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Leadership at the subnational level – mayoral and executive models

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Abstract

Over the last decades and across the globe, subnational government has undergone significant reform. In many of these structural changes to the systems of local, urban and metropolitan governance, the roles of leaders and positions of leadership were at the core of the reform. One of the most prominent aims has been to give expression to a new ideal type of local political leadership and to increase the legitimacy and accountability of subnational government. The further proliferation of the directly elected mayor model is but one expression of this trend. However, the academic literature continues to struggle to capture the complexity and changing nature of subnational leadership. In response, the aim of this chapter is to analyze and discuss the changes in mayoral and executive leadership against the background of the available typologies for mayoral and executive models. In addition, the authors develop an agenda for further research.

Key words: political leadership, local government systems, local democracy, mayors, directly elected mayor, new institutionalism

Local political leadership in focus

In the study of how societies deal with contemporary social and economic challenges, the local level has gained increasing interest in recent years (Pierre 2016). This is because local governance reflects the ways in which societies deal with such issues, and how they attempt to realize their visions of democracy (John *et al.* 2012). In this field of study, political leadership has understandably received significant attention. In and outside of academia, it is increasingly believed that local leadership, that of directly elected mayors and other local political leaders in particular, plays a crucial role in addressing today's grand societal challenges (Barber 2013; Stren and Friendly 2019). Mayors are championed for being pragmatists who are better at problem-solving than national politicians, for example in response to the recent COVID-19 crisis (Watts 2020). And, in democracies, mayors are meant to be responsive to their electorate. In most settings, the behaviour of mayors is of important symbolic as well as instrumental significance (Kukovič *et al.* 2019: 163-164). Increasingly, local political leadership is seen to be necessary to steer society in the direction of collectively negotiated outcomes and to address the challenges of local governance itself (Heinelt *et al.* 2018a). Most notably, these include 'dilemmas of accountability

and coordination' (Steyvers *et al.* 2008; 137; see also Borraz and John 2004), at the core of our new modes of governance. In response to these challenges, over the last decades, subnational government has undergone considerable reform, which has resulted in many cases in the strengthening of local leadership. According to Steyvers *et al.* (2008), two interrelated process can be noted in reform strategies. The first is to personalize the selection of leader, that is, not to leave the choice of leader to parties or council assemblies, but rather, to let citizens choose. The second is to endow more and greater powers in the hands of leaders. The result is more potent and powerful local political leadership. The relatively recent introduction of directly elected mayors in countries such as Croatia, England, Germany, Hungary, and Poland is but one expression of this trend (Hambleton and Sweeting 2014; Wollmann 2014). The study of directly elected mayors, and of the mayoralty more broadly, has followed these trends and has intensified in the recent years (Wall 2018).

Many studies have analyzed the institutional design of local government, that is the general character and structure of how local government is organized in terms of its laws and regulations. This is because these are seen to heavily affect how mayors operate on a day-to-day basis. 'Institutions matter a lot', conclude Mouritzen and Svava (2002: 2) in their seminal study of local political leadership. Evidently, as neo-institutionalism rightly points out, there is much more to political leadership than institutional design only (Davies and Trounstone 2012). 'City leadership involves a mix of formal and informal powers, institutional resources, persuasion, deal-making, brokering, facilitation, profile, charisma, and vision to achieve goals and satisfy followers' as Sweeting notes (2017: 3). However, formal and informal rules, as they are identified by neo-institutionalist approaches to leadership, are particularly influential, and the study thereof offers unique insights into the complex phenomenon of political leadership (Helms 2014; Steyvers 2016).

One of the complexities of the study of local leadership is that there is such wide variety in how local government is designed and operates (see Loughlin *et al.* 2011 for an overview). Even the formal rules of local government present substantial variation cross-nationally. The position of the mayor as political leader, whether directly or indirectly elected, is also very different between, and sometimes also within countries, as in England. Whereas some mayors have a very powerful, almost presidential position in local government, other mayors merely act as ceremonial figureheads. This is because the legislative frameworks and the institutional designs under which mayors operate vary considerably from country to country. As a consequence, significant differences can be identified between mayors not only in terms of selection procedures, but also in terms of the two fundamental and important formal power relations: vis-à-vis national government and vis-à-vis the council and the local administration (Heinelt and Hlepas, 2006). Even when it comes to 'the' directly elected mayor model, there is a wide variety of hybrid forms in terms of the position, tasks and responsibilities of office holders, which means that there is no single archetypal construct (Sweeting 2017; see also Kukovič *et al.* 2015).

