



# Using Large *N* Longitudinal Comparison to Explain Political Recruitment in Changing Democracies

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## Abstract

This case describes our use of longitudinal analysis to examine the career trajectories of Italian regional chief executives. Our research focused on regional chief executives, under the premise that they are neglected actors in comparative studies, despite their growing political relevance. We used Italy as a case study to test two expectations and provide insights for comparative conclusions. Empirical information was based on a unique dataset on Italian chief executives' socio-demographic background and political experience from 1970 (when Italian regions were established) and 2015. Two hypotheses about the impact of institutional settings and state organization were derived from comparative literature. Italy was selected as a quasi-experimental case study, where there were variations of the conditions of interest within the same national context. The large-*N* dataset (242 chief executives' terms in office were the units of analysis) provided aggregate percentages of individuals with specific career backgrounds, whose association with changing institutional conditions was tested through statistical analysis. We describe how we collected and organized data based on theoretical conjectures derived from the literature. Moreover, we show how findings about under-studied topics can be fruitfully understood to develop generalizable knowledge.

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## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Have a better understanding of how an intellectual interest can evolve into a research design
  - Understand how to determine what empirical information needs to be gathered to answer a research question
  - Recognize how a research project can develop, based on authors' own assessments and peers' feedback
  - Assess how longitudinal analyses can unveil the impact of institutional change on political processes
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## Research Interest, Project Overview, and Context of Development

We had the idea to work on this topic in September 2015. At that time, a proposal of panel for the upcoming International Political Science Association (IPSA) World Congress, to be held in Poznań (Poland) in July 2016, had been submitted. This panel was later jointly organized and led by us. The main purpose of the panel was to gather prominent scholars involved in the study of political career paths at the regional level in different countries. The grounding rationale was to promote and to contribute to the development of the study of sub-national elite circulation (i.e., changes in the politicians occupying given political offices), especially in consideration of the growing interconnection between levels of government in Europe and beyond. The relevant literature had already shown that elite renewal (i.e., substitution of previous politicians with new ones

in given political offices) and politicians' profiles could have a major impact on the quality of democracy and performance in office (e.g., Siavelis & Morgenstern, 2008). Thus, it seemed worth researching further and understanding what can affect political careers and, ultimately, leaders' behavior in office.

Both of us had already worked (and were still working) on political elites and political careers, looking at legislators' recruitment and national executives. With regard to sub-national executives, there was still a lack of attention. We started discussing a possible collaboration on this topic, deciding to try to fill the gap and to focus on the regional level of government, which had been usually meant to be a key level in different countries (Botella, Teruel, Barberà, & Barrio, 2010; Stolz & Fischer, 2014). The paucity of studies on this topic prompted us to follow this idea and to present a research paper at the IPSA Congress. Once deciding this, we had to define our goal precisely and find a clear-cut research question, to be answered through a theoretically based empirical analysis.

Our first rough idea was to extend existing knowledge about the relationship between political opportunity structures (i.e., the political context) and political recruitment to the almost unexplored field of regional chief executives. In particular, we referred to two strands of literature. The first argues that in presidentialized systems, where executive actors are directly elected, political parties prefer personalities appealing to the public to draw votes, while in parliamentary systems, parties prefer reliable agents with extensive parliamentary and ministerial experience (Samuels & Shugart, 2010). The second strand provides evidence of a connection between the degree of state decentralization and politicians' preferences toward political careers in different levels of government (Borchert, 2011; Stolz, 2003).

For our purpose, we needed cases to test our expectations. Given the lack of studies, we opted for concentrating on a single country from a longitudinal perspective (i.e., over time). This appeared to be the best choice to generate new hypotheses in an underdeveloped field of research (Seha & Müller-Rommel, 2016). The Italian case soon emerged as a very promising case. Indeed, Italy underwent a process of regionalization between the 1990s and the 2000s, together with a deep change of the party system and inter-party competition dynamics. On one hand, the regional level of government moved from the parliamentary model to a presidential one. On the other hand, regional institutions became more autonomous from the center and potentially more attractive for ambitious politicians. We thus eventually decided to answer the following questions: *Has the regionalization process in Italy affected regional chief executives' profiles and careers? If yes, in which sense?*

The potential contribution of such analysis was twofold: (1) a better knowledge of the Italian political system and its changes and (2) the extension and corroboration of existing theoretical arguments as well as clues about findings' generalizability.

To summarize, we acknowledged the theoretical and political relevance of a specific issue, observed the paucity of studies on this topic, and decided to join our efforts to contribute to the debate. Subsequently, we had to narrow down our general interest and to define our research aim and our questions. The process resulted in a set of back-and-forth moves between theoretical conjectures based on existing literature,

empirical evidence, and attempts to find a case that would be viable and appropriate for our purpose. A first deadline was the presentation of findings at the IPSA meeting in July. However, before fixing the type and share of work for both, we had to think about the data on which to build our analysis.

