

Municipal Political Elites: Sociodemographic Profiles and Career Paths in Umbria

Le élite politiche comunali: Profili sociodemografici e percorsi di carriera in Umbria

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Abstract. Nonostante il ruolo fondamentale che le élite politiche locali svolgono nelle moderne democrazie multilivello, i loro profili e i loro percorsi di carriera, soprattutto a livello comunale, rimangono in gran parte poco esplorati. Basandosi su un dataset originale, il presente lavoro cerca di colmare questa lacuna analizzando l'età, il genere, il livello di istruzione, il background professionale e l'esperienza politica pregressa dei politici comunali umbri e approfondendo in particolare come variano i loro profili in funzione della carica ricoperta e delle dimensioni demografiche dei comuni. I risultati indicano che la classe politica locale umbra, al pari della classe politica locale italiana ed europea, è prevalentemente di mezza età, con un alto livello di istruzione e spesso impiegata in lavori altamente specializzati. Concentrandosi sul caso umbro, il presente lavoro fornisce preziose indicazioni sulla composizione delle élite politiche locali e contribuisce a una comprensione più approfondita della rappresentanza democratica a livello comunale.

Abstract. *Despite the critical role of local political elites in modern multilevel democracies, the profiles and career trajectories of local politicians, especially at municipal level, remain largely underexplored. This paper seeks to fill this gap by investigating the sociodemographic characteristics and career paths of local councillors, executive members, and mayors in Umbrian municipalities. Drawing on an original dataset, this study analyses the age, gender, educational attainment, professional background, and political experience of Umbrian local politicians. Particular attention is paid to the differences between offices and the demographic dimensions of municipalities. Findings indicate that Umbrian local politicians, like their counterparts throughout Italy and Europe, are predominantly middle-aged, highly educated, and often employed in highly specialised jobs. By focusing on the Umbrian case, this paper provides valuable insights into the composition of local political elites and contributes to a deeper understanding of democratic representation at the municipal level.*

Keywords: *Local Political Elites, Political Careers, Local government, Gender Representation, Italian Municipalities*

1. Introduction

Although local politics has long been regarded as a form of “low” politics, subordinate to the “high” politics of national parliaments and governments, it plays a crucial role in shaping citizens’ daily lives (Della Porta, 1999).

Indeed, at the municipal level, citizens interact for the first time with democratic institutions and processes and experience political representation and participation (Kemp and Jiménez 2013). Their interactions with the political system’s periphery and with local political actors often shape their broader perceptions of politics (Bettin, Talluri, and Magnier 1989). Therefore, although municipal administrators have less influence than their counterparts at regional, national, and European levels, they serve as a vital link between the political centre and periphery, and between the political system and the social sphere (Bettin, Talluri, and Magnier 1989).

In Italy, although less attention has been given to the profiles and careers of local politicians than to their counterparts at the supranational (Rombi and Seddone 2019), national (Boldrini and Grimaldi 2023; Verzichelli 2010) and regional levels (Grimaldi and Vercesi 2018; Vassallo and Cerruto 2009), interest in local politicians began to grow particularly after reforms introduced administrative decentralisation and the direct election of mayors (Barberis 1988; Bettin, Talluri, and Magnier 1989; Catanzaro et al. 2011; Damiani 2010; Segatori 2003).

Since then, the idea that local governance contributes to strengthening democratic quality and citizenship has attracted growing interest (Fantozzi, 2007). Furthermore, as at the national level, the competencies and career paths of municipal administrators can affect local development as well as the performance and stability of local representative democracies (Best and Vogel 2014; Grotz et al. 2021).

Therefore, using an original subnational dataset, this paper aims to examine the sociodemographic characteristics and political-professional backgrounds of local political elites in Umbrian municipalities.

The article is structured as follows: after a brief review of the major contributions of literature, the third section focuses more specifically on the local level and presents the main questions guiding the research. Section four analyses the peculiarities of the Italian multilevel system, with a focus on Umbria. The following section presents a descriptive analysis of the sociopolitical profiles of local politicians in Umbria, focusing on their gender, age, education, professional experience, and political careers across various levels of government. The final section provides a summary of key findings and conclusions.

2. The study of political leadership

Political leadership has attracted the interest of scholars since the studies of Plato and Aristotle (Bell, 2014). However, the first systematic formulation of the theory of political elites dates back to the early 20th century with the publication of early works by Mosca, Pareto and Weber (Best and Higley 2018). Since then, the study of leadership has been translated into different types of analysis and approaches and has been seen as a way to predict the actions of politicians and the impact they might have on the community ('t Hart and Rhodes 2014).