Typologies of local government systems

Several authors have tried to negotiate this very diverse landscape by developing typologies of local government systems more broadly or of mayoral models more specifically (for comprehensive overviews, see Heinelt *et al.* 2018b; Kukovič and Haček 2019). Although such typologies necessarily reduce information because they are usually based on a limited number of dimensions (Heinelt *et al.* 2018b: 20), they perform a crucial function by also reducing complexity and making possible meaningful comparison between real-life models. Although some typologies that have emerged in the field of mayoral leadership are Weberian ideal-type distinctions between various types of leadership, with mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive dimensions (Bäck 2005), the large majority of typologies in the field are empirically informed attempts to identify commonalities between real-life institutional designs. The latter do not necessarily cover all possibilities and do allow for combinations of the various models to exist. With these models, the various authors engage in comparative analyses where they try to negotiate the myriad of real-existing models of local leadership.

One of the earliest and most influential typologies that was developed in this tradition is the one developed by Mouritzen and Svara in their seminal book *Leadership at the apex* (2002). Their typology focuses on what is called the ‘horizontal power dimension’, that is, the power relations between the mayor, the council and the administration, and not the ‘vertical power dimension’ of power relations between local and national government. According to the authors, ‘The key issue is how political power is obtained, maintained, exercised, and shared. ... Political power is a function of the degree of control a political actor – a person or a collective body – has in two arenas. First, to what extent is the city council controlled by one or more political actors? The second arena is the executive, and the question is to what extent is control over the executive in the hands of one or more political actors’ (Mouritzen and Svara 2002: 53). In answering these questions for specific countries, they argue both formal structures and informal rules and norms are important.

Mouritzen and Svara (2002: 53-56) distinguish four types of governmental form (see also Heinelt and Hlepas 2006: 31-32; Kukovič and Haček 2019):

1. The *strong mayor*, who is clearly in executive and political charge of the municipality, with control over the city council.
2. The *committee-leader form*, where there is obviously a political leader (who may or may not have the title of mayor), who shares functions with other politicians, committees, and the CEO.
3. The *collective form*, where a collegiate body of locally elected politicians is the key decision-making organ, which the mayor may chair.
4. The *council-manager form*, where a council-appointed chief executive takes control of executive functions and the mayor holds ceremonial functions.

One of the drawbacks of the above typology is that, as indicated before, it does not take into account the vertical power dimension, that is the relationships between the central state and the municipal level. This multi-level context, however, is very important in some systems, especially in more centralized states, because mayoral governance is shaped and constrained by legislative frames from national governments. Clear illustrations are provided by the UK and New Zealand, and to a lesser extent Poland (Sweeting 2017). Therefore, attempts have been made to combine Mouritzen and Svava's typology with types of local government systems according to vertical local-central relations. One of these results in the elaborate POLLEADER typology of political leadership types. Basically, this typology distinguishes four types of mayors (Heinelt and Hlepas, 2006: 36-37; Heinelt et al. 2018a):

1. The *political mayor*, that is, strong mayors who act under the condition that municipalities are responsible for a relatively limited scope of 'state' functions.
2. The *executive mayor*, that is strong mayors in municipalities who are responsible for a broad spectrum of public service provision.
3. The *collegial leader*, where the mayor acts under the institutional condition of the committee leader form and the collective type of local government, which requires a collegial cooperation between the municipal leader and other powerful actors or bodies.
4. The *ceremonial mayor*, where the municipal administration is directed by a professional manager and mayors perform a mainly ceremonial role.