The study we were planning required several observations to draw sound enough conclusions. We wanted to focus on as high a number as possible of individuals who had become chief executives of regions at least once. After we checked the distribution of individuals, we agreed that we could have covered the entire universe of cases from the very beginning (1970) to December 31, 2015. However, for comparability's sake, we focused only on the 15 Italian ordinary regions, leaving aside five regions with special statutes (i.e., the regional constitutions) and usually studied separately by the specialized literature (Baldi, 2003; Bolgherini & Loughlin, 2006). We were thus confronted with a large enough yet homogenous set of individuals to be investigated.

The next step was to decide which traits (or variables) would be useful to answer our research questions. The choice was based on our theoretical premises and expected outcomes. We decided to focus on both previous and subsequent institutional political experience of Italian chief executives as well as their party experience before entering office. This experience could involve all the possible levels of government in Italy (municipal, provincial, regional, and national) plus the European level when applicable. Moreover, socio-economic and occupational characteristics entered the analysis. In this way, we would be able to see whether, after a change in the opportunity structure, there was a change in the executives' profiles and career trajectories.

To detect possible fine-grained time variations, we referred to each single individual term in office as our unit of analysis, rather than to the persons per se. The result was a list of 242 units. We prepared a grid for our dataset with 30 variables, converted into numerical indicators according to a precise codebook we jointly developed.

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## Data Collection and Research Design

To do good research, it is important to define a good research design. This means identifying the theme, the research question, the literature, the theoretical approach, case selection, the hypotheses to be tested, and the methodology to be adopted. In addition to defining our research question and objectives to produce an original work, we needed to justify our case selection. First, we claimed the Italian sub-regional system is an extremely rare opportunity to assess, *ceteris paribus*, the effects of constitutional formats on regional chief executives' career paths. In fact, a shift between consensual and majoritarian patterns occurred in the 1990s within the same political system. In other words, a proportional electoral system was replaced by a quasi-majoritarian rule and a parliamentary model of government was replaced by a presidential model.

We also focused on the second level of selection, namely, the choice to study regional presidents by claiming that there was a vacuum in the literature, which had only focused on members of representative assemblies. Moreover, we worked to extract two main hypotheses by focusing on the most up-to-date literature. One

strand of the literature used deals with the impact of constitutional change on political careers, and the other strand deals with the impact of the regionalization process on political careers. Therefore, our work can be placed within a neo-institutional theoretical framework. In other words, we assumed that institutions—broadly understood as stable and accepted rules, contextual constraints, and opportunities—affect behavior and individual political choices. From a methodological point of view, we decided to rely on descriptive statistics, as this research is one of the first attempts to map and explain the career paths of regional presidents.

After defining all the aspects just mentioned, we arranged a research plan that consisted in defining each work phase and the time expected to fulfill each phase. Thus, we organized a template with the following goals:

1. Structuring the dataset and the codebook, expected time: 2 weeks
2. Collecting data, expected time: 3 months
3. Analyzing data and preparing the outline of the paper, expected time: 2 weeks
4. Preparing an abstract and a first draft of the paper for the IPSA conference, expected time: 1 month
5. Attending the conference: 3 days
6. Reviewing or changing parts of the paper according to the suggestions of other scholars, expected time: 2 weeks
7. Choosing a scientific journal with a potential interest in this work, expected time: 2 days
8. Meeting stylistic requirements of the journal (e.g., the style of bibliographical references), expected time: 2 days

The first step was to define the variables of the dataset, which were fundamental to map, and explain the career paths of regional presidents. To do this, we had several Skype meetings to discuss what and how many variables had to be taken into account. Here, it was important to find an equilibrium between accuracy and parsimony, to think about all the opportunities a president can encounter during his or her career path, and to choose between those aspects previously investigated by other scholars, and those which we aimed to add, and that essentially should represent the originality of this work. Furthermore, we aimed at choosing only relevant aspects, to avoid redundancy. For instance, in monitoring the local offices, we decided to focus on only the most senior positions that chief executives had previously held, such as those of mayor and president of province.

During the first weeks, we exchanged many proposals of datasets and codebooks. Our previous experiences in the construction of surveys were crucial in precisely and quickly defining the dataset and the codebook, and we were able to timely fulfill this first goal. In particular, we built our codebook around information that would place regional chief executive in context (such as the region, the dates of entrance and exit from office, the time in office, the reason to leave) plus information about socio-demographic background (sex, age, and profession). Moreover, we defined a list of variables providing clues about professional and party experience; for example, whether the executive was a regional member of Parliament before and after entering office or whether he or she was a local party leader before entering office.

For each variable, we translated possibilities into numerical indicators (e.g., dummy distinction between 1 [yes] and 0 [no], or more fine-grained distinctions). The codebook contains all the necessary instructions and references to guide a consistent codification of information by different scholars.

