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Continuity of Leadership in Slovenian Local Government

ABSTRACT

Paper constitutes the analyses of executive political leaders' careers in Slovenian local self-government system. The basis for the analysis are incumbency advantage theories that argue the probability of electoral victory or defeat is not homogeneously distributed among the candidates, as several factors influence the possibilities of success of some candidates and the failure of others (seniority, membership of political parties, electoral performance, etc.). Based on the analysis of objective data and empirical survey conducted among mayors, we analyse the re-election of mayors in Slovenian local self-government with the emphasis on their seniority. We confirmed the hypothesis that candidates' political seniority has positive impact on their chances of leadership continuity. We also confirmed that the electoral vulnerability of mayors decreases with seniority, as mayoral re-election rate is only increasing with every local election since 1998.

Key words: local elections, leadership, mayor, continuity, Slovenia

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

This paper highlights the leadership continuity in Slovenian municipalities with particular interest in the seniority of mayors. We approached the topic of mayors' leadership continuity from two angles. On the one hand, the article represents development of mayoral political careers of Slovenian municipalities over the entire period since the re-introduction of local self-government in 1994 until last local elections in autumn 2014. This overview is based on comprehensive analysis of statistical data. On the other hand, we also include data from empirical survey among

the mayors¹ with intense to capture their subjective views on seniority of leadership. In our analysis, we are predominantly interested in the electoral choices of voters with regard to rewarding and/or punishing mayors in terms of their re-election and consequently leadership continuity. During the analysis we test the hypothesis that candidates' political seniority has a significant positive impact on their chances of leadership continuity. At the same time, we would like to ascertain that electoral vulnerability decreases with a candidate's seniority and growing experience.

Two major fields of scientific literature cover the studying of political careers, namely the theories that attempt to explain the incumbency advantage and the theories of legislative behaviour. The core assumption of the first is that political officials who hold certain political positions and execute certain political duties (incumbents) have an advantage over other political leaders who are (currently) not in an equal position. According to Przeworski's [1991] definition, elections are events whose results are uncertain, since all participants/candidates basically have at least a minimum chance of success. However, theories that analyse the incumbency advantage claim that not all candidates have an equal chance. Leoni, Pereira and Renno [2004: 111] hold that factors having a key influence on an incumbent political official's chances of re-election include success in past work, personal characteristics and electoral vulnerability. The probability of electoral victory or defeat is therefore not evenly distributed among the candidates. The possibility of success is positively influenced by several factors, and some of them are closely related to the question of political careers, especially seniority, membership of a political party, and electoral appearance. Theories analysing the incumbency advantage claim that senior political officials can better serve their constituencies since they have better access to various resources and positions. Thus, seniority acts as an incentive for voters to give their votes to political leaders who already perform some form of political duty, as they otherwise risk that a person, to be elected to a political position, lacks sufficient political capabilities to provide their election district with the goods and services it needs [King, Zeng 2000; McKelvey, Reizman 1992]. Hence, seniority is a factor that strongly influences the chances of electoral defeat. This has been confirmed by many studies, among which the study by Finocchiaro and Lin [2000] is worth mentioning. In a study performed among the Members of the U.S. Congress they find that the probability of electoral defeat is highest after the first term and then slowly decreases during subsequent terms. After several terms of office (authors state the seventh or the eighth one), it again slowly increases, mirroring the "constituency fatigue". In other words, elected incumbent political leaders seem to be vulnerable especially after their first elections; this is followed by a gradual increase of their advantage over non-incumbent political challengers and, only later, when several terms have passed, their advantage begins to decrease.

¹ This research project was performed by the Centre for Analysis of Administrative-Political Processes and Institutions in February 2012 among mayors and deputy-mayors of Slovenian municipalities.

