

Chapter 12

Directly Elected Mayors vs. Council Appointed Mayors – Which Effects on Local Government Systems? A Comparison between Italy and Spain

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ABSTRACT

This chapter compares the Italian and the Spanish case discussing the influence of having elected or appointed mayors on local government systems. Five elements of the local government systems are compared: the electoral system and its influences on the political composition of the local government; the local government structure and the distribution of functions and powers between Mayor and council; the role of political parties; scrutiny of executive and accountability; citizen participation. Our comparative analysis highlights that overall directly elected mayors have ensured better efficiency in terms of quicker and faster decision making processes, even if mostly at the expenses of democratic representation. Having direct or appointed mayors also impacted on accountability and legitimacy patterns. However, all these effects depended not only on the way mayor is elected, but mostly on other mechanisms, such as, for example, the strong majority prize provided by the electoral law and the bond of coexistence existing between the mayor and the council.

INTRODUCTION

The debate around directly elected mayors is particularly topical (e.g. Bäck, Heinelt, & Magnier, 2006; Bottom & Reiser, 2014; Eckersley & Timm-Arnold, 2014; Elcock, 2008; Hambleton & Sweeting, 2014; Wollman, 2008), as changes concerning European local governments have been taking place in Europe

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0317-0.ch012

recently. These developments account for changes in local political leadership (Bäck, Heinelt, & Magnier, 2006) and are likely to bring about further change.

In this chapter, we discuss the possible effects that could derive from the shift towards a directly elected mayor system. More specifically, we compare the cases of Italy and Spain, adopting a lesson-drawing perspective (Elcock, 2008; Rose, 1993) in the attempt to shed more light on the influence of mayor election systems on local government systems in terms of transparency, accountability, legitimacy, and efficiency.

An electoral reform in which a directly elected mayor system replaced the system based on council-appointed leaders was implemented in Italy in 1993. The reasons for implementing this electoral system were directly related to an attempt to better meet democratic requirements such as transparency, accountability, legitimacy, and efficiency; this reform is nowadays generally considered a successful one. In Spain, mayors are appointed by the council, even if—as in other European countries such as, for example, England—there is currently an ongoing debate about the opportunity of introducing directly elected mayors.

According to the literature on local government, Italy and Spain can be considered comparable local government systems. Many authors have indeed classified Italy and Spain in the same typology of local government system, even if using different labels, for example: Southern type (Denters & Rose, 2005; Norton, 1994; Page & Goldsmith, 1987); Franco (Napoleonic) model (Bennett, 1993; Hesse & Sharpe, 1991); clientelist/patronage oriented (Goldsmith, 1990, 1992); or strong mayor (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002, pp. 55–56).

To carry out this comparative study, we analyzed several features of the two local government systems. In terms of research methods, we built our arguments from a critical analysis of the literature enriched by the experience that we have gained in working with local government in the respective countries.

The structure of the chapter is the following: in the second section we present our framework of analysis; in the third and fourth sections we highlight the Italian and the Spanish case, while in the last section we discuss the main findings of our study.

BACKGROUND

Comparative research aims to compare different contexts in order to identify and to separate common factors from those that are specific (“embedded”) for each single context (Przeworski & Teune, 1970; Ragin, 1994). As a consequence, a comparative analysis requires clearly identifying the variables investigated in the comparison.

Here, we focus our analysis on five specific variables: the local electoral law and its influences on the political composition of the local government; the local government structure and the distribution of functions and powers between the mayor and the council; the role of political parties; the scrutiny and accountability of the local government; and electoral participation.

These dimensions have been chosen both for their connection with the goals that have often triggered the shift towards the introduction of the direct election of the mayor and because they have been considered as relevant by the main literature on local government systems (e.g. Copus & Dadd, 2014; Copus, 2004, 2006; Denters, 2006; Garrard, 2007; Heinelt & Hlepas, 2006; HM Government, 2003). Of course, we could have chosen other relevant variables, but we decided to focus on some specific variables in order to delimitate our analysis; future studies may investigate other variables or compare the selected variables in other contexts.

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