At the local level, Montesanti (2007) identified three distinct levels or approaches for analysing the political class: sociographic, political, and network-based, each emphasizing different dimensions of political representation.

The sociographic approach, which is one of the most commonly used for studying political elites, focuses on the social and demographic characteristics of elected officials. It examines their profiles and backgrounds, focusing on variables such as gender, age and education in order to investigate whether and how leaders differ from the rest of the population (Best and Higley 2018; 't Hart and Rhodes 2014).

The second approach, identified by Montesanti (2007) as political, focuses on the processes of political recruitment and selection, exploring the mechanisms and criteria that determine access to political offices. It also encompasses the study of local politicians' career trajectories, which are inherently tied to the evolution of political systems and the interactions among various levels of government (Verzichelli, 2018). The processes of decentralisation and the subsequent professionalisation of the subnational political class (Guérin and Kerrouche, 2008), along with the emergence of European institutions and the supranational political class, have transformed the career patterns of European politicians increasing the interconnection between the different levels of governance (Borchert and Stolz, 2011; Dodeigne et al., 2018).

Finally, the network-based approach emphasizes the actions and roles of the local political class, distinguishing between positions such as mayors, members of the executive, and councillors (Montesanti, 2007).

In this evolving context, these local offices are gaining strength and democratic legitimacy in several countries. Reasonable remuneration for mayors and councillors, as well as their exclusive dedication to political work, can motivate experienced politicians and attract well-prepared citizens into local politics, thereby improving the management of public services (Benito et al., 2021). As a result, local positions can become more attractive than other national level roles in terms of power, prestige, payment, and

privileges, making a move from the national to the local level a potential progress in a political career (Stolz 2003).

The introduction of direct elections of mayors in most European countries has further increased the legitimacy of the local elected leaders (Magnier 2006). Some long-standing politicians have decided to serve as mayors, especially in a large city, e.g. Milan, Venice, Rome or Naples highlighting the growing appeal and influence of local executive roles (Damiani, 2010). Scholars have noted an evolution of the European mayoral role from “voluntary amateur representatives to local professionals” (Dodeigne et al., 2018). This professionalisation is closely linked to the increasing responsibilities and duties, particularly for mayors, whose role can now be compared to a full-time job occupation (Dodeigne et al., 2018).

Unlike mayors, councillors are often viewed as amateurs or layman politicians, regardless of their formal power (Mouritzen and Svara, 2002). Verhelst, Reynaert, and Steyvers (2013), examining recruitment and career development of European local councillors, identified two ideal types of councillors: the laymen and the professional model, which should be intended as two poles of a continuum. In the first case, the recruitment process is open, councillors tend toward the resemblance model of representation largely mirroring the characteristics of the represented community and tend to be elected on local lists. In the second case, the recruitment process is more selective, politicians are usually elected with national political parties and groups with certain characteristics are overrepresented in the council. They also tend to have previous elective experience at other levels and bigger ambitions and career scope.

More broadly, the literature highlights a growing professionalisation of local political offices, particularly in larger municipalities and for roles like mayors. These positions may increasingly be seen as both entry points and career goals for politicians, shaping the quality of representation and democratic engagement at the municipal level.

3. Local political class: backgrounds and careers

The profiles, backgrounds, and careers of European local politicians have been studied, in particular, in two comparative research projects involving European municipal councillors (Egner, Sweeting, and Klok 2013b) and, more recently, mayors (Heinelt et al. 2018). Despite variations across and within countries, these studies reveal that, even at the municipal level, the recruitment process tends to favour individuals with certain characteristics. As a result, most European mayors and municipal councillors are not

representative of the population of their municipality (Steyvers and Medir, 2018; Verhelst et al., 2013)

In this context, Steyvers and Medir (2018) found that Italian mayors, like their European counterparts, are mostly male (85.1%), middle-aged, and come from a talking or brokerage profession (40%). The majority of Italian mayors also hold a university degree (65.3%), although this percentage is lower than the European average (81.5%). Similarly, Verhelst et al. (2013) found that Italian local councillors are predominantly university educated (48.9%), even though the percentage is lower than the European average (60.6%). Lastly, the high proportion of male councillors in Italy (86.2%) confirms that, as in the others European local councils (70.7%), gender equality is far from being achieved.