The (mayoral) leadership continuity can be connected with the concept of political representation that implies politicians' desire to retain their function for a longer period of time and also their duty to act in the best interest of their constituencies. According to Mansbridge [2003] and Przeworski and others [1999], political representation also implies the ability of voters to decide whether or not to extend the political careers of their representatives. Political leaders are well aware of the fact that elections are a regular, periodical occurrence at which voters evaluate their past work in order to decide whom they are going to vote for. Hence, the preoccupation of political leaders with the continuation of their political careers gives the voters a mechanism (electoral connection)² through which they make political leaders accountable for their past (in)action. Modern democracies inadvertently demand both the use of political debate and the process of decision making without the presence of all citizens [Dahl 1989], since one of the key characteristics of a democratic process is the presence of elected officials at the decision-making event. The preconditions that once used to limit who could be elected (restrictions such as race, sex and property) have long since been abandoned. Nowadays, nearly every citizen can be elected to most political positions. However, Botero [2008: 5] states that for the sake of the quality of democracy in a society, it is nevertheless not unimportant for a professional elite of individuals, or career politicians, to be formed, who are prepared to devote their entire careers to political activity. Furthermore, the idea of democratic representation is relevant to the construction of one's political career for two reasons. First, career politicians serve the citizens better. Through the instrument of elections, career politicians receive incentives to promote especially the interests of "their" voters, otherwise the political leaders will not be re-elected by the voters. A career politician's connection with a constituency is of key importance to the voters, as the voters can demand that their representative acts in a responsible manner.³

Przeworski and others [1999] state if political leaders are a priori not interested in a longer political tenure, this otherwise powerful tool in the hands of voters becomes completely useless. Career politicians are a more desirable species in terms of the quality of democracy exactly because they tend to be more open to the demands and desires of their voters, especially compared to short-lived, single-term politicians. Many authors' [Cain, et al. 1987; Mayhew 1974; Rae 1967] research finds that the behaviour of political leaders is strongly influenced by their own career interests. Political leaders build long-term relationships with their constituencies simply because they are well aware of the fact that a loyal constituency will have a beneficial effect on their future career development. As a consequence, the construction of a political

² See Mayhew [1974].

³ Clearly, voters can inform their representatives of considerations and demands individually as well, or they can use various forms of petitions or exert pressure on them via their parties' leaderships. However, casting a vote at elections remains a powerful tool in the hands of a voter with which receptive representatives can be rewarded and inefficient ones can be punished [Botero 2008: 5].

career stresses democratic representation as citizens tend to establish stronger bonds especially with career politicians who, because of their desire for a long-lasting tenure of office, are more responsive to the needs of their constituencies [Botero 2008: 6]. On the other hand, the second argument states that more experienced political leaders with a longer political career are more efficient and can therefore better represent the interests of their constituencies. According to Polsby [1968], a career politician assists his or her constituency in becoming more institutionalised and professional, and in having a stable membership, internal structure and clear rules. In this way, career politicians whose objective is to achieve a longer political tenure, devote more time to both public policy making and implementation [Botero 2008: 6]. Krehbiel [1991] argues that by virtue of a stable and clear division of labour and longevity, career politicians become experts in their specific field(s), regardless of whether they perform a function in the legislature or in the executive. In a longitudinal study of the U.S. House of Representatives, Hibbing [1991] proves that the contribution⁴ of long-time members of Congress is incomparably greater than that of the congressmen who are in their first or second term. Therefore, the seniority of legislative bodies members is closely connected to a greater efficiency in their work.

Political leaders, who perform a political position for a longer period of time, eliminate the need for the initial introductory period at the beginning of a new term. They have already accumulated new knowledge and expertise in the course of several preceding terms and are already familiar with the mode in which their political position is performed. In addition, voters can also analyse the list of what an individual political leaders have so far achieved and compare the effects of their work with the needs of the community. In this manner voters can compel a political leader to act responsibly. Through such conduct, voters send political leaders a strong signal that their (in)action in office is under the voters' meticulous surveillance.

