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Political careers in multi-level systems: Regional chief executives in Italy, 1970–2015

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Italian regional chief executives and aims to investigate if and how the Italian regionalization process has affected regional chief executives' career trajectories. Our analysis is based on an original dataset on political careers of regional heads of government in Italy from 1970 to 2015. After presenting our two research expectations, we find that the direct election of regional presidents and the decentralization process have gone hand in hand with the selection of more regional political outsiders and visible politicians as well as with a higher integration between institutional levels in terms of career paths

KEYWORDS Regional presidents; career paths; decentralization; presidentialization; elite circulation

Introduction

The goal of this article is to study the political recruitment and career trajectories of regional chief executives in Italy. The literature to date has focussed on legislators' careers both at national (Verzichelli, 2010) and regional level (Vassallo and Cerruto, 2007), but has neglected regional executive roles. However, executives' careers are different from those of MPs, and the way in which heads of government are elected has significant implications for the quality of mandate representation and democratic accountability (Samuels and Shugart, 2010).

According to the literature, the pathways to power are affected by factors that can be grouped into two main categories: (micro-level) individual motivations and (macro-level) contextual factors. The candidates' political ambition, which impacts their strategic choices and consequentially their career paths, is the most clear-cut example of an individual factor (Schlesinger, 1966; Nicholls, 1990; Sieberer and Müller, 2017). On the other hand, new-institutionalist

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approaches (Hall and Taylor, 1996) have posited that these individual choices are constrained by the structure of competition of the political system in question. The idea is that '[t]he rules and procedures of political systems structure behaviour, attitudes and opinions in predictable orderly ways' (Dogan, 1989; Norris, 1997: 9). Borchert (2003) has argued that the opportunity structure is defined by the (1) availability, (2) accessibility and (3) attractiveness of political offices.

Our theoretical framework clearly relates to the new-institutionalist approach, since we aim to understand the potential impact of electoral rules and institutional arrangements on the career trajectories of Italian regional chief executives.

From this point of view, Italy is an interesting case study. In the early 1990s, the party system moved from extreme pluralism (Sartori, 1976) to bipolar competition (Bardi et al., 2013); moreover, the proportional electoral system was replaced by a quasi-majoritarian rule (Chiaramonte and Tarli Barbieri, 2007). At the regional level, the model of government moved from a parliamentary to a presidential model.¹ Finally, the regionalization process that started in the mid-1990s gave regional governments more powers and thus made the office of the regional chief executive more attractive. The Italian case is therefore useful to assess – *ceteris paribus* – the effects of constitutional formats on regional chief executives' career paths; indeed, it allows consensual and majoritarian patterns within the same political system to be compared, an extremely rare example of quasi-experimental research conditions (e.g. Grilli di Cortona, 2011).

This article presents original data (Grimaldi and Vercesi, 2017) on the heads of government of ordinary regions from these regions' establishment in 1970–2015. Information covers not only institutional experience but also party backgrounds, which received little consideration in previous studies on regional elites. The modification of the rules to elect regional executives and the state decentralization process that took place in Italy between the 1990s and 2000s make it reasonable to assume that dramatic changes have taken place in the opportunity structure. In fact, we have observed relevant changes in the profiles and career patterns of regional chief executives. In particular, from 1970 to 1995 regional heads of government were mostly party agents and political climbers (Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli, 2017) and the career models that prevailed were alternative and unidirectional from local to centre; however, after 1995 the number of outsiders and the so-called high-flyers increased as did those following an integrated model, which implies moves between levels of government in any direction without hierarchy and based on variable opportunities (Borchert, 2003, 2011). As a consequence, we have empirical support to argue that the opportunity structure influences the profiles of the prominent members of the sub-national Italian political elite.

In the following section, we analyse the literature on the impact of institutional settings and party competition on political careers and we put forward our expectations. Subsequently, we outline the changes in the Italian political structure of opportunity that are of relevance to the analysis. Thirdly, we operationalize the variables and specify practical and methodological issues. Finally, we present and discuss our findings and offer our preliminary conclusions.

Institutional settings and political careers

Electoral rules and political careers

Electoral systems and the type of party competition significantly affect personal profiles and pathways to power (Best and Cotta, 2000; Borchert and Zeiss, 2003; Jun and Hix, 2010). According to Eliassen and Pedersen (1978: 289), 'electoral variables occupy a central position as intervening variables in any realistic model of the transformation of the [...] elite'.

In this respect, Samuels and Shugart (2010) have noted that different electoral rules and electoral campaigns matter not only with regard to MPs' profiles, but also because they give rise to distinctions in the types of chief executive. The two authors have pointed out that the different electoral logics of parliamentary and presidential systems push political parties towards distinct forms of organization and the selection of different types of candidates for executive office. The argumentation is based on the principal-agent theory of party delegation (Strøm, 2003). Political parties would be principals that fill public offices with their own agents; parties seek to avoid prospective agency losses by screening *ex-ante* the experience of candidates. When the executives stem from the legislature (as is the case with the parliamentary ideal-type), parties are more likely to select a 'reliable' agent as chief executive and, therefore, to minimize adverse selection.

In contrast, when chief executives originate separately from legislatures (presidential ideal-type), the candidates need different skills: 'vote-drawing ability and an appealing [...] public image' come first (Samuels and Shugart, 2010). In other words, candidates should be visible and well-known to the broad electorate and, ultimately, able to win elections as voters' agents. These traits outweigh the importance of 'reliability' as a party agent (e.g. Curtice and Lisi, 2015). Parliamentary systems are hence more likely to recruit political insiders. Unlike an outsider, a political insider has stronger ties with the party organization and a broader experience in the party and in representative institutions (Samuels and Shugart, 2010: 65ff.).