The underrepresentation of women in elected office, influenced by political-institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic factors (Regalia, 2021), is especially pronounced in Italy, despite measures to promote gender equality (Carbone and Farina, 2020). Women's representation in subnational governments is crucial, as their presence is essential to influencing policymaking - particularly on issues that disproportionately affect women, such as childcare and other social services (Ríos et al., 2023; Weeks and Masala, 2022). However, even at the municipal level, the recruitment process tends to favour male and middle-aged candidates (Steyvers and Medir 2018; Verhelst, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2013). Additionally, research on local political class has shown that the increasing professionalisation of local politics may discourage certain groups, such as the less educated, from running for office (Dodeigne, Krukowska, and Lazauskienė 2018).

The process of professionalisation can also affect the career paths of elected officials, in terms of seniority and future ambitions. Dodeigne et al. (2018) developed a model based on the professionalisation of mayors and the interconnectedness between the local and national political scene. According to this model, Italian mayors do not have a clear local or national orientation. Compared to their European counterparts, Italian mayors express a higher percentage of progressive ambitions, indicating a desire to continue their career at regional, national, or European level. However, the percentage of Italian mayors with political experience at any upper level is lower (23%) than the European average (40%). Only 21% of Italian mayors involved in the research project have previous political experience at the county or regional level, while just 3% have served as MP and 1% as Minister. On the other hand, the percentage of Italian mayors with experience in municipal councils (73%), and municipal executive positions (57%) is higher than the European average.

As other executives roles at higher levels, the competencies of mayors, as well as their prior experience at the regional, national, and/or European level, are important elements of their political capital (Best and Vogel 2014). Indeed, previous political experience can be an added value for mayors because they can learn how the formal and informal rules of the political system work, and this expertise can be crucial in managing their daily duties and responsibilities (Dodeigne et al., 2018).

With regard to municipal councillors, the study conducted by Verhelst et al. (2013) found that Italian local councillors do not significantly differ from the average local councillor in Europe in terms of political families, motivations, party membership, and influence (Verhelst, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2013). Despite spending a significant amount of time in office, Italian municipal councillors tend towards the model of the amateur councillor in terms of career goals and ambitions.

In light of these patterns, this paper aims to explore the sociodemographic characteristics and career paths of municipal politicians in Umbria, focusing on their gender, education, professional background, and prior political experience. It also seeks to determine if and how the profiles of local politicians in Umbria vary across roles and municipalities, identifying which municipalities tend to attract more experienced political actors. Although no single indicator can definitively determine what makes a “good” politician, research on Italian municipalities has shown that political quality, in terms of human capital - specifically educational attainment and job-related skills - tends to increase with municipal population size, the average educational level of residents, and the employment rate (De Paola and Scoppa, 2011). By providing unique insights into the local political landscape of Umbria, this study contributes to the broader discourse on democratic representation in Italian municipalities, deepening our understanding of the local political class and its defining characteristics.

4. Institutional setting: The Italian and Umbrian local political system

Italy’s governmental system operates on four levels: the central government, regions (comprising 15 ordinary and 5 special regions with extended powers), provinces and metropolitan cities as second-tier authorities, and municipalities. In 2023, Italy counted 7,901 municipalities, approximately 70% of them have fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, while only 1.8% have populations above 50,000. Their main tasks include general administration, management of financial resources, and provision of public services at the local level.

Municipalities are governed by a mayor, a municipal cabinet, and a council, with elections held every five years.

The reforms of the 1990s and the approval of Law 81 of 1993¹, which attempted to redesign the local government model, inaugurated a new phase in the history of Italian local administration (Damiani, 2010).

Since then, mayors are directly elected by the citizens, as are municipal councillors and the prevalence of local or independent lists – independent from national political parties – has become increasingly common (Damiani, 2010).

In municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants, the mayor is elected through a one-round system, while larger municipalities use a two-round system. This approach increases local government stability and gives mayors the highest level of popular legitimacy, making them the most important actors at the municipal level (Segatori, 2003). They appoint the members of the executive cabinet – who are not necessarily elected representatives – to manage all the executive functions. This approach has also contributed to the professionalisation of politics at the local level (Damiani, 2010) and has established the Italian local government a ‘strong mayor model’ (Mouritzen and Svava 2002).

Typically, the mayor controls the majority of the municipal council, which serves as the primary link between citizens and local decision-makers and represents the political preferences of residents (Egner, Sweeting, and Klok 2013a).

The municipal council serves also as the political-administrative control body of the local government and is composed of local councillors, whose number varies based on the size of the municipality. The smallest councils, in municipalities with a population under 3,000 inhabitants, currently consist of 10 councillors, while the largest councils, in municipalities with over 1 million inhabitants, have 48 councillors.

To ensure the gender balance in council composition, the double preference vote was introduced in 2012 in municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants. Additionally, in 2022, the Italian Constitutional Court intervened to mandate that no gender should be represented by more than two-thirds in the electoral lists of every municipality, regardless of its dimension.