Political leaders often adapt their actions to try and please their constituencies and thus to promote their own further careers. The studying of political careers offers researchers an insight into the key aspect of democratic representation and it helps assess the power of electoral connection between voters and political leaders, as well as the scope of use (or lack thereof) of votes as a means of rewarding or punishing the (in) action of political officials [Kukovič, Haček 2013]. Furthermore, the studying of political careers also enables an insight into the structure of political organisations, their efficiency and the contribution of an individual holder of a political function. According to Botero [2008: 8], modern democratic institutions require professional political leaders and therefore the analysis of factors determining the decisions of political leaders regarding the continuation of political careers or retirement is of key importance. In fact, it is the analysis of factors that shed light on the reasons for

⁴ In the study mentioned above, this contribution refers to the proposals of amendments, the number of speeches and the number of submitted or sponsored draft legislative proposals or draft amendments to existing acts.

longevity of individual political careers. With respect of abovementioned reasons of importance for researching political careers, we analyse trends of seniority and continuity of mayoral leadership in Slovenian municipalities.

THE STATUS OF MAYOR IN THE SLOVENIAN LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

Slovenian municipalities follow traditional European division of power to the executive (the mayor) and legislative (the municipal council) branch. Every municipality also has a supervisory committee [Brezovšek, et al. 2008: 169]. The mayor is an individual body, a political official directly elected, for a term of office lasting four years, by secret ballot cast by voters who have permanent residence in the municipality for at least one year prior to local elections (Local Self-Government Act, Article 42). Suffrage at elections of mayors is identical to suffrage at elections of the municipal council [Kavčič, Grad 2008: 392]. The right to vote for and to be elected as a mayor is granted to every citizen who has the right to vote at elections for the municipal council. The candidacy procedure is fairly simple, as political parties and groups of voters can propose candidate mayors. Whenever a group of voters proposes a candidate for the office of mayor, signatures of voters residing in a municipality, amounting to at least two percent of all the voters who cast a vote in the first round of the most recent regular elections of mayors, have to be collected. However, the number can be neither lower than 15 nor higher than 2,500.

Mayoral elections use an absolute majority electoral system; the candidate who gets a majority of all the votes cast is elected. If none of the candidates receives an absolute majority of the votes cast, a second round is held for the two candidates who received the most votes in the first one. If more than two candidates receive the same highest number of votes or if two or more candidates receive the same second highest number of votes, lot decides the selection of candidates who are to run in the second round. The second round should be held no later than three weeks following the day of the first round. A mayor can be elected at regular elections or by-elections. The President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia announces regular mayoral elections, which are held simultaneously with regular municipal council elections. By-elections of mayors are held in case a mayor's tenure of office ends before the official expiry of the mayor's term of office and are announced by a municipal electoral commission [Kavčič, Grad 2008: 392].

The most important functions of mayor are executive and coordinative at the same time. Mayor is the political and legal representative of both the municipality and the municipal council. The mayor summons and presides over sessions of the municipal council, but has no right to vote. As an executive body, the mayor primarily executes the decisions made by the municipal council and also has the right of legislative initiative, as the mayor proposes the draft budget, municipal decrees and other legal acts for adoption by the municipal council. The mayor is often regarded as local "sheriff"

of the municipality with almost absolute executive authority [Kukovič, Brezovšek 2016], as he or she looks after the municipality's assets, replenishes it and provides for an increase in its value on a daily basis, namely by virtue of signing various contracts, public tenders, the rational and economical implementation of the budget, plus a strict consideration of the principles of good management. His or her tasks also include the summoning of citizens' assemblies and the adoption of emergency measures when the lives and/or property of citizens are endangered [Prašnikar 2000: 46]. The most important function of the mayor is to be in charge of the municipal administration.⁵ The mayor is sovereign and practically untouchable throughout his or her entire term of office. With the help of municipal administration, the mayor can pursue a very independent policy, regardless of the policies pursued by the municipal council. However, this can also lead to problems in case a mayor is of different political background compared to the political majority in the municipal council. To sum up, Slovenian mayor certainly plays very central role in the Slovenian system of local self-government and, due to the fact that the mayor is an individual body, the citizens often find that he or she is also the most recognisable figure in the municipality.

THE CONTINUITY OF MAYORAL LEADERSHIP IN SLOVENIAN MUNICIPALITIES

At the end of every term in office, incumbent mayors in the Slovenian local self-government system have an opportunity to run for office of the key executive function in the municipality and continue their political careers and policies they have proposed. On the other hand, mayoral elections represent also an opportunity for the citizens to decide whether or not to reaffirm their confidence in their local leaders and to express their satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the (incumbent) mayors' performance. Or, alternatively, this is also prime opportunity for citizens to entrust some other persons with this leadership position.