One of the drawbacks of both the Mouritzen and Svava and Heinelt and Hlepas typologies is that they tend to treat Eastern European countries as one group. In response, Swianiewicz (2014) developed an empirical typology of local government systems in Eastern Europe that identifies five types of local government forms among 19 countries according to the dimensions of (a) territorial organization, (b) functional decentralization, (c) financial discretion, and (d) horizontal power relations. These groups can be roughly summarized according to the following characteristics:

1. Group I: the *champions of decentralization*, where typically directly elected mayors operate in municipalities that provide a wide scope of functions and where local government has a high level of financial autonomy.
2. Group II: the *relatively decentralized*, where municipalities also provide a wide scope of functions, but with considerably less financial autonomy.
3. Group III: the *Balkan countries*, where the scope of local government functions is usually rather narrow and the level of financial autonomy is relatively low. Typically, the Balkan countries have directly elected mayors.
4. Group IV: is a group of countries with *a very high level of territorial consolidation*. These countries typically have a collective type of leadership.

5. Group V: is a group of countries with *strong functional and financial centralization as well as territorial fragmentation*

This typology in particular shows the complexity of developing concise and parsimonious typologies of local government systems that do justice to the empirical diversity in designs of local governance. It has not been applied yet to West European countries (Swianiewicz 2014).

From typologies to indexes... and back

One of the ways in which scholars have tried to deal with the issue of complexity when it comes to mayoral models is not to develop typologies but to develop indexes of 'mayoral strength'. Such instruments determine and compare the formal powers that mayors have in different models of local government. Although such tools are vulnerable to the objection that there is 'much to be said for the strength of "weak" mayors' (Sweeting 2017: 2), they nevertheless provide valuable insights into how the formal powers of mayors differ under various regimes. They also allow for considerable variety in the sense that, compared to the existing typologies, they can better accommodate directly elected mayors with little formal powers as well as strong indirectly elected mayors and the like.

One such index was developed by Heinelt and Hlepas (2006). It covers nine variables, including direct election, control over the council majority, the right to appoint the municipal chief executive officer and the like. The instruments show considerable differences between countries, with French mayors scoring the highest points, together with Spain, Italy and Greece, and with the Swedish council leaders scoring the lowest points, together with Switzerland, the Netherlands and Ireland. With some adaptations in the weighting of index variables, a similar index was used to specify mayoral strength in a 2014 survey (reported on in Heinelt *et al.* 2018a). The results showed only slight variation between the two assessments.

Interestingly, in the latter case, the authors conclude that, in the analysis of mayoral strength, it continues to be useful to work with the original Mouritzen and Svava typology since it is 'generally useful to capture basic differences in the strength of mayors of the four types of local government systems', and in the self-perception of mayors (Heinelt *et al.* 2018b: 38). In the index of mayoral strength, countries are grouped in a similar way as they are in Mouritzen and Svava's original analysis. In other words, the Mouritzen and Svava typology still has strong empirical validity. When it comes to the horizontal power relations, this conclusion is shared by several other authors in the 2018 book as well as other observers (Wall 2018).

Recent changes in mayoral leadership

When analyzing mayoral leadership and the institutional designs that office holders operate under, the Mouritzen and Svava typology, therefore, still provides a very valuable tool to scholars. It also allows us to discuss some of the changes that mayoral leadership has gone through. Here, we mainly focus on changes in horizontal power relations, necessarily ignoring major trends in local and regional government including globalization and devolution, which are already covered by other chapters in this volume.

As discussed, already in 2008, Steyvers *et al.* (2008) observed two interconnected trends towards (a) the personalization of leadership selection and (b) the concentration of executive powers in the hands of individual leaders. Both trends seem to have continued after 2008. The personalization of leadership selection in the formal sense of the word has increased through the further proliferation of the directly elected mayor in several countries. While a comprehensive study of the extent of this institutional format is not available, directly elected mayors are common across the globe (Stren and Friendly 2019) and the ‘international rising tide’ continues (Hambleton 2013). One relatively recent development in this direction is the introduction of the directly elected mayor at the metropolitan level, that is of ‘metro-mayors’. One example is the 2010 election of the first directly elected mayor of Auckland in New Zealand. Similarly, since 2010, in several city-regions in England, ‘combined authorities’, comprising several municipalities, have been created which include directly elected mayors (Shutt and Liddle 2019). In other countries, the debate about the possible introduction of directly elected mayors has surfaced, or resurfaced. Limerick in Ireland will elect its first directly elected mayor in 2021, following proposals recently published by the Irish Government (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2019). This development has been accompanied by debate in other Irish cities about the suitability of the model in a country which has traditionally organized its council executive according to the council-manager form. In the Netherlands in 2019, an important constitutional barrier against the introduction of the directly elected mayor was removed. Although this does not yet mean that the directly elected mayor will be introduced into the Dutch system of local government any time soon, it does show that the country, in which the political culture traditionally is quite hostile towards strong individualistic leadership (Karsten and Hendriks 2017), is becoming more open to such leadership.