Italian legislation limits the possibility to hold multiple offices at different levels of government. Councillors cannot be councillors in other municipalities² and in municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants, they

¹ Law No 81 of 25 March 1993: ‘Direct Election of the Mayor, the President of the Province, the Municipal Council and the Provincial Council’.

² Art. 65 TUEL.

cannot also be members of the executive³. Mayors and councillors, on the other hand, cannot simultaneously hold the office of regional councillor⁴. Moreover, in municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants, mayors may not be members of parliament, MEPs or ministers.⁵

Furthermore, in municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants, mayors are subject to a two-term limit, while in municipalities with between 5,000 and 15,000 inhabitants, mayors are subject to a three-term limit. Members of the executive and council, however, can be re-elected indefinitely.

3.1 The Umbrian municipalities

Umbria has a total of 92 municipalities, most of which have a population of less than 3,000 inhabitants. Although these small municipalities account for around 50% of the municipalities in the region, only 8% of the regional population lives in them, with most of the population concentrated in larger municipalities. In fact, 30.7% of Umbrians live in the provincial capitals, Perugia and Terni. Città di Castello, Foligno, Gubbio, and Spoleto have populations between 30,000 and 100,000 and collectively make up almost 20% of the region's residents. Municipal council sizes vary according to population: municipalities with under 3,000 residents elect 10 councillors, those with populations between 3,000 and 10,000 elect 12, municipalities with 10,000 to 30,000 residents elect 16, and those with 30,000 to 100,000 elect 24 councillors. Only in Perugia and Terni, the number of councillors rises to 32.

5. Data

The data presented below provide information on the socio-demographic characteristics and political background of the local politicians in office in the 92 Umbrian municipalities in April 2023.

As there is a lack of systematically available data on the local political class, information was collected from various sources. The main source was the "Register of Local and Regional Administrators" section of the Ministry of Internal and Territorial Affairs website. To have a more updated picture of the local political class in Umbria, including resignations and replacements, we reviewed this primary source through the direct analysis of the websites of the municipalities, as well as of political parties.

This data collection phase allowed the construction of a dataset, updated to April 2023 (before local elections), consisting of a total of 1541 municipal

³ Article 64 TUEL.

⁴ Art. 65 TUEL.

⁵ Art. 13.3 Decree Law 138/2011.

councillors, members of the executive and mayors of the region. The information collected includes their gender, age, education level, profession, party affiliation and previous political experience at local, regional and national level.

6. The Umbrian municipal political class: socio-demographic characteristics and political careers

This section provides a description of the socio-political profile of the Umbrian municipal political class. Firstly, their socio-demographic features are examined, considering the following dimensions: gender, age, education, and profession. Secondly, data about their election list are presented, as well as their past political experience at the municipal, regional, and national level.

6.1. Gender

In line with previous research on both the Italian and European political class, our data confirms that men still constitute the majority of local politicians in Umbria in all three local-level offices. As shown in Table 1, the proportion of women is at its lowest among mayors (17.4%), while it appears to be relatively higher among councillors (34.5%) and members of the executive cabinet (44.9%).

Table 1: Distribution of municipal political class by gender and office (%)

	Council	Executive	Mayor	Tot
Women	34.5	44.9	17.4	35.6
Men	65.5	55.1	82.6	64.4
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's elaboration.

These findings are consistent with the data collected by the Ministry of Interior for all Italian municipalities. These data report that in 2022 women held the office of mayor in only 15.2% of cases. As in municipalities in Umbria, this percentage is significantly lower than women's representation in municipal councils (33.8%) and cabinets (40.7%).

However, it is worth noting that both the data on the local political class in Umbria and in Italy show a slow and progressive improvement compared to previous years. In 2015, the percentage of women in the municipal cabinet

was 34%, and only 28% in the council. This gradual improvement appears to reflect, at least in part, the influence of legislative reforms aimed at increasing gender representation. Law No. 125⁶ of 1991 required municipal and provincial statutes to adopt positive actions to ensure the presence of both sexes in their decision-making bodies. This was followed by Law No. 81 of 1993⁷ which introduced the direct election of mayors and stipulated that electoral lists contain no more than three-quarters (or, in municipalities with populations above 15,000, two-thirds) of candidates from any one gender.