Statistical data (see Table 1) reveals that at the 1998 local elections, 90.5% of incumbent mayors from the preceding term (1994–1998) decided to run for office again. At the subsequent 2002 and 2006 local elections, the percentage of incumbents' candidacies somewhat dropped (87.5% and 84.5%, respectively), whereas at the most recent local elections in 2010 and 2014, this percentage remained on the same high level (85.2% and 83.9%, respectively).⁶

⁵ As the head of the municipal administration, the mayor makes decisions on administrative matters within the scope of the municipality's competences in the second instance; appoints and dismisses the director of municipal administration and heads of bodies of the municipal administration; decides upon the systematisation of administrative positions in the municipal administration; decides on the employment(s) or the conclusion of employment relationship(s) within the municipality; assigns tasks to the municipal administration the latter has to perform for the municipal council and for which the municipal administration; etc. [Juvan Gotovac 2000: 17].

⁶ Hereby, we stress the fact that the number of municipalities in the given period was slowly, but steadily increasing (from 192 in 1998 to 212 in 2014).

Table 1. Re-election of mayors of Slovenian municipalities; comparison of 1998–2014 local elections

		1998	2002	2006	2010	2014
Number of municipalities in which elections were held		192 (2 nd round 75)	193 (2 nd round 61)	210 (2 nd round 73)	208+2 (2 nd round 74+1)	212 (2 nd round 54)
Incumbency of mayors		133 out of 147 (90.5%)	168 out of 192 (87.5%)	163 out of 193 (84.5%)	179 out of 210 (85.2%)	177 out of 211 (83.9%)
Re-election rate	<i>first round</i> ⁷	82 (80%)	114 (86%)	111 (83.5%)	122 (82.4%)	129 (86.6%)
	<i>second round</i>	21 (20%)	19 (14%)	22 (16.5%)	26 (17.6%)	20 (13.4%)
	total	103	133	133	148	149
Electoral success (%)		77.4	79.2	81.6	82.7	84.2
Proposer of a candidate	at least one political party	77 (74.8%)	91 (68.4%)	92 (69.2%)	96 (64.9%)	72 (48.3%)
	a group of voters	26 (25.2%)	42 (31.6%)	41 (30.8%)	52 (35.1%)	77 (51.7%)

Source: Data provided by the National Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia and the National Electoral Commission; see also: Kukovič, et al [2015: 700].

If five mayoral elections from 1998 to 2014 are compared, it is apparent that the percentage of re-elected mayors steadily increased. As political parties or groups of voters can propose mayoral candidates, our analysis focused on the influence of the proposing entity on the prospects of mayors' re-election. The data shows that the percentage of re-elected mayors whose candidacy is supported by at least one political party has been decreasing ever since the 1998 elections of mayors (from 74.8% in 1998 to 48.3% in 2014), whereas the percentage of re-elected mayors whose candidacy is supported by a group of voters has been slowly, but steadily increasing (the highest being at the most recent mayoral elections, namely 51.7%). Hence, a conclusion can be drawn that the electoral success rate⁸ of re-elected mayors has increased with every subsequent election of mayors (from 77.4% in 1998 to 84.2% in 2014). At the same time, an ever-increasing proportion of re-elected mayors have consisted of those proposed by a group of voters. On the other hand, the respective proportion of mayoral candidates, proposed by at least one political party, has been shrinking.

Analysis of all the mayoral elections held from 1998 further reveals that only 133 incumbent mayors chose not to run for office once again, which represents only

⁷ Of the 82 mayors who were re-elected in the first round of the 1998 local elections, 11 (13.4%) had no opponent candidates to compete with. Of the 114 incumbent mayors who were re-elected in the first round of the 2002 local elections, 18 (15.8%) had no opponents. Of the 111 incumbent mayors who were re-elected in the first round of the 2006 local elections, 13 (11.7%) had no competitors. Of the 122 incumbent mayors who were re-elected in the first round of 2010 local elections, 21 (17.2%) were the only candidates. Of the 129 incumbent mayors who were elected in the first round of 2014 local elections, 30 (23.3%) were the only candidates, the highest number so far.