Building on these insights, we extend the argumentation from national to regional heads of government. However, some caveats must be addressed. At the sub-national level, the same reasoning applies to the parliamentary type of election, without significant differences. If regional chief executives are

chosen from the regional assembly according to a parliamentary logic, it is probable that they are party agents, thus party members, with leadership experience at the local level. Moreover, they are likely to be political climbers (Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli, 2017) who have followed an ascending *cursum honorum*, moving from sub-regional institutions to regional assemblies and regional governments before entering the office (e.g. Botella et al., 2010). On the other hand, directly elected regional presidents are more likely to be outsiders, since previous experience as party agents at the local and regional level is less important to obtaining the post. Parties have to redefine their strategies and find candidates with new skills and profiles. In particular, the personalization and the mediatization processes that have affected all Western democracies (Karvonen, 2010; Esser, 2013) imply that candidates must be more recognizable in the eyes of voters; and the national arena is the most visible showcase. Hence, the direct election of the chief executive is likely to increase the access of outsiders and politicians with high public visibility and, conversely, to limit that of politicians with low public visibility, albeit with a steady party or institutional career.

If this is true, we have to take into account not only outsiders but also 'high-flyers'² (Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli, 2017), namely politicians who enjoy some nationwide visibility. For example, candidates with no connection to the territory but who have acquired political experience jumping to the national or supra-national level; or local candidates who have become popular leaders at the national level, such as mayors of large cities. The decline of traditional party representative models (Dalton and Weldon, 2005; Mair, 2013) would further support such a conjecture: indeed, national party figures become more prominent.

By means of the electoral reform of 1995 (plus the constitutional change of 1999), Italy has moved from a fully-fledged parliamentary model for the election of heads of regional governments to a presidentialized model based on the direct election of regional presidents. Therefore, our *presidentialization expectation* is that:

When the institutional framework is presidentialized, a larger ratio of regional presidents will be political outsiders or 'high-flyer' politicians with high public visibility.

We assume that changes in electoral procedures imply changes in the opportunities to enter office. Hence, testing this expectation allows us to focus on the accessibility issue,³ conceived of as the chance someone has to take office (see Borchert, 2011).

State decentralization and political careers

In addition to the change in the institutional setting, the literature has stressed the role of state structure in shaping political careers and has resulted in an

increasing number of studies on multi-level careers (Pilet et al., 2014). More precisely, the territorial structure of the state clearly does influence career opportunities since there are more offices at stake in federal or regional states than in centralized states (Borchert 2011). Along with the wave of regionalization (Keating, 1998), the opportunity structures have probably been broadened dramatically by the EU level of government.

Based on a comparative approach, Borchert (2011) has identified three models of multi-level careers. The first is the unidirectional model: the typical pathway follows the organization of the state from the local to the regional and then to the national level (see also Hibbing, 1991). Secondly, according to the alternative model, there is no pre-determined hierarchy and sub-national and national careers are separate. This is a more likely pathway if there is a high degree of separation between levels of government and if the composition of constituencies differs significantly (Borchert 2011). Thirdly, politicians can move from one level to the other and vice versa and follow an integrated career model. Here boundaries between levels of government or types of institution are more porous as there is no clear-cut hierarchy, so the number of opportunities is likely to increase and movement is encouraged. This framework has been elaborated for the study of parliamentarians, but its extension to chief executives seems useful. In fact, here we are interested in relationships between institutional layers in multi-level systems and the potential impact of the decentralization process on these relationships, irrespective of the type of public office. However, these features probably interact with other recruitment dynamics that are specific to executive offices, which are highlighted by our first expectation.

All else equal, decentralization and the prestige of sub-national political offices would determine which career model is likely to prevail. For example, Stolz (2001) has pointed out that state decentralization can facilitate territorial differentiation between sub-national and national elites. The higher the territorial distinctiveness, the less local and regional politicians are socialized within national institutions. An empirical study on regional prime ministers in France, Spain and the United Kingdom (Botella et al., 2010) has confirmed this expectation. Moreover, the authors of this study have shown that the higher political value of the regional level in these three countries has been conducive to specific territorial pathways to power: from less attractive local positions to regional premiership. These changes have been paralleled by a decline in the national institutions' role in regional leaders' careers. Similarly, Stolz and Fischer (2014) have found that top regional politicians in a polity with powerful sub-national units such as the German *Länder* tend not to exploit the sub-national level as a springboard, but rather to pursue separate regional careers. On the other hand, Cazzola et al. (1988) have shown that when regional institutions are weak, moves between sub-national and national levels (if any) go from the former to the

latter and seldom in the opposite direction. Stolz (2003: 244) has provided evidence that decentralization processes in conjunction with the growing institutionalization and professionalization of regional units can foster centrifugal moves from the centre to the sub-national level, especially in strong and highly autonomous regions. This, in turn, can lead to integrated yet not hierarchical career trajectories, as has been the case in Wallonia in Belgium and Catalonia in Spain (Stolz, 2003: 240).

All these studies thus suggest that the greater attractiveness of regional offices fosters the attractive force of the sub-national level and the formation of centrifugal drives in the paths to power. This can result either in alternative careers or patterns that are more integrated. In contrast, lower attractiveness pushes local and regional politicians to seek higher offices unidirectionally.

Between the 1990s and the 2000s, Italy moved from being characterized by very weak sub-national authorities (Massari, 2013: 313) to a decentralized system with autonomous and strengthened regions (Fabbrini and Brunazzo, 2003). These changes gave regional presidents more power resources, especially in forming their own government team (Wilson, 2016). Moreover, the personalization of the presidential office (Musella, 2009) and direct election contributed to the consolidation of presidents' executive powers, political visibility and public legitimacy (Wilson, 2016). In a nutshell, the regional presidential post has become very attractive due to its political benefits. For our purposes, these benefits can be traced back to two main features. On the one hand, the post of regional chief executive has sensibly gained in terms of political prestige. Regional presidents have become the central figures of the electoral campaigns; their public figure has become more prominent *vis-à-vis* party organizations; and their chances to build their own political capital (Bennister et al. 2017) for further career steps – at least in principle – have been expanded. On the other hand, the higher attractiveness of the office has been a consequence of the increase of competences and powers that institutional changes granted to the Italian regional governments between the 1990s and 2000s. This process has been conducive to a larger room for manoeuvre for regional presidents in their action as policy-makers and policy-changers.