The increase in women's representation slowed significantly following the Constitutional Court's ruling 422/1995⁸ which declared unconstitutional any "limits, constraints, or reservations in candidate lists based on gender," favouring the principle of formal equality over substantive equality (Feo and Piccio 2019). Following this ruling, the proportion of women in municipal administrations remained stable at around 17%. However, the approval of Laws No. 215 of 2012⁹ and No. 56 of 2014¹⁰, which reintroduced list quotas and a double gender preference system, enabled a new, gradual increase in the presence of women among local administrators (Farina and Carbone 2016). Today, over one-third of Italian municipalities have been led by a female mayor at least once in recent years (ANCI, 2019).

Nonetheless, the objective of achieving full and effective gender equality in local representative institutions remains largely unfulfilled, particularly in smaller municipalities.

Table 2 shows how the gender distribution of municipal political class varies based on the municipality size class. The share of elected women in the two provincial capitals reaches 41.7%, while in municipalities with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants, it stands at only 32.0%.

A recent ruling by the Constitutional Court, No. 62 of 2022, highlighted that in smaller municipalities, female candidates "do not enjoy the same opportunities for access to elected office that the Constitution intends to guarantee for all, in order to rebalance gender representation in elected

⁶ Art. 2.6, Law No. 125 of 10 April 1991, "Positive actions for the realisation of equality between men and women at work".

⁷ Articles 5, 6, 7, Law No 81 of 25 March 1993, 'Direct Election of the Mayor, the President of the Province, the Municipal Council and the Provincial Council'.

⁸ Constitutional Court, *Judgment* 422/1995, 6-12 September 1995, the full text can be found at Constitutional Court - Decisions.

⁹ Art. 2, Law 215 of 23 November 2012, 'Provisions to promote the rebalancing of gender representation in the councils and boards of local authorities and in regional councils. Provisions on equal opportunities in the composition of competition commissions in public administrations'.

¹⁰ Art. 27, Law No 56 of 7 April 2014, 'Provisions on metropolitan cities, provinces, unions and mergers of municipalities'.

bodies”¹¹. At the time of the ruling, the severity of penalties for failure to comply with gender parity requirements in electoral lists decreased as the population of the municipality decreased. The Court therefore considered it unlawful to allow electoral lists that did not ensure representation of both sexes in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, describing this as “unjustified unequal treatment”.

Table 2: Gender distribution of municipal political class by municipality size class (%)

	<3000	3000-10000	10000-30000	30000- 100000	>10000	Tot
Women	32.0	36.2	40.4	34.7	41.7	35.6
Men	68.0	63.8	59.6	65.3	58.3	64.4
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author’s elaboration.

Furthermore, the Council of State recently reaffirmed the importance of gender equality in the councils of small municipalities, asserting that the provisions on gender balance in these contexts “have a prescriptive character.” It is hoped that, in light of these directives, the proportion of women in municipal councils and executive cabinets in the smallest municipalities will continue to rise in the coming years, ensuring women both representation and the opportunity to be represented.

6.2. Age

Local administrators today continue to be predominantly middle-aged, despite the significant shift in 1975, when 18-year-olds were granted the right to vote and stand for election, paving the way for a new generation of administrators (Bettin, Talluri, and Magnier 1989). This trend has also emerged in comparative studies across various European countries.

As shown in Table 3, the majority of Umbrian municipal administrators are in the 40-49 age range. Additionally, the average age increases with the level of responsibility: councillors and members of the executive cabinets have an average age of 45.9 and 46.5 years, respectively, while mayors have an average age of 49.8 years, with none under 30.

Table 3: Age groups by office (%)

¹¹ Constitutional Court, *Judgment No. 62/2022*, 25 January 2022, considered in law, para. 2. The judgment can be found at the following address: Constitutional Court - Advanced Search.

	Council	Executive	Mayor	Tot
18-29	11.3	5.8	0.0	9.5
30-39	22.9	22.1	17.4	22.4
40-49	26.9	32.1	33.7	28.4
50-59	22.1	26.9	28.3	23.4
60 and over	16.8	13.1	20.6	16.3
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's elaboration.

The data in Table 4 indicate that the exclusion of both very young and over-60 individuals varies significantly with the size of the municipality. In larger municipalities, and especially in the two provincial capitals, younger candidates face reduced chances of success. The percentage of over-60s, who are more represented in the smaller municipalities, also decreases significantly in the larger municipalities.

Table 4: Age groups by municipality population size (%)

	<3000	3000-10000	10000- 30000	30000- 100000	>10000	Tot
18-29	11.2	7.7	11.4	6.3	6.0	9.5
30-39	24.1	22.8	21.7	16.5	20.2	22.4
40-49	23.4	30.2	29.5	34.7	39.3	28.4
50-59	23.5	23.0	22.1	25.2	27.4	23.4
60 and over	17.8	16.3	15.3	17.3	7.1	16.3
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's elaboration.