The second trend that was observed by Steyvers *et al.* (2008), that is, the concentration of executive powers in the hands of individual leaders, seems to be also to have remained strong. Studies from across the globe report on the incremental but steady transfer of formal powers to the directly elected mayor. This includes, amongst others, Croatia (Podolnjak and Gardašević 2013), Norway (Bentzen *et al.* 2020), Slovenia (Kukovič and Brezovšek 2016), England, Germany, Poland and New Zealand (Sweeting 2017). In addition, several studies report on processes of ‘presidentialization’ in local politics without changes in the formal structure of local government,

through, amongst others, the personalization of elections (see also Poguntke and Webb 2005). Examples include Belgium (Rodenbach 2017), the Balkan countries (Passarelli 2019), and Italy (Freschi and Mete 2020).

Thus, across the board, there seems to be a broad trend towards the strong mayor model in Mouritzen and Svava's terms, or the executive mayor in Heinelt and Hlepas's terms, or towards Bäck's (2005) presidential or semi-presidential systems of local government. This does not necessarily hold for all counties -in the Netherlands a process of parliamentarization is observed for example (Karsten and Boogers 2014)-, but the broader trend is evident. The hope among policymakers in many countries is that this strengthening of local political leadership through institutional design leads to more effective, transparent and accountable local governance (Berg and Rao 2005; Borraz and John 2004). Despite this position being subject to criticism (Bergström *et al.* 2012; Ruscio 2008), strong, individual leadership is often seen as the new 'ideal type' of local political leadership in policy-making circles (Lowndes and Leach 2004). This desire was particularly evident in the most recent pandemic crisis, when quick and pro-active decision-making was essential, and fearlessness, strategy and insight were most-sought-after personal characteristics of a leader.

An agenda for further research

This brings us to the main item on the agenda for further research in the field of the mayoralty. Although a vast literature on local political leadership has become available over the last few years, we believe the field is still lacking a comprehensive evaluation of the validity of the legitimacy and accountability claims that are behind the above trends.

When it comes to the directly elected mayor, stock-takes of the various policy arguments pro and contra the introduction of the directly elected mayor are available (Sweeting 2017: 5) and the literature about the effects of the rise of the directly elected mayor is steadily growing (Fenwick and Johnston 2020; Sweeting and Hambleton 2020). But, as Hambleton correctly observes, there continues to be 'a dearth of evaluation research on the actual impact of different mayoral models of governance. Given the relative absence of solid evidence—one way or the other—on directly elected mayors, future research should focus on whether a given mayoral model makes a difference and, if it does, for whom?' (2020: 4).

One of the issues in the field is that evaluation research on the various models of the mayoralty continues to be dominated by research conducted in West European countries, and the UK in particular. This is of course understandable given the fact that the introduction of the directly elected mayor in the UK is quite a recent phenomenon. Moreover, the fact that local governments in the UK can to an extent, choose their own institutional design, which leads to intra-country variation, makes it an ideal candidate for comparative research on the effects of various mayoral

and executive models. Furthermore, the way of selecting a leader is essential, as the weight of his role is related both externally in correlation with other local and national authorities as well as internally in the local government system itself (Kukovič *et al.* 2019). Successful empirical research in the field, however, requires more variety in mayoral and executive models and more systematic cross-country comparisons also including countries outside of Western Europe. And, on a methodological note, more quasi-experimental research on the directly elected mayor and other models is needed which consistently and systematically compares the ‘before and after’ situations. Up until now, the field continues to be dominated by research that only studies the situation *ex post hoc* or that evaluates the effects based on respondents’ impressions of the effects. Although this line of research does produce very relevant insights into the effectiveness, legitimacy and accountability effects of the various models, effective theory building in local politics requires more methodological rigor (Steyvers 2019).

