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New development: Directly elected mayors in Italy—creating a strong leader doesn't always mean creating strong leadership

Alessandro Sancino and Lorenzo Castellani

More than 20 years after their introduction, directly elected mayors are key players in Italian urban governance. This article explains the main effects of this reform on local government systems and provides lessons for other countries considering directly elected mayors.

Keywords: Italy; leadership; local government systems; mayors; urban governance.

The debate around directly elected mayors is hot (for example Bottom and Reiser, 2014; Copus and Dadd, 2014; Eckersley and Timm-Arnold, 2014; Hambleton and Sweeting, 2014): as Fenwick and Massey (2014, pp. 309–310) pointed out, there is a new urgency to understand more about this model of urban governance and to fill the gap between rhetoric and reality with more evidence. In this article, we aim to contribute to this issue by presenting the Italian case.

Italy has a strong mayor form of local government (Mouritzen and Svava, 2002, p. 58), and it can be described as a southern type of local government system (Page and Goldsmith, 1987; Denters and Rose, 2005) characterized by a Napoleonic administrative tradition (Hesse and Sharpe, 1991; Bennett, 1993; Ongaro, 2010) and permeated by patterns of clientelism and patronage (Goldsmith, 1992).

Directly elected mayors were introduced in Italy by Law No. 81 in 1993; this reform—which is generally considered successful (Baldini, 2002, p. 374)—introduced a 'presidential model of local government' (Cassese *et al.*, 2003), replacing the previous model based on a proportional system. This change was welcomed by almost all the main opinion leaders at that time—as Gianoli wrote (2010, p. 187): 'Corruption, the imbalance between legislative and executive powers, the pervasiveness of political parties, and the lack of a strong leadership within a governance context became the key issues to be addressed'.

Our article presents the main aspects of direct election of mayors in Italy, highlighting five main effects on local government systems. We conclude with lessons for other countries. The article contributes to the wider debate

around city leadership, making the argument that the traditional leader-centric and positional view of leadership should be complemented by a more distributed and dynamic view of leadership as an activity, rather than a position of authority.

We built our arguments from a critical analysis of the literature, enriched by our experiences working in local politics in Italy with several mayors. Copus (2003, p. 34) welcomed practical experience like ours: 'The experience of being immersed in local politics throws up the possibility that traditional research into such a complex world may be all the better for being filtered through what councillors actually do and say in more unguarded moments'.

Background

The Italian state is divided into four levels of government: central government; 20 regions (regioni, the intermediate subnational level of government); provinces and municipalities (comuni). Provinces and metropolitan cities (consisting of more than 8,000 comuni and about 110 provinces) represent the local government level.

Each municipality has a mayor, a cabinet, a city council and an administrative structure. In Italy, the mayor represents the municipality both politically and legally and acts as the main government official in the functions delegated by the state to the municipality. Basically, the mayor performs three independent functions: head of the municipality, leader of the majority party (or coalition) and government official (Vaciago, 1999). The mayor appoints the members of the cabinet, who are not necessarily elected by the citizens. Moreover, the mayor

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appoints the heads of offices and services and the representatives of the municipality in local *quangos* and municipal corporations.

In Italy, mayors are elected directly by citizens with different electoral systems depending on the size of the municipality. In municipalities with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants, the party receiving a simple majority in the election wins, and gets two-thirds of the seats, and their leading candidate becomes mayor (winner takes all). In municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants, there could be two separate ballots: a mayor is elected in the first round if one candidate gets more than 50% of the votes; if not, a run-off election is held between the two candidates receiving the highest number of votes. In both cases, the coalition of parties supporting the winning mayor gets 60% of the seats. The elections are held every five years, and the same person cannot be re-elected mayor for more than two consecutive terms. The resignation of the mayor, or a vote of no confidence, result in the automatic resignation of the whole city council.

Main effects of directly elected mayors on local government systems

More stability and improved decision-making

Before the introduction of directly elected mayors in 1993, less than 1% of the Italian main local governments (the provincial capitals) had cabinets that lasted for the entire (five-year) term (Baldini, 2002, p. 368). After this reform, councils have stronger political majorities, are less fragmented and are consequently relatively stable in supporting a mayor (Clarke *et al.*, 1996; Larsen, 2000). Moreover, the decision-making process and policy implementation benefited from the introduction of directly elected mayors in terms of efficiency, since decisions were faster than under the previous system (Baldini and Legnante, 1998). This is in line with other studies that have highlighted improved decision-making as one of the benefits of having directly elected mayors (for example Sims, 2011).

Greater accountability on roles and responsibilities

The directly elected mayor is the central figure in a municipality. Before the introduction of directly elected mayors, councillors were responsible, together with the members of the cabinet, both for executive matters and for the function of overview and scrutiny. This created considerable confusion about who was responsible for what. Now, along with the direct election of the mayor, the Italian

legislation has imposed a separation of powers between the cabinet and the council, putting the first exclusively in charge of executive matters. Gianoli wrote (2010, p. 186) that 'with the direct election of the mayor, the electorate directly confers legitimacy to the mayor, thus entrusting him/her with the overall responsibility for municipal government'. Thus, there is now a greater accountability on roles and responsibilities and 'mayors are more powerful but also more accountable than their predecessors' (Baldini, 2002, p. 366).