6.3. Educational level

Concerning the educational level, findings in Table 5 show that most Umbrian local politicians have a secondary school diploma (48.7%) or a tertiary degree (43.5%). The percentage of local politicians who have a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, or a Ph.D. is considerably higher than that of the general population in Umbria. According to ISTAT data, in 2020, only 17.2% of the population over 15 in the region held a university degree.

This disparity highlights that the political class, even at the local level, tends to be more educated than the average. Additionally, the proportion of university graduates is highest among members of the executive cabinet (47.4%) and mayors (52.2%), roles that require greater responsibilities than those of a municipal councillor.

Table 5: Level of education by office (%)

	Council	Executive	Mayor	Tot
Primary- Low secondary	9.6	3.5	1.1	7.8
Secondary	48.8	49.1	46.7	48.7
University degree or more	41.6	47.4	52.2	43.5
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's elaboration.

Among university graduates, there is significant variability between women and men, with women tending to hold higher degrees. According to ISTAT, 19% of women in Umbria are university graduates, compared to 15% of men. This disparity is even more pronounced among municipal representatives: 59.9% of elected women are graduates, while this percentage falls to 34.6% among men. The data therefore confirms that female local politicians tend to have higher qualifications than their male counterparts (Bettin, Talluri, and Magnier 1989; Damiani 2010). This trend aligns with findings at the national level, where female candidates tend to possess a higher level of education than male candidates, a phenomenon often attributed to the so-called "Cinderella effect" in the self-selection process (Regalia, 2021). Women may apply for political roles more rarely than men and only if they possess better credentials than their male colleagues, both in terms of their level of education and from a professional point of view (Regalia, 2021).

Table 6 presents the educational level of local politicians by size class. The percentage of university graduates increases progressively with population size. It rises from 30.7% in municipalities with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants to 70.7% in the two provincial capitals, Perugia and Terni. These data confirm that in larger municipalities, where responsibilities are greater, a higher level of cultural capital is required from administrators (Bettin, Talluri, and Magnier 1989; Damiani 2010).

Table 6: Education level by municipality size class (%)

	<3000	3000-10000	10000- 30000	30000- 100000	>10000	Tot
Primary- Low secondary	14.0	5.7	2.6	3.2	3.7	7.8
Secondary	55.3	50.0	45.0	41.3	25.6	48.7
University degree or more	30.7	44.3	52.4	55.5	70.7	43.5
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's elaboration.

6.4. Profession

Table 7 indicate that local politicians in Umbria have a similar professional background to their European and national counterparts (Verhelst, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2013). Indeed, most of them work in highly specialised professions, (25.8%, 28.2% of members of the executive, and 45.9% of mayors). This category includes lawyers, teachers, doctors, architects and engineers, among others. The percentage of inactive, which comprises students, retired and people who are not currently working, amounts to 16.5% among councillors, 9.5% among members of the executive and 5.9% among mayors.

Table 7: Profession by office (%)

	Council	Executive	Mayor	Tot
Entrepreneurs and managers	9.4	11.0	16.5	10.2
Highly specialised prof.	25.8	28.2	45.9	27.6
Technical prof.	9.8	11.4	14.1	10.5
Executive prof.	18.7	29.3	8.2	20.2
Services and sales workers	6.4	4.9	3.5	5.9
Craftsmen. workers. farmers	11.1	3.4	2.4	8.9
Armed Forces	2.3	2.3	3.5	2.4
Inactive	16.5	9.5	5.9	14.3
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's elaboration.

Compared to councillors, mayors perform jobs that usually require a higher qualification: while the percentage of entrepreneurs and managers is 9.4% among the former, it increases to 16.5% among the latter. Similarly, low-skilled jobs are held more by councillors (11.1%) than by mayors (2.4%).

As shown in Table 8, professional background appears to be particularly important in larger municipalities, where a higher percentage of local politicians work in professions requiring high levels of specialisation. In contrast, smaller municipalities have a greater proportion of local politicians employed in services, or as craftsmen, workers, and farmers. Additionally, the percentage of inactive is above average in municipalities with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants, reaching 17.5%.