In this regard, Massari (2013: 315) has underlined that the Italian regionalization process has been conducive to a situation where 'there is no centre anymore, because every local joint of the state is centre itself'. This means that the prestige of the state and regions is now more similar. Consequently, rational ambitious politicians can alternatively target the centre or the region, based on the circumstances and their own strategies. Building on this literature stream, we want to use the Italian case to observe whether the unidirectional model really prevailed from 1970 to 1995, namely when the regional institutions were quite weak, and whether it was subsequently replaced by the alternative or the integrated model when these institutions

became more attractive. In particular, we infer from the general literature's argument and we limit our focus to the office of the regional presidency.

Accordingly, our *career model expectation* is that

When the state is decentralized, a larger ratio of regional presidents will follow a career path based on the alternative or the integrated model.

The regionalization process in Italy

The 1948 Constitution defines Italy as a unitary state made up of 20 regions: 15 ordinary regions and five special regions with a higher level of autonomy. Special regions are characterized by specific territorial identities and/or ethno-linguistic differentiations, such as German, French or Slavic minorities, repressed under Fascism. Italian scholars usually study special regions as a separate group (Caciagli and Corbetta, 1987; Baldi, 2003; Bolgherini and Loughlin, 2006), since these territories rely on a different constitutional status and came into being soon after the WWII, long before ordinary regions. For comparison's sake, we follow the same approach, given that the number of past legislative terms in special regions is higher than in ordinary regions and the election of chief executives follows a different electoral calendar.

Regionalization in Italy has been in constant flux (Leonardi, 1992). Although the Constitution made reference to ordinary regions from the outset, they were only established in 1970. Even after being established, ordinary regions had relatively little autonomy from the centre during the so-called First Republic (1948–1994), and parties controlled the entire political process from the national level. In the early 1990s, the re-emergence of the centre-periphery cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Vercesi, 2014: 283–285) and the growing electoral importance of the Northern League party – advocating the need to tackle the 'Northern Issue' – gave decentralization great impetus. Moreover, this issue was pursued at the European level through the Treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice as well as through the creation of the Committee of the Regions (Bolgherini, 2006). As a result, important provisions were introduced at the end of the decade to improve the autonomy of ordinary regions, in line with federalist thought.

From an institutional viewpoint, the first attempt to reinforce the role of ordinary regions was made in the Law No. 59/1997, which acknowledged EU indications on the subsidiarity principle. Subsequently, two constitutional reforms were introduced (CL No. 1/1999 and No. 3/2001). The most important novelties were the direct election of regional presidents and the possibility for each region to decide autonomously about both their own Statute (the regional 'Constitution') and electoral law, based on a mixed-majoritarian system introduced by the central state in 1995 (Law No. 43/1995) (Vassallo and Baldini, 2000; Chiamonte and Tarli Barbieri, 2007). The new rules –

overturning the former provisions – stated that regions would have legislative competencies on all topics other than those carried out exclusively by the state; in other words, they acquired a major policy role in healthcare, agriculture, environment, economic development and professional training (Baldi, 2003). Moreover, ordinary regions won more fiscal autonomy. As a result, whereas the authority of ordinary regions increased from 2001, particularly with reference to self-rule, shared-rule remained limited (Hooghe et al., 2008). Overall, institutional reforms produced major changes both in the *vertical* distribution of power and the *horizontal* distribution of power, strengthening the executive leader *vis-à-vis* the legislature (Fabbrini and Brunazzo, 2003, Wilson, 2016)

If we look at the dynamics of party competition, the regionalization process in Italy can be analytically divided into two periods (1970–1995 and 1995 onwards), which correspond to two important electoral phases. The first period (five legislative terms of five years) corresponds to the concretization of constitutional provisions, when the ordinary regions started functioning. During this period, regional elections and party systems usually mimicked those at the national level. The proportional system introduced by the state Law No. 108/1968 and polarized pluralism (Sartori, 1976) led to the regions experiencing the same ‘problems’ as the national political system, government instability being one of them. In the 1990s, a political earthquake gave rise to the collapse of the national party system and the sudden disappearance of the most important ruling parties (Christian Democracy and Italian Socialist Party). These changes also had an impact at the regional level. The beginning of the second period (from 1995) was characterized by a new majoritarian law for regional elections (Law No. 43/1995). The majoritarian turn was further boosted by the constitutional reform of 1999. This reform formalized what had already actually existed since 1995, that is, the direct election of regional presidents by voters. These changes fostered both greater government stability and a lower turnover of regional chief executives. Moreover, in the mid-2000s, the Law No. 65/2004 introduced the limit of two consecutive mandates for regional presidents.

If we look at the total number of legislative terms in all regions until 31 December 2015, we have 159 terms in the first period and 83 in the second.⁴ Of these, 53.5% and 23.5%, respectively⁵ ended with an early interruption, that is, any interruption not due to a scheduled election according to the normal legislative term of five years. The average duration in days of the *only concluded terms* of regional governments is 850 from 1970 to 1995 and 1548 afterwards. These numbers are lower than the total tenure of each head of government. In fact, each head of government stayed in office 1155 days on average before 1995 and 2239 days from 1995 onwards. The presidential turnover – calculated as the ratio of chief executives to the total number of terms – is 73.6% in the first period and 71.1% from 1995.

