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Political careers and stability in office of regional ministers in Italy

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ABSTRACT


Models of political representation and selection in the Italian regions have undergone major changes since the mid-1990s, due to the new framework of opportunities based on a presidential form of government and a new party system. We aim to understand the extent to which certain socio-economic characteristics and political profiles influence the stability of the tenure of Regional Ministers (RMs), using an original dataset of 1121 RMs in ordinary statute regions. Our results show that political affiliation and regional political experience are crucial for holding office and even certain socio-economic features such as gender and age. Indeed, centrist politicians are less likely to remain in office than those who belong to other parties. Furthermore, they are more likely to stay in office longer if they have a high level of regional experience.

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KEYWORDS Regional ministers; political career; political professionalism; elite circulation; career stability

Introduction

Political professionalism and the career paths of subnational politicians are relatively new topics in the political science literature. They have developed recently in countries with federal/quasi-federal systems (e.g. Germany, Spain, Belgium) or in countries that have experimented with strong decentralization processes (e.g. Italy and the UK). Since the mid-1990s, the models of political representation and selection in the Italian regions have undergone major changes. This is due both to the implosion of the previous party system and to the innovations introduced by the new institutional framework

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based on a presidential type of government (Musella 2009). Nevertheless, we still do not know much about subnational politicians, especially at the regional level. This is especially true when compared to regional councillors (Cerruto 2017) and regional presidents (Grimaldi and Vercesi 2018), whose characteristics and careers have been much less studied.

This paper aims at understanding what kind of socio-economic characteristics and political profiles have emerged among Regional Ministers (RMs) (*assessori*) in Ordinary Statute Regions (OSRs) since 1995, based on an original dataset (Grimaldi and Boldrini 2022) of 1146 Regional Ministers (in terms of positions). In addition, the paper aims to understand whether such characteristics and previous political experience have an impact on the stability of the tenure of RMs.

On the one hand, leadership longevity is an important topic in the political science literature, brilliantly conceptualized by Blondel (1980, 1985). Subsequently, Bienen and Van de Walle (1991) examined the durability of world leaders by going beyond anecdotal evidence. In particular, they linked leadership durability to the broader issue of regime stability and democratic quality. Indeed, research confirms that the first factor influences the second. In other words, continuous and rapid leadership turnover can affect the functioning of democratic institutions and sometimes trigger democratic crises. Moreover, the length of time that leaders remain in office is crucial for the implementation of structural change policies or even for coherent policy-making. In fact, rapid turnover makes it difficult to take coherent and clear decisions and can thus weaken democratic responsiveness. All these aspects can be assumed to apply also to