⁸ Electoral success is computed as a quotient of the number of municipalities in which incumbent mayors have been re-elected and the overall number of proposed candidacies of incumbent mayors in all municipalities.

13.1% of all mayors that were to be elected in stated period. Since we were interested in the motives behind the decisions of incumbent mayors that decided not to run, especially about “personal decisions” motivated by the drop in political support, we attempted to ascertain what happened to these people after their tenure of office had finished.⁹ Table 2 shows that 47.4% of all mayors who chose not to run for office again did so because they had already been executing their functions as retired persons, or they had retired during their term of office or just after their term had expired. Thirty-five point three percent found employment elsewhere after their term of office had ended (among these, seventeen continued their political careers in the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia); 12% chose not to stand as a candidate for personal reasons,¹⁰ and 7 mayors passed away during their term of office.

Table 2. Mayors who chose not to run for another term at 1998–2014 local elections

	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	Total
Total	14	24	30	31	34	133
- <i>personal decision</i>	4	4	4	1	3	16 (12.0%)
- <i>retirement</i>	7	10	11	18	17	63 (47.4%)
- <i>got a new job</i> ¹¹	3	9	11	11	13	47 (35.3%)
- <i>died</i>	–	1	4	1	1	7 (5.3%)

Source: Kukovič, et al [2015: 701].

Additionally, we conducted a survey among mayors of Slovenian municipalities and asked them about their standpoints on re-election.¹² First of all, we were interested in their opinions regarding a limitation of the number of terms of office. Almost two thirds of mayors said that there was no need for it. Among the mayors who saw the need for a limitation of the number of terms of office, more than half claimed that

⁹ This data was gathered by telephone interviews, either directly with mayors who chose not to run for their office again or with civil servants of individual municipalities.

¹⁰ Personal decision: illness, political discord, decline of support among citizens, etc.

¹¹ In 1998, all three continued their political careers in the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia; in 2002, there were two; in 2006, there was one, and in 2010, there were once again three. In 2011, the National Assembly adopted legislation, that prohibited mayors of municipalities to perform, at the same time, also job as a MP.

¹² Survey was performed by the Centre for Analysis of Administrative-Political Processes and Institutions in February 2012 among mayors of Slovenian municipalities (200 mayors were included in the survey; 11 mayors were excluded from our data set as they had been elected at parliamentary elections in December 2011 and their function of the mayor automatically expired; by-elections of mayors were then held in March 2012). We received 114 completed questionnaires (57%). It should also be pointed out that the expressed opinions are highly subjective evaluation from the part of mayors, and should not be taken in absolute terms.

the law should allow for no more than three terms; the remaining 46.2% would limit the mayors' tenure of office to no more than two terms.¹³

Mayors who have been incumbent for at least the second time were asked what their central motive behind their renewed candidacy was; 67 mayors answered this open question and their answers can be grouped into three categories. Most answers referred to the continuation or completion of already existing projects and investments in municipalities (76.1%), followed by the continuation of general developmental programmes or the development of municipalities (9%). The third group contains answers such as personal challenge, the creativity of the political function and citizens' support (14.9%). Considering that a high percentage of mayors said that their candidacies were intended to assure the completion of investments and projects that had already commenced, for which a four-year term was too short, the extension of the term of office to five years may be worth contemplating.

Political leaders are acutely aware of the fact that elections are periodically reoccurring events at which voters evaluate politicians' past work when deciding whom to cast the ballot for. We therefore asked mayors where, in their opinion, the trust of their voters originated from. The majority responded that the voters' trust was a consequence of their efficiency at work or of citizens' trust in their work and in their non-politicised style of leadership that transcended political divisions.¹⁴ However, the highest percentage of disagreement (at a surprising 96.2%) was recorded with the statement that the trust of voters was due to the mayor's membership in the political party that enjoyed the greatest support in a municipality. Interestingly, 94.4% of mayors who had been proposed as candidates by at least one political party shared the same opinion.