Even though variations among regions increased (Massetti and Sandri, 2013) and vote orientation seems to have become more region-centred since the 1995 election (Magone, 1998; Mazzoleni, 2002), party systems at regional level still resemble the national system. The recent changes at the national level that were seen in the 2013 general election (Chiaramonte and De Sio, 2013) can also be detected at the regional level with the emergence of a tripolar competition (Bolgherini and Grimaldi, 2016, 2017).

The percentage of heads of government in office one or more times is similar for the two periods under analysis (Table 1). However, there are striking differences in chief executives' party membership. In fact, during the first phase only a small proportion of heads of government belonged to a minor party (8%), whereas this quota increased considerably in the second phase (31%), when structured parties started losing their grasp on the electorate. Moreover, in the first phase, there was a clear and constant voting orientation in most regions towards heads of government either from Christian Democrats and its allies (Socialists and Republicans) or from Communists,

Table 1. Turnover and party affiliation of Italian regional chief executives by time period.

Region	Re-elected individuals (once)		Re-elected individuals (twice or more)		Individuals from minor parties** or independents		Dominant party by individuals' affiliation***	
	1970–1995	1995–2015	1970–1995	1995–2015	1970–1995	1995–2015	1970–1995	1995–2015
Abruzzo	3 (37.5)	-	1 (12.5)	-	-	3 (5.1)	DC	A
Apulia	2 (16.7)	1 (25.0)	-	-	1 (0.9)	2* (3.4)	DC	A
Basilicata	-	1 (25.0)	1 (25.0)	-	-	2* (3.4)	DC	C-L
Calabria	3 (37.5)	-	-	-	1 (0.9)	2 (3.4)	DC/PSI	A
Campania	3 (30.0)	1 (20.0)	-	-	-	2 (3.4)	DC	A
Emilia-Romagna	1 (16.7)	-	1 (16.7)	1 (25.0)	-	-	PCI	C-L
Lazio	2 (15.4)	-	-	-	1 (0.9)	3 (5.1)	PSI	A
Liguria	1 (9.1)	1 (25.0)	-	-	3 (2.6)	1 (1.7)	A	A
Lombardy	2 (28.6)	-	1 (14.3)	1 (50.0)	1 (0.9)	1* (1.7)	DC	C-R
Marche	-	2 (66.7)	3 (50.0)	-	-	1* (1.7)	DC/PSI	C-L
Molise	1 (11.1)	1 (25.0)	1 (11.1)	1 (25.0)	1 (0.9)	1* (1.7)	DC	A
Piedmont	1 (16.7)	1 (25.0)	-	-	-	-	DC/PSI	A
Tuscany	3 (60.0)	2 (66.7)	-	-	-	-	PSI/PCI	C-L
Umbria	2 (40.0)	2 (66.7)	1 (20.0)	-	-	-	PCI	C-L
Veneto	2 (28.6)	1 (50.0)	1 (14.3)	1 (50.0)	1 (0.9)	-	DC	C-R
<i>Total</i>	<i>26 (22.2)</i>	<i>13 (22.0)</i>	<i>10 (8.6)</i>	<i>4 (6.8)</i>	<i>9 (7.7)</i>	<i>18 (30.5)</i>		
Mean (N)	2	1	1.3	0.8	0.6	1.2		

*In these regions, the same chief executives were first members of a minor party and then of a major or another minor party. We consider these chief executives as two distinct cases.

**We consider major parties Christian Democracy (DC), Italian Republican Party (PRI), Italian Communist Party (PCI), Italian Socialist Party (PSI) (1970–1995), Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), Left Democrats (DS), Democratic Party (PD), *Forza Italia*, People of Freedom (PDL) (1995–2015); minor parties all the others (Green, AN, CDU, Daisy, LN, PPI, SEL, SDI, RC, UDR).

***Letter 'A' means 'Alternation'. Since major parties often changed their names between 1995 and 2015, we refer to centre-left (C-L) and centre-right (C-R) coalitions.

Note: Percentages between brackets.

Source: own data.

depending on the region. On the other hand, the second phase is characterized by increasing alternation between presidents from the centre-left and the centre-right throughout the Italian territory. The only exceptions are the regions with 'red' (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria, partly Marche) and 'white' (Veneto and partly Lombardy) sub-cultural legacies.⁶ In these regions, the same coalitions won the presidency in five consecutive elections.

Operationalization

Our study is built on two potential *sources of variation*: the rules for the election of regional chief executives and the state decentralization.

We operationalize the first of these by distinguishing between the cases in which a legislature mediates the relationship between voters and the executive and those in which this relationship is direct or quasi-direct (see Sartori, 1994: 84–85). In our case, from 1970 to 1995 the functioning logic of regional systems was strictly parliamentary: voters elected a legislature, which, in turn, nominated the regional cabinet. In contrast, the aforementioned 1995 electoral reform bestowed – as a matter of fact – on regional chief executives the direct legitimation of the electorate. The prospective regional chief executives were indicated on the ballot and linked to party lists; a majority-assuring electoral system was introduced. The constitutional reform of 1999 completed the passage by formally introducing the direct election of presidents and the executive-legislative *aut simul stabunt, aut simul cadent* bond⁷ (Rubechi, 2013).

As argued above, the introduction of new electoral rules in 1995 was also the first step in the regionalization process. For this reason, we also use 1995 as the key date to operationalize the second condition.