To sum up, for the past two decades, research on political leadership at the subnational level has to a large extent been focused on grasping how the institutional set-up forming the form of government in the local political entity affects the horizontal power relations between the mayor, the local council and the local administration. And, at a time when one of the main trends has been answering the call for stronger leadership with the introduction of more directly elected mayors, it is no surprise that the research agenda on local political leadership is largely occupied with the questions about whether and how directly elected mayors affect leadership in the local realm. In this chapter, we join the choir and call for more research on this important matter. However, in combination with this agenda for future research we will conclude by pointing out four additional dimensions of subnational political leadership that could be valuable additions to this research.

First, we should continue to debate the concept of power, not least to be careful not to overestimate the importance of formal structures and of formal powers. Neo-institutionalist theories as well as studies of actual mayoral leadership show us that informal powers and understandings may be just as important as formal structures. There may be advantages to the study of local government comparatively from taking a sophisticated institutional approach that, as well as taking into account formal powers and structures, also offers a framework that aims to uncover the tacit understandings, unspoken assumptions, path dependencies and forms of accepted behavior associated with local political leadership (see Scott 2014 for such a framework). The concept of ‘facilitative leadership’ introduced by Svava (1994) grasps this informal (and often soft) power. Building upon this concept, future research on mayoral leadership could benefit from Kjær’s (2013) model of political leadership as the art of circulating political capital, which ‘reaches beyond the traditional divide between structure and agency’ (Bennister *et al.* 2017: 1-2). Also a political ethnography approach (Rhodes *et al.* 2007) promises to offer rich data on the everyday experiences of political leaders and move on the study of mayoral governance demonstrating that there is ample room for human agency in any of the mayoral models. Thus, any research in the field should render account of the interplay between formal and informal types of leadership that

effects actual mayoral governance in ways that are very hard to map in typologies of local government systems.

Second, we should be careful not to forget the vertical power dimension. While Swianiewicz (2014), as already described, tries to somewhat incorporate this power relation in his typology of local government forms, in most cases (as so far in this chapter) the vertical power relation is only acknowledged but not further investigated. However, it could be important for local political leadership whether it is conducted in a local government system with a broad task portfolio and a high degree of political discretion or whether it is performed in a single-purpose municipality that mostly implements decisions already made at a higher political level. It might very well affect the leadership if the mayor is ‘a big fish in a little pond’ instead of the other way around. And, this also relates to which scene local political leaders are acting in. While the mayor in many countries used to be the mayor of the city or town exclusively, today, there might also be expectations of mayors performing at the national or even on the international political scene. When Barber (2013) named his book on the subject ‘If mayors ruled the world’, it was a direct call for mayors to step up and to be directly involved in the international scene. More research on how mayors are faring on this new scene – and not least how they conduct multi-level leadership – is most warranted.

Third, it should also be noticed that the number and complexity of the problems with which local political leaders have to deal are changing. Or at least, the problems differ from local government to local government. For instance, the ongoing – and in recent years intensified – process of urbanization means that in some local governments the leadership is facing increasing unemployment, an aging population, and a negative economic growth, while in others, mayors are dealing with traffic congestion, large infrastructure projects, gentrification and problems of recruiting internationally. The global financial crisis of 2008 and the recovery might have further intensified the economic growth zero-sum game between localities and challenged the skill set of the local leaders. Research investigating these kinds of questions would be very relevant, not least in the beginning of a new recession (and hopefully recovery) caused by the COVID19-pandemic.

Fourth, as much as it is well established that political leadership also at the local level is a leader-follower relation (Kellerman 2008), research on leadership tends to be leader-centered. Remembering to take into account also the perspective of the followers, that is citizens, needs to be an important aspect of leadership research, not least since the relationship between the leaders and followers in its more formal configuration tends to be in flux. In the traditional formalistic representational model, political parties and the ballot box are (the most) important features but neither party membership nor local turnout are on an upward trajectory (in many countries on the contrary). Therefore, there has been a call for more ‘collaborative’ or even ‘shared’ leadership, where local politicians and local citizens meet in less traditional and formalized ways (Sørensen 2020) – also a dimension of local leadership open to more empirical research.

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