The second phase was dedicated to the collection of data. The first obvious step was the division of workload and tasks. We decided that each of us would work on half of the ordinary regions. As it often happens by passing from the research design to the reality, we were not able to define *ex ante* all possible important sources. Some of them were simply recognized *ex post*, during the research phase. However, to guarantee symmetrical results, it was crucial to cooperate by sharing our strategies and explaining how we obtained certain information, so as to consider the possibility of replicating the scheme in different contexts. Also in this phase, it was important to act with flexibility by counterbalancing the necessity to count on reliable data with the need to find as much information as possible.

When available, we drew data from the Registry of Local and Regional Administrators of the Italian Ministry of Interior. However, this archive only covers politicians in office from 1985. As a consequence, to gather older information and to double-check all the other information, we consulted the official websites of the two Italian parliamentary chambers, those of the regional governments and assemblies and that of the European Parliament. In addition, we consulted the websites of some relevant sub-regional institutions, such as certain provinces or municipalities, to find specific information on certain presidents. As far as non-official sources were concerned, we chose among those mentioned by other scholars to match a certain degree of reliability (e.g., the Openpolis database or the database of worldstatesmen.org, as well as that of worldleadersindex.org).

With regard to party experience, the biggest challenge we faced during the data collection phase was that there is a paucity of official information on Italian sub-national party elites. For this reason, we relied on different sources to investigate the party careers of regional presidents, such as the historical archives of certain political parties (e.g., the Archive of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party for Emilia-Romagna) and historical archives of Italian newspapers. We also looked at websites on the history of political parties and publications on the history of Italian regions and politicians' personal webpages. Finally, we read (when available) individual biographies in Wikipedia, to double-check our data. When inconsistencies appeared, we went back to the aforementioned sources to investigate further and detect possible inaccuracies. This phase was the longest and we fulfilled it with a delay.

The following phases are analyzed in depth in the next sections; however, it is worth mentioning here that we were able to respect our scheduled template. One of us analyzed data by using descriptive statistics and elaborated the first tables. Then we scheduled several Skype meetings to discuss the results of the research.

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## Methodological Choices, Practicalities, and Research Challenges

In our research, we operationalized our two conditions or sources of variation simply by distinguishing

between two periods, 1970–1995 and 1995–2015. Outcomes of interest were operationalized by means of the joint consideration of different variables in our dataset. Our first general choice was to present aggregate data for each indicator by period. This was justified by the fact that this strategy would allow us to detect general career patterns in Italy both before and after the threshold date of 1995.

Data were reported with descriptive statistics of percentage frequencies in several tables, so that we were able to see whether there were actually differences as expected and to see the magnitude of these differences. In fact, the picture provided evidence in line with our theoretical argument, by suggesting that our hypotheses were likely to be corroborated.

In particular, we derived from the literature that a shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system of (regional) government would have been likely to favor the emergence of political outsiders or of candidates with higher public visibility. Our second hypothesis was that, after the regionalization process in Italy in the 1990s, ambitious politicians would have valued and pursued regional offices more often than in the past. Overall, aggregate numbers moved in these two directions. Both the percentages of regional presidents since the 1990s with a profile of outsider and those of presidents with a national visibility were clearly higher, compared with the previous period. Moreover, the ratio of regional presidents who did not simply use the regional office as springboards for reaching national positions, but rather as a value per se, increased along with the regionalization process. All these findings encouraged us to proceed in our project.

Based on our expertise, we divided the writing process, writing only the introduction and the conclusion section together. However, the writing process kept us constantly in touch and we eventually had several chances to consult with each other and to discuss the entire paper when it was presented. We recognized that we needed to address an important issue before having a solid enough argumentation for a published article, which concerned the structure of the argumentation. While our presentation was more focused on data, a journal article needed to be more balanced between discursive and theoretical arguments and data. Different aspects needed to be precisely connected analytically and then recapped in a discussion.

Before submitting our work to a suitable venue for publication, we cut some parts of the article as well as some tables to make it more straightforward. In August 2016, we completed the article, which we ultimately submitted to two different journals, receiving each time important feedback that strengthened the methodological facet of the analysis.

Among the reviewers' suggestions was to emphasize the theoretical implications of the analysis of the Italian regional presidents. In particular, although descriptive statistics showed temporal changes in the expected direction and although we were dealing with the entire universe of our interest, the analysis had to be made stronger by the use of a significance test. Statistical tests of significance are a basic instrument to understand whether variations of observations within a random sample are probably due to chance. If this is not the case, then one can argue that such variations are likely to characterize other possible random samples from the same population (Pennings, Keman, & Kleinnijenhuis, 1999). One assumption is that tests refer to samples (randomly built) and do not apply when the entire population is analyzed, as was in our case. Nonetheless, we

posited that our  $N$  could be representative of additional possible observations, provided the same conditions in the context.