Our expectations also imply two *outcomes of interest*. The first refers to the profile of Italian regional heads of government, in terms of their 'outsiderness' or their nationwide visibility *before entering office*. We check this against politics in general, parties, and institutional levels. Thus, a first indicator is the lack of political experience at all levels: we consider political outsiders those individuals with neither party nor institutional experience prior to becoming regional heads of government. Moreover, for the above theoretical reasons, we also use the experience in national and supra-national party and institutional positions that generally imply greater popularity before entering office as an indicator of nationwide visibility. With regard to this, we also use the experience as mayor of a capital municipality before entering office, since several studies demonstrate how presidentialization and personalization at local level (Legnante, 1999) lead to such popularity of mayors that they become leading characters of national politics in Italy (Baldini, 2002; Di Virgilio, 2005). Thus, we operationalize 'high-flyers' as those regional chief executives with experience in the national party executive, in supra-regional institutions (national and European) or as mayors of capital municipalities.

We measure party experience as: party membership; leadership of the local party; provincial party leadership; leadership at the regional level; and membership of the national party executive. As for institutional experience, we examine: experience as mayor (non-capital and capital municipalities); as president of the province; in the region (MP and minister); in the national parliament (deputy or senator); in the national government (senior or junior minister); as European MP.

Our second outcome of interest is the chief executives' career model. To our knowledge, Botella et al. (2010) is the main study systematically focusing on this subject with regard to regional heads of government. In their research, the authors limit the analysis to the career steps prior to entering office. However, a fully fledged understanding of the career models requires the observation of career steps in institutions both *before and after being in office*. For this purpose, we take an additional step and apply the above-mentioned indicators of institutional experience to both phases to test our *career model expectation*. More specifically, the typical unidirectional model implies a movement from local to regional to national or European level; the alternative model implies that regional and national careers are clearly separate and that there is no movement from regional to national or European level. Finally, the integrated model implies that there is no hierarchy among territorial levels and, thus, movements from the European or the national level to the regional level are more likely. Party experience is excluded from this analysis since the career model framework only concerns the occupation of institutional positions.

Data and methodology

This study deals with all chief executives of ordinary regions from the year in which these institutions were established (1970) to 31 December 2015. We have not counted those who were appointed only as acting heads of government. Overall, our dataset comprises 173 individuals.

However, our units of analysis ($N = 242$) are single terms and not single chief executives ($N = 159$ between 1970 and 1995; $N = 83$ between 1995 and 2015). This is because we are interested in the profiles of the elected individuals, *when they have been elected*, irrespective of whether or not they had already been regional heads of government. The same head of government can be elected more than once, but s/he brings a different kind or level of experience to the executive office each time s/he is elected. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to post-mandates. We want to observe career steps after each term in office. An individual can have further experience at the regional level or move towards another institutional level. Henceforth, this applies to all our analysis. Our approach provides a better picture of the degree of elite circulation and gives clearer insights into the integrated character of

sub-national and national careers. Moreover, the same approach has recently been used to assess ministerial circulation (Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli, 2017).

We present aggregate data for each indicator comparing two periods. By aggregating data, we can detect possible career patterns before and after 1995. For comparison's sake, we provide both absolute and percentage frequencies, and the significance of results is statistically tested through chi-squared tests.⁸ In addressing possible missing values, we follow an available-case approach with a pairwise deletion (Peugh and Enders, 2004). This means that slight differences may be found in the sums of absolute frequencies in the tables due to variations in missing values for each variable.

There is almost no official information on Italian sub-national party elites that is systematically available (Ignazi, 2013). For this reason, we relied on different sources for data collection. When available, we drew data from the 'Registry of Local and Regional Administrators' of the Italian Ministry of Interior, which provides data from 1985 onwards. In addition, we consulted the official websites of the two Italian parliamentary chambers, the regional governments and assemblies, the sub-regional institutions, and the European Parliament. Other sources were the historical archives of political parties (e.g. the Archive of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party for Emilia-Romagna) and historical archives of Italian newspapers. The Openpolis database – an online database to monitor Italian politicians' activities – provided further data. We also referred to the database of Worldstatesmen.org, an 'extremely reliable' source according to the comparative literature (Elgie, 2011: 57), as well as that of Worldleadersindex.org. We also looked at websites on the history of political parties (e.g. www.storiadc.it) and publications on the history of Italian regions and politicians' personal webpages. All the information was double-checked against general informative websites. Finally, Wikipedia was used as an indicative source to steer the search further.

Findings

Presidents' political experience before entering office

According to our *presidentialization expectation*, we should see more outsiders and 'high-flyers' after 1995. Numbers in Table 2 refer to the ratios of chief executives with party experience and/or institutional experience.⁹

We see that the typical path to power has passed through both party and institutions. However, the percentage of chief executives who followed this pathway has declined by almost 10 percentage points in the recent period. At the same time, that of individuals with no political experience moved from 0% to 9% after 1995. This finding is in line with our expectation.

Table 2. Type of political experience of regional chief executives before entering office by time period (%).

Type of political experience	Time period	
	1970–1995	1995–2015
Party experience only	2.6 (4)	3.7 (3)
Institutional experience only	0.7 (1)	2.4 (2)
Experience in party and institutions	96.7 (148)***	85.4 (70)***
<i>Total with political experience</i>	<i>100 (153)***</i>	<i>91.5 (75)***</i>
<i>Total with no political experience</i>	<i>0 (0)***</i>	<i>8.5 (7)***</i>

Differences are statistically significant for: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Note: Absolute frequencies between brackets.

Source: see Table 1.

With regard to party experience only, heads of government with previous party membership declined 10 percentage points between the two periods (99.4% until 1995 and 89% from 1995) (Table 3). The ratios of local and regional party leaders remained substantially the same (5.8% and 7.8% and 18.8% and 18.5%, respectively), but there was a fall in the proportion of provincial leaders (from 34.9% to 16.9%). This is probably due to the fact that during the regionalization wave in the 1990s, both parties and interest groups tried to revise their internal organization, where the provincial level played an important organizational role, according to the traditional Italian pre-republican territorial divisions. Such organizational setting, however, soon appeared particularly dysfunctional and it is no surprise that the provincial level lost importance for party life (Mattina, 2010; Ignazi, 2013). For our purpose, it is particularly worth noting that the percentage of members of the national party executive increased dramatically, from 12.6% to 41.6%.