Table 8: Profession by municipality size class (%)

	<3000	3000-10000	10000- 30000	30000- 100000	>10000	Tot
Entrepreneurs and managers	7.5	12.9	8.0	16.6	10.7	10.2
Highly specialised prof.	20.0	30.0	33.2	33.1	35.7	27.6
Technical prof.	9.1	12.3	10.1	9.1	13.1	10.4
Executive prof.	19.6	19.9	21.4	19.8	21.4	20.2
Services and sales workers	7.8	3.9	7.1	4.1	3.6	5.9
Craftsmen. workers. farmers	13.8	7.6	6.7	4.1	1.2	8.9
Armed Forces	4.7	1.1	1.3	0.0	1.2	2.4
Inactive	17.5	12.3	12.2	13.2	13.1	14.3
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's elaboration.

6.5. List of election

Table 9 presents the election lists of Umbrian municipal politicians. Data indicate that 81.4% were elected through civic lists. The presence of civic lists is a defining feature of the Italian local political system, especially in small municipalities where lists are often an expression of civil society (Bolgherini and Grimaldi, 2022; Vampa, 2016). At the local level, independent civic lists reflect a growing demand for effective, practical problem-solving, prioritizing issue-based politics over traditional party politics and emphasizing solutions specifically tailored to local needs (Reiser and Holtmann, 2008). However, it can be challenging to determine whether a list is genuinely independent

or indirectly affiliated with a party, even if it does not bear a party name¹². Among the major parties, the Democratic Party has the highest percentage of elected representatives (6%), followed by the League (4.7%) and Brothers of Italy, with only 2.7% of local administrators elected from its ranks.

Table 9: Party or list by office (%)

	Council	Executive	Mayor	Tot
Brothers of Italy	2.9	2.9	0.0	2.7
League	5.4	2.9	0.0	4.7
Go Italy	1.9	4.1	0.0	2.1
5 Star Movement	1.9	1.2	0.0	1.6
Democratic Party	6.1	5.7	4.7	6.0
Centre right coal.	0.6	0.0	9.3	1.1
Centre left coal.	0.1	0.0	3.5	0.3
Civic list	80.9	82.8	82.5	81.4
Other	0.2	0.4	0.0	0.2
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's elaboration.

Table 10 indicate that the role of political parties increases with municipality size. In municipalities with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants, all elected officials come from a civic list. This percentage gradually decreases in municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants (45.7% in municipalities with between 10,000 and 30,000 inhabitants and 45.8% in municipalities with between 30,000 and 10,000 inhabitants, respectively).

In the two provincial capitals, Perugia and Terni - the only towns in Umbria with populations exceeding 100,000 - the percentage of civic list falls to 24.0%. Here, national parties gain importance, with the League accounting for 24.0% of those elected, followed by Brothers of Italy (16.0%), Go Italy (12.0%), and Democratic Party (12.0%). This pattern contrasts with Umbria's historical political identity. Until a decade ago, the region was considered a stronghold of the Italian left, firmly rooted in the so-called "red subculture" (Diamanti, 2009). In recent years, however, the political landscape has

¹² The data presented here is based on the Register of Local and Regional Administrators database and official municipal websites. Although these lists are formally classified as local lists, they may sometimes include coalitions and political parties operating under a "local" guise. A comprehensive study of civic lists would therefore require a more qualitative approach to capture their complexity.

become more fluid, reflecting a decline in leftist voting patterns across the red regions (Bracalente et al., 2020).

Table 10: Party or list by municipality size class (%)

	<3000	3000- 10000	10000– 30000	30000– 100000	>10000	Tot
Brothers of Italy	0.0	0.0	7.8	5.9	16.0	2.7
League	0.0	0.0	11.9	15.3	24.0	4.7
Go Italy	0.0	0.0	7.1	2.5	12.0	2.1
5 Star Movement	0.0	0.4	3.4	5.1	9.3	1.6
Democratic Party	0.0	0.0	19.3	22.0	12.0	6.0
Centre right coal.	0.0	0.7	2.6	2.5	2.7	1.0
Centre left coal.	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.9	0.0	0.3
Civic list	100.0	98.9	45.7	45.8	24.0	81.4
Other	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.2
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's elaboration.

6.6. Political career

Let us now consider the political experience of municipal officeholders in Umbria. Table 11 displays their experience at the local/provincial, regional, and national/European levels. For each level, only the highest position held is recorded, so it is not possible to determine, for example, if a mayor has previously served as both mayor and councillor. Despite this limitation, the data provide useful insights into the career trajectories of Umbrian municipal politicians.

Only 0.1% of local politicians have served as national or European MPs, and just 0.8% have regional government experience, indicating that local offices generally do not attract politicians with higher-level experience.

The data also reveal that mayors tend to have more political experience than members of the executive and council members. Almost 80% of mayors were re-elected after previously serving in a municipal role. Among members of the executive, this percentage drops to 44.7 % and to 31.2% for municipal councillors. Additionally, over half (53.3%) of the mayors in office in the regional municipalities have held this position previously.