To assess the significance of the differences we found between the analyzed periods, we excluded regression methods of analysis because of broader contrasting theoretical assumptions behind our analysis. Indeed, we were aware that several other case-specific factors could have had an impact on our outcomes of interest and that, nonetheless, it was out of the scope of the paper to control for them. What we wanted was simply to see whether changes had occurred and whether such changes had moved in the direction of our expectations, which had been derived by clear theoretical argumentations.

Eventually, we opted for very simple but functional chi-square tests of significance, which are normally used to assess whether there are significant differences between actual and expected frequencies, given a null hypothesis (Hanneman, Kposowa, & Riddle, 2013). We were aware that we were dealing with not-repeatable data: that is, data that “exhaust the population of substantive interest” (Jackman, 2009, p. xxxi). On the contrary, our data could have been assumed to be representative of further possible observations.

An additional problem we were confronted with was the presence of missing values in our dataset; this was due in part to the paucity of reliable information about sub-national Italia party elites and in part to the difficulty of finding detailed data about presidents of some Italian regions with regard to the years before the 1980s. In such cases, an available-case approach with pairwise deletion, which “attempts to use all available data by discarding cases on an analysis-by-analysis basis” (Peugh & Enders, 2004, p. 528), was followed. This choice produced some noise between absolute and percentage frequencies but without jeopardizing the robustness of our findings. The tests corroborated further our observations and thus improved the robustness of our theoretical arguments.

In February 2017, we submitted the revised version of the paper to a second journal, after a rejection from the first. After several further modifications, we were asked by the reviewers to perform a regression analysis. For the aforementioned reasons, we rejected this suggestion, stressing the configurational (rather than correlational) assumptions of our analysis. While correlational analyses generally assume that different independent variables can have a net effect on a dependent variable, configurational approaches argue that a particular outcome can be explained by a specific interplay of conditions. This means that a condition that may have no impact on its own becomes important when present together with (or in the absence) of others (Ragin, 2008).

The revised version was submitted in September. Less than 1 month later, the article was finally accepted for publication, even though other small changes were required. At this point, we decided to publish also our dataset on *Gesis datorium* (Grimaldi & Vercesi, 2017). This is a data repository service for the social sciences and economic sciences research community. It provides a user-friendly tool for the autonomous documentation, upload, and publication of research data. The publication was meant to give other scholars access to original data for reliability and replication reasons.



## Conclusion

Our study was built around two main expectations derived from two different strands of literature. We selected the Italian case for its especially favorable features to test such expectations. First, we recognized the importance of the longitudinal perspective, to address how institutional changes can affect processes and leadership profiles. As institutions are usually stable, the temporal dimension proved to be very important, allowing us to compare two periods characterized by specific institutional environments. From a methodological point of view, our choices were constrained by the lack of existing works addressing our topic, and the consequent absence of a developed theory. We assumed that the factors we were observing were important to explain change, but that others could be at stake. At the same time, we could have not deepened further the analysis, without losing in terms of scope of the focus. We thus opted for a simple comparison of frequencies between two periods along several selected variables.

Comments from journals' reviewers proved to be important to enhance our theoretical arguments and, in particular, to strengthen the methodological side. Our choice to use significance tests but not to turn to regression analyses was rooted in our theoretical assumptions. The simple comparative longitudinal perspective adopted provided important insights and clues about the validity of our theoretical expectations. We hope our study can be a starting point for further empirical research on political recruitment in changing democracies.

Important to the success of our research was our ability to work as a team. Working together is often crucial to achieve important developments in research, but can be hard if there is a lack of or a gap in mutual confidence, esteem, or understanding between the people who make up the working team. Having these factors in place is fundamental to succeed in conducting research together and to finalizing the efforts with a coherent publication. This is precisely what happened with our study: Because each of us had read the other's previous scientific works, and we had engaged in debates on similar research themes during a number of academic conferences, we knew each other and realized we shared similar theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches.

To overcome difficulties in the research design, data collection, and analysis phases, we stressed since the very beginning the necessity to clearly assign different tasks. At the same time, we established periodic contacts to share views and opinions. Each phase was inaugurated by an agreement on the basic steps and provisional goals. Once satisfied, we moved to the following one. More important, we were able to be flexible enough in the observance of the agreed schedule to meet unforeseen challenges and to fulfill all the required steps as expected.

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## Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What are some benefits of focusing on single cases for the deep understanding of political

- changes?
2. Which factors should researchers consider when they choose to conduct a significance test?
  3. What are some circumstances under which longitudinal comparisons can be particularly useful to explain political outcomes?
  4. Think of a political process you would like to study using longitudinal analysis. What data would you collect to understand how the process has changed over time?

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