In Table 4, we present data on institutional experience.

Findings about institutional experience follow the same pattern. The percentage of chief executives who had also been mayors did not decrease significantly; however, there is an interesting inversion trend as there were more mayors of capital municipalities after 1995. This is consistent with ‘presidentialization’, since the strengthening of the mayoral office in Italy following the introduction of the direct election of mayors in 1993 (Fabbrini, 2011;

Table 3. Type of party experience of regional chief executives before entering office by time period (%).

Type of party experience	Time period	
	1970–1995	1995–2015
Party member	99.4 (156)***	89.0 (73)***
Local party leader	5.8 (6)	7.8 (6)
Provincial party leader	34.9 (36)***	16.9 (13)***
Regional party leader	18.8 (24)	18.5 (15)
National party executive member	12.6 (14)***	41.6 (32)***

Differences are statistically significant for: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Note: Absolute frequencies between brackets.

Source: see Table 1.

Table 4. Type of institutional experience of regional chief executives before entering office by time period (%).

Type of institutional experience	Time period	
	1970–1995	1995–2015
Mayor		
Non-capital municipality	20.3 (29)	13.3 (11)
Capital municipality	10.5 (15)**	21.7 (18)**
Both	–*	2.4 (2)*
<i>Total mayoral experience</i>	30.8 (44)	37.4 (31)
President of province		
	15.0 (23)	8.4 (7)
Member of regional institution^a		
MP	48.2 (67)**	31.3 (26)**
Minister	–*	2.4 (2)*
Both	47.5 (66)**	31.3 (26)**
<i>Total regional experience</i>	95.7 (133)**	65.0 (54)**
Member of national parliament		
Deputy	2.5 (4)***	32.5 (27)***
Senator	1.9 (3)	1.2 (1)
Both	–**	3.6 (3)**
<i>Total parliamentary experience</i>	4.4 (7)***	37.3 (31)***
National minister		
Senior	–***	9.6 (8)***
Junior	0.6 (1)***	9.6 (8)***
Both	–	2.4 (2)
<i>Total ministerial experience</i>	0.6 (1)***	21.6 (18)***
Member of European Parliament^b		
	–***	13.3 (11)***

Differences are statistically significant for: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

^aFirst terms of 1970 excluded.

^bCalculated only for chief executives chosen from 1980.

Note: Absolute frequencies between brackets.

Source: see Table 1.

Baldini, 2002) exposed several capital municipality mayors to stronger public and media attention (Legnante, 1999). On the other hand, not only did the number of former presidents of province decrease, but there was also a lower percentage of chief executives with previous experience in the region. Meanwhile, the data on experience in national institutions is straightforward. While only 4% of regional chief executives elected between 1970 and 1995 had already been members of the European Parliament (MPs), 37% of their later counterparts had had this kind of experience. Moreover, in the first period we find no former senior ministers and only 1% of junior ministers. After 1995, 9% of presidents had been senior ministers before entering office and 9% had been junior ministers. Among former ministers, 2% had occupied a position in both layers. Finally, the percentages of former members of the European Parliament (MEPs) provide additional empirical evidence. No individuals in the first period had been MEP prior to becoming regional chief executive, whereas 13% of presidents after 1995 had held this post (however, it should be noted that the post only became available in 1979).

To summarize, the figures support the scenario of our *presidentialization expectation*. After 1995, the new figure of political outsiders has appeared,

while it was absent at all in the previous period. Moreover, a larger number of 'high-flyers' were appointed as regional presidents. To be precise, full outsiders have moved from zero to 8.5%. Party 'high-flyers' (i.e. members of the national party executive) have increased by almost 30%, from 12.6% to 41.6%. With regard to institutional experience, the increase has been of 11.2% for capital municipalities; of 33.1% for the national parliament; of 21% for the ministerial experience; and 13.3% for the European parliament. The tables show that all the changes between the two periods have been highly statistically significant, with a slight weakening with regard to (capital) mayors. Among those with political experience (still the large majority), overall the ratio of individuals with a sub-national experience decreased. At the same time, the national stage (at both party and institutional level) became a more common step along the pathway to the regional presidency.

Presidents' career paths

With regard to the career model of the Italian regional chief executives, the numbers thus far presented tell us that, between 1970 and 1995, the trend to achieve regional executives from below (sub-national level) was stronger than the trend from above (national level). This could be interpreted as a sign of either a unidirectional model from region to centre or an alternative model. Meanwhile, data on regional presidents from 1995 to 2015 indicate that the trend in this period points more to a movement from the centre, implying an integrated model.

To assess which model prevailed in the two periods, we need to observe post-mandate career steps. In other words, we have to look at what regional chief executives did after leaving their job. Our information covers both subsequent jobs and positions held after a period of time since holding the regional leadership. We present relevant data of institutional experience in [Table 5](#).

First, we see that in 11% of all cases between 1970 and 1995 regional heads of government climbed down the institutional ladder and became mayors. No presidents in the second period followed a similar path. No significant variations can be detected with regard to the post of national minister (senior and/or junior) or MEP. On the other hand, we can observe a decrease over time in the ratio of chief executives who remained in regional institutions. Nonetheless, there is a high percentage of regional heads of government who stayed in the region after being in office in both periods (74% in 1970–1995 and 66% in 1995–2015). Finally, data show a marked decline in the ratio of regional chief executives with a post-mandate career in the national parliament (38% in 1970–1995 and 18% in 1995–2015).

Table 5. Type of institutional experience of regional chief executives after being in office by time period (%).