Thereafter, we wanted to know how many of the incumbent mayors would stand as a candidate again if elections of mayors were held tomorrow. Nearly 60% of mayors responded positively; 27.4% answered that they did not know yet; and only 15.9% were determined not to run for office again. This data confirms that we can again expect a high percentage of repeated candidacies by incumbent mayors, which has already been mentioned in relation to the objective data and which, at the same time, indicates one of the plausible trends at the coming local elections. All those mayors who said that they were not going to run for office again were asked to reveal the reasons for their decision. One half responded that this was their own personal decision, nearly one third claimed that they were going to retire; and only 5.6% said they were getting employed elsewhere.

¹³ In response to this question, five mayors expressed their support of limitation of the number of terms, but at the same time argued for a longer, five-year term of office of the mayor.

¹⁴ 58.5% of mayors whose candidature was supported by at least one political party said that the trust of voters they enjoyed originated from their non-political style of leadership or their ability to surpass political divisions. As expected, this percentage was even higher (73.1%) for mayors whose candidacy was supported by a group of voters.

CONCLUSIONS

Since municipalities are the only units of local self-government in Slovenia and represent the level of political authority closest to the citizens, this paper analyses the development of the key local government politician's career, i.e., the mayor. In the course of this paper, we have argued that incumbent career politicians avoid the introductory learning period at the beginning of a new term of office, since they have already acquired the necessary knowledge and skills during their preceding tenure of office. We were interested in the number of mayors who were re-elected at the local elections in the period from 1998 to 2014. Statistical data shows that at every mayoral elections from 1998 onwards, somewhere between 80% and 90% of incumbent mayors have decided to run for office again, which indicates that mayors are highly motivated to stay on in their positions and to build-up their political careers in this way.

This confirms that the local political atmosphere is strongly in favour of the re-election of mayors – we have found that at all local elections held thus far from 1998 onward, the electoral success rate of incumbent candidates has increased (at the most recent local elections in 2014, this rate was already at 84.2%). It seems that voters are obviously satisfied with mayors' work to such an extent that they want to make sure that incumbent mayors will be in charge of their municipalities during the next term as well. Even mayors themselves clearly expressed their opinion, that the efficiency of their work and the voters' trust in it are the key elements enabling their re-election if, of course, they decide to run again. On the other hand, unfinished work on various projects and investments is the essential motive for mayors to enter the electoral race again. In 97 Slovenian municipalities out of 212, the incumbent mayors are now at least in their third consecutive term of office. Eleven municipalities have had the same mayors since 1994 (hence, they are currently serving their sixth straight term). In 4 municipalities, former mayors were again elected after a pause-interval of at least one term. And, finally, of the current 212 municipalities, there are no municipalities in which every election so far has seen a victory by a different candidate mayor. This means that in all 212 municipalities, at least one mayor has repeated his or her term of office in the last two decades of Slovenian local democratic life.¹⁵

Both phenomena, the mayoral re-election and several consecutive terms of mayor's leadership, are therefore a common and frequent occurrence in Slovenia. The current legislative framework does not limit the number of terms of office a mayor may hold, which consequently has enabled quite a few municipalities to have the same mayors ever since they were established, some even for decades. Compelling majority of mayors expressed their view, that there is no need for the limitation of the number of terms. Additionally, we would like to emphasise the tenure of

¹⁵ Of course, the youngest municipality of Ankaran held its first local elections only in October 2014.

Slovenian municipalities' mayors as well. Mostly members of a somewhat older generation decide to become mayors – let us bear in mind that nearly one half of the mayors who chose not to run for the office again retired either during their term of office or afterwards or had already retired. Exactly one half of incumbent mayors who decided not to run at 2014 local elections were retiring. This may be the point at which a consideration of demographic characteristics of the central (executive) body of Slovenian municipalities could be relevant. However, our paper ends with the answer to the hypothesis stated in the introduction. On the basis of the data we have analysed, we state emphatically that the political seniority of mayors has an exceptionally positive impact on the chances of their re-election and that this impact only increases with every subsequent local election.

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