Individualization and personalization of power

The introduction of directly elected mayors has impacted significantly on local power dynamics in two main ways:

- Mayors and members of cabinets have become the key gatekeepers of citizens' and civic groups' interests and issues. In other words, individuals have substantially replaced parties in their traditional role of mediation and representation of civic interests and issues.
- Power has become more concentrated on the mayor: for example, mayors appoint the members of the cabinet, as well as representatives in local *quangos* and municipal corporations. This has contributed to making the municipality an increasingly candidate-centred institution.

Disempowerment of the local council and lack of overview and scrutiny

When directly elected mayors were introduced, it was intended that the administrative structure would support the cabinet in executive matters and the city council in their overview and scrutiny role (Urbani, 2003). However, in practice, almost all of the administrative resources have been dedicated to supporting the executive matters, leaving councillors without the support they need for overview and scrutiny. This situation is frustrating for councillors from opposition parties and has often led to their gradual disengagement.

The changes in local (and national) politics

The introduction of directly elected mayors profoundly changed Italian local and national politics. The three main impacts were: weakening of the influence exercised by local parties; the emergence on the national political scene of new political movements led by mayors; and increasing influence on national policy-making by the mayors of large cities. The weakening of parties was mainly caused by the

trend towards greater personalization of political campaigns (Vandelli, 1997), often centred on the personalities of the mayoral candidates rather than on urban issues. This determined a direct relationship between voters and the mayor that greatly diminished the influence of political parties at the local level.

This personalization of the political stage has also successfully projected many mayors onto the national scene: for example, in two cases out of six, the two candidates for prime minister for the centre-left coalition were mayors, as well as the current prime minister, Matteo Renzi, who was previously mayor of Florence.

What can we learn from the Italian experience?

Lesson No. 1: Creating a new power requires creating a new counter-power

Introducing directly elected mayors had a major impact on the distribution of powers. The reform redistributed powers between the executive branch of the local government and the council. This has sometimes resulted in local councillors being unable to properly exercise their overview and scrutiny responsibilities. The reform would have been more beneficial if it had simultaneously provided more powers and support for overview and scrutiny. Moreover, in terms of lessons to be learned, this situation provides a warning about the importance of institutional reforms being accompanied by training for managing the transition and for preparing all the people affected by the reform to understand the key features of the new arrangements.

Lesson No. 2: Directly elected mayors are powerful energizers in local democracy and national politics

Lesson No. 2 deals with the role of the directly elected mayors in the patterns of local democracy and national politics. Italian directly elected mayors have played a substantial role in revitalizing local democracy through their more direct and engaging style of communicating with their constituency. A recent survey found that the municipality is the level of government that Italians trust the most (Demos, 2014). Having been a directly elected mayor has proven to be a key step towards a role in central government, without pursuing the traditional career path within political parties. This finding may explain the reluctance of established politicians to acknowledge the value of directly elected mayors.

Lesson No. 3: Urban governance and local government systems are not about just one person

Overall, directly elected mayors have provided greater stability in Italian urban governance than the previous system. However, this is not only the result of having a directly elected mayor, but on other mechanisms as well, such as the strong majority prize provided by the electoral law; the bond between the mayor and the council; and the change in the political culture of Italian local parties towards a stable government being a key element for re-election. So the debate about the advantages and disadvantages of directly elected mayors, needs to include all the other elements that characterize local government systems and affect urban governance.

Conclusions

In the early 1990s, Italian local government was in dire need of institutional reform. The Italian legislature thought that the introduction of directly elected mayors would create stronger leadership, better accountability and more effective policy-making. The idea of having better urban governance and stronger leadership through directly elected mayors is shared across different countries, as for example with the recent decision of the UK government to establish a directly elected mayor for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. After more than 20 years' experience, we can conclude that the introduction of directly elected mayors in Italy has had some positive effects on urban governance in terms of better political stability and greater accountability on roles and responsibilities. However, there are also some downsides in terms of individualization and centralization of power in the role of mayor without proper checks and balances.

Moreover, impacts on leadership have been problematic in some cases. Some mayors have played a crucial role in the development of Italian cities but, in other cases, mayors have been a major barrier to progress. Drawing from the Italian experience, we conclude that giving so much power to a single person can be very risky. Embracing a more sophisticated view of leadership is necessary to avoid a situation where the leader might not be equipped to respond to complex challenges (with increasingly shrinking resources) eroding local democracy and creating public distrust in government.

Moving from a leader-centric, static and positional view of leadership towards acceptance of a more distributed, pluralistic and interactive

perspective of leadership (for example Hartley and Allison, 2000) would be the best way forward in the context of contemporary urban governance. The debate around the issue of directly (or not) elected mayors would, in this case, be at the centre of a much bigger picture, where the mayor would be one of several elements that cities and communities need to maximize their democratic, economic, social and civic potential.

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