Type of institutional experience	Time period	
	1970–1995	1995–2015 ^a
Mayor		
Non-capital municipality	5.3 (8)*	_*
Capital municipality	6.0 (9)**	_**
Both	-	-
<i>Total mayoral experience</i>	11.3 (17)***	_***
President of province	-	-
Member of regional institution		
MP	59.4 (92)	65.7 (44)
Minister	-	-
Both	14.2 (22)***	_***
<i>Total regional experience</i>	73.6 (114)	65.7 (44)
Member of national parliament		
Deputy	21.0 (33)	14.7 (10)
Senator	11.5 (18)***	_***
Both	5.7 (9)	2.9 (2)
<i>Total parliamentary experience</i>	38.2 (60)***	17.6 (12)***
National minister		
Senior	5.7 (9)	8.8 (6)
Junior	8.9 (14)	7.4 (5)
Both	1.9 (1)	1.5 (1)
<i>Total ministerial experience</i>	16.5 (24)	17.7 (12)
Member of European Parliament	8.3 (13)	7.3 (5)

Differences are statistically significant for: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

^aOnly concluded terms.

Note: Absolute frequencies between brackets.

Source: see Table 1.

Overall, these findings – together with those presented above – suggest, as expected, that a common career model in the first period was unidirectional from region to centre. In fact, before entering office a large proportion had been mayor and/or president of province and almost all had had some kind of regional experience as MPs or regional ministers. Moreover, a large proportion went on to the national Parliament after being regional chief executives. However, it is worth mentioning that many former regional heads of government decided to spend their career at the regional level as MPs; thus, contrary to our expectations, the alternative model seems to be the other main option followed between 1970 and 1995. From 1995, the typical models changed and moved towards a deeper integration between institutional levels. In particular, we observe new drives towards a movement from centre to region. In other words, the comparison provides further evidence for our second expectation: the ratio of moves from the centre to regions considerably increased and, therefore, the integrated model became more frequent. However, even in the second period many former regional presidents seemed to prefer to stay within regional institutions rather than moving towards national ones. As a consequence, the alternative model was also a major option from 1995 onwards.

Our dataset shows that the ratio of chief executives with prior regional experience decreased by 30 percentage points from 1995. At the same time, the percentage of regional chief executives with subsequent national experience fell by 20 percentage points. As a result, the pathway of the unidirectional model from region to centre no longer predominates. Finally, we found a large increase in the ratio of cases with neither regional experience *ex-ante* nor national experience *ex-post*. This finding further not only shows that the sub-national level has become less important as a step towards the regional presidency, but also highlights the decline of the regional level as a springboard to the national stage, at least as long as the regional presidency is concerned.

For a better assessment of the increase in the integration between the levels, we looked at the national institutional experience of regional heads of government both before and after being in office (Table 6).

The frequency distributions are congruent with our expectations, although some caveats apply. From 1995 to 2015, 23% of presidents moved from the centre to take office and they did not subsequently go back. This holds for only 3% of the heads of government-appointed between 1970 and 1995. The positions are reversed with regard to those with only a post-mandate national experience: 37% in the first period and 19% in the second. Results about regional chief executives with national institutional experience both before and after are clear-cut, with the percentage rising from 1% to 16% over time. Fourthly, we found that the ratio of regional chief executives with no national political experience – neither before nor after being in office – fell 18 percentage points, from 59% to 41%.

In a nutshell, between 1970 and 1995 two main models stood out: the alternative model (58.6%) and the unidirectional model (36.9%). Only 4.5% of regional heads of government followed an integrated model. In the second period, the distribution became more equilibrated. The unidirectional model was the least followed (19.1%), while similar percentages of regional presidents may be found for the alternative and the integrated model

Table 6. National institutional experience of regional chief executives before and after being president by time period (%).

Sequence of posts in national institutions	Time period	
	1970–1995	1995–2015 ^a
Only before	3.2 (5)***	23.5 (16)***
Only after	36.9 (58)***	19.1 (13)***
Both	1.3 (2)***	16.2 (11)***
<i>Total national experience</i>	41.4 (65)**	58.8 (40)**
<i>No national experience</i>	58.6 (92)**	41.2 (28)**

Differences are statistically significant for: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

^aOnly concluded terms.

Note: Absolute frequencies between brackets.

Source: see Table 1.

(41.2% and 39.7%, respectively). As argued, the higher ratio of the unidirectional model between 1970 and 1995 can be explained by the Italian regions' extreme weakness and dependence on the centre before the mid-1990s. The regional level was often subordinated to the centre and the only 'contacts' went from the latter to the former. On the other hand, the unexpected decrease in the percentage of regional chief executives following an alternative model after 1995 could be linked more to the functioning of the electoral rules rather than a greater separateness acquired by the regional level. In fact, whereas the parliamentary form of government secured the possibility of being elected for more than two consecutive terms in the first period, a state law explicitly banned this possibility for directly elected regional presidents in the second period. As a consequence, the permanence of presidents within the regional level is visibly greater from 1979 to 1995 than after 1995 when they were more likely to try to politically compete on other territorial and institutional levels, especially at the end of their second term approached. Finally, the significant increase in the ratio of chief executives who moved in both directions (integrated model) indicates that the degree of preference for the national over the regional level decreased over time. Overall, the greater variability of patterns in the second period may be explained by the strengthening of the regional level: ambitious politicians recognize the regional level as a viable and worthwhile option like the national level.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the career paths of regional chief executives in different party and institutional conditions provides interesting results. The choice of the Italian case is particularly stimulating because Italian regional political systems underwent profound changes between the 1990s and the 2000s. First, they moved from a pure parliamentary logic, in which regional chief executives were chosen by regional assemblies, to a presidential logic whereby a new electoral law and a constitutional provision established a direct link between voters and regional presidents. At the same time, regional governments have become more autonomous from the centre and more powerful political arenas. Accordingly, regional executive offices have become considerably more attractive. This study reveals some interesting implications about regional elite circulation also from a comparative perspective.