Table 11: Political experience (%)

	Council	Executive	Mayor	Tot
Re-elected	31.2 (337)	44.7 (138)	79.4 (73)	36.9 (548)
Municipal/prov. council.	25.9 (281)	24.9 (77)	11.9 (11)	24.9 (369)
Municipal/prov. executive	13.9 (151)	28.5 (88)	21.7 (20)	17.5 (259)
Mayor/President of the prov.	1.8 (19)	0.3 (1)	53.3 (49)	4.7 (69)
N local level mandates(average)	1.1	1.7	3.3	1.6
Regional Council	0.7 (7)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.5 (7)
Regional Executive	0.4 (4)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.3 (4)
President of the Region	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
National/EU Parliament	0.1 (1)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.1 (1)

Source; Author's elaboration,

The following table (Table 12) highlights that re-election rate is higher in municipalities with fewer than 3,000 residents (45.1%). In these smaller municipalities, a larger proportion (7.7%) of local politicians have previously held the office of mayor or president of the province, compared to just 1.2% in the two provincial capitals. Former members of the municipal council are also more common among those elected in smaller municipalities, where competition is generally lower than in larger municipalities.

Table 12: Political experience by municipality size class (%)

	<3000	3000-10000	10000- 30000	30000- 100000	>10000	Tot
Re-elected	45.1	30.5	38.4	27.6	29.3	36.9
Municipal/prov. council.	30.5	18.5	24.6	24.4	25.6	24.9
Municipal/prov. executive	18.2	20.9	15.7	11.0	9.7	17.5
Mayor/ President of the prov.	7.7	3.3	3.2	2.4	1.2	4.7
N local level mandates (average)	2.0	1.5	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.6
Regional Council	0.2	0.2	0.4	1.6	2.4	0.5
Regional Executive	0.2	0.2	0.0	1.6	0.0	0.3
President of the Region	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
National/EU Parliament	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.1

Source; Author's elaboration.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Using an original dataset, this paper examined the sociodemographic characteristics and political careers of local politicians in Umbria, whose critical role in multi-level representative democracies and potential impact on territorial development merit closer attention. Despite their significant role in local democracy, the profiles of local political actors remain largely unexplored in the literature.

The empirical findings on municipal political class in Umbria revealed that local politicians align closely with those of local politicians elected in Italian and European municipalities. The analysis shows that there are groups, such as women and young people, who are only partially represented in municipal councils and local executives and who, as a result, hardly participate in the decision-making process and contribute to policy formulation.

Firstly, gender representation remains a challenge among Umbrian local politicians, especially for mayoral roles and in smaller cities. Although measures such as double preference voting and gender quotas have been introduced, they have yet to close the gender gap that persists across Italian institutions.

Secondly, similar to trends in other European municipalities and across Italy, local councillors and members of executives in Umbria are predominantly middle-aged, highly educated, and employed in specialised professions. Analysis of their sociodemographic characteristics further reveals that mayors tend to be older, better educated, and occupy higher-status professional positions than councillors. Additionally, differences in these characteristics are observed based on municipality size: larger municipalities have a higher proportion of middle-aged, highly educated men in skilled professions.

The data on electoral lists confirm a defining feature of the Italian local political system - the predominance of civic lists, which are particularly common in smaller municipalities. However, this trend decreases in larger municipalities, where major political parties hold a greater share of elected officials.

The majority of Umbrian local politicians either lack prior political experience or have experience only at the municipal or provincial level. Nevertheless, mayors generally possess more political experience than councillors and executive members.

This is particularly notable given the increasing responsibilities placed on local politicians, especially mayors. The skills and prior experience of municipal-level elected officials can be crucial for effectively managing daily

tasks and responsibilities (Dodeigne et al., 2018), and, as a result, may enhance their capacity to handle crises and uphold the quality of local democracy.

These findings suggest that the recruitment process is more selective for roles with greater responsibilities, such as mayoral positions and elected roles in the two provincial capitals. According to the layman-professional continuum model, politicians elected in larger municipalities are more likely to align with the professional type than those elected in smaller municipalities. However, despite this tendency, experienced regional or national politicians appear to find municipal offices, including mayorships in larger municipalities, not attractive.

This study underscores the importance of examining the profiles and careers of local politicians, who serve as the primary point of contact between citizens and democratic governance. Furthermore, it raises important questions regarding the patterns of political professionalism, the factors influencing entry into municipal office, and the interconnections between different territorial levels within a single region, as illustrated by the case of Umbria.

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