Our empirical findings are in line with expectations, but with insightful mixed evidence. The first finding is linked to the personalization of politics and the growing demand for public visibility which determines the emergence of a number of outsiders without political background and of 'high-flyers' recruited for their popularity. In other words, after 1995 a larger

percentage of chief executives had no political experience, came from the national level, or had previously been mayor of a capital municipality.

The second finding is linked to the previous one. It refers to the change in the career structure of opportunity for top regional politicians: the selection for the highest office within the regional government is less based on the traditional pathways of political-party professionalism, and careers are less unidirectional. The careers of regional chief executives now may also follow an integrated model. This to some extent contradicts the findings of Botella et al. (2010), namely that the increase in the importance of the regional level goes together with a lower number of regional prime ministers with previous national experience. It can be speculated that this difference is due to the type of election. Botella et al. (2010) focus on chief executives who are not directly elected. However, Italian regional heads of government are now directly elected and thus need high public visibility to run elections; therefore, experience at the national level can be a crucial asset. Finally, recent political personalization and strengthening of regional presidents do not explain why regional chief executives were more likely to follow an alternative career model in the first period rather than in the second. We argue that the change of electoral rules connected with the duration of tenure is more likely to explain this result.

Our study does not provide a fully fledged causal account of the relationships at stake; however, it presents – supported by theoretical arguments – evidence that institutional settings and competition logics can be deeply related to the change of the profiles and experiences of political elites. Moreover, it suggests that they also have an impact on the circulation of these elites within the political system and across institutional layers. This, in turn, sheds light on the level of integration between national and sub-national elites. Overall, we found that a restructuring of electoral rules can modify party behaviours and recruitment at the sub-national level just as it does at the national level. Moreover, we show that when the political resources of the institutional levels are similar, this offers ambitious politicians more differentiated but overlapping routes to power.

We are aware that, from an empirical viewpoint, a larger set of explanatory factors may be acting simultaneously in shaping the outcome of interest. This is particularly relevant to the Italian case as many features of the political system changed in the mid-1990s (Morlino, 2014). Future research could broaden the number of variables and seek to evaluate their net effect through regression analyses, using the present empirical evidence as groundwork for theory building (cf. Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Further analysis is also required to test whether the changes we have observed are connected to a more general trend of decreasing party-driven political professionalization in Western democracies at different levels of government (Borchert, 2003). Finally, any potential intervening impact of intra-party dynamics could be a subject for inquiry.

Scholarship on sub-national political elites predominantly looks at members of regional assemblies. However, decentralization processes across countries and the growing relevance of regional executive elites for decision-making processes indicate the need **also** for research on who governs at the sub-national level.

Notes

1. More precisely, we can speak of neo-parliamentarism or semi-parliamentarism (Duverger, 1986): the chief executive is directly elected by voters and there is a confidence relationship between parliament and government, based on the *simul stabunt vel simul cadent* principle. Therefore, the termination of executive government always leads to the dissolution of the assembly and to new elections.
2. This label – as well as that of climbers – has been used by Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli (2017) with regard to Italian ministers' profiles and it is here re-adapted to regional presidents. Thus, we do not consider technocrats with specific policy expertise, but politicians with skills more in line with the personalisation of politics and in particular with nationwide visibility. Similarly, we take into account leaders without territorial links, who simply jump to the fore. The operationalization of this concept is provided in the fourth section.
3. On this point, it is worth making a further clarification. Here, we are specifically interested in how general electoral rules shape the profile of successful politicians, *under an 'else equal condition.'* It may well be that parties can select different profiles, depending on open or closed selection procedures (e.g. Sandri et al., 2015b). Nonetheless, studies on how parties organize in different institutional settings (i.e. parliamentary vs. presidentialized) have provided evidence that institutional patterns come first and party variables are at most likely to foster or hinder systemic effects (Siavelis and Morgenstern, 2008: 10; Passarelli, 2015). The major effect is thus likely to go from electoral rules to intra-party procedures, rather than the other way round. This is confirmed by studies on party primaries, such as Sandri et al. (2015a). Moreover, Samuels and Shugart (2010) have claimed that, whatever the role of internal factors, different parties (arguably characterized by different intra-party selection rules) tend to propose similar politicians' profiles, due to institutional pressures. Based on this literature, we want to observe (if any) the overall effect on regional chief executives and, therefore, we will not consider intra-party procedures in our analysis.
4. We count a new government where there is a (1) change of chief executive; (2) change of regional cabinet party composition and/or (3) regional election.
5. Only concluded terms are considered.
6. White-Catholic and Red-Communist subcultures were deeply rooted in the North-East (Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Trentino-Alto Adige) and in the Centre of Italy (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria), respectively (e.g. Caciagli, 1988).
7. From 1995 to 1999, this principle was valid only for the two first years of the legislative term. Indeed, in three regions (Calabria, Campania, Molise), there was a change of executive within the same legislative term after this threshold. Nonetheless, we take 1995 as the general watershed, since it has been shown that in hybrid systems the 'presidential' facet of institutional setting is likely to

'contaminate' the parliamentary one, and thus shape the career paths of all chief executives (Samuels and Shugart, 2010: 70).

8. It is worth noting that we deal with the total population for the considered period. This could lead to epistemological and methodological pitfalls when it comes to use statistical significance tests. These tests rely on the assumption that the units of analysis come from a random sample, which could be representative of the whole population. In our case, we are instead confronted with non-repeatable data. However, we can claim that our *N* is likely to be representative of further observations, made under similar contextual features. For a discussion and relevant references, see Müller-Rommel and Vercesi (2017: 257).
9. We also tested differences with regard to socio-demographic background indicators, such as age, level of education and occupation. However, findings did not reveal substantial differences between the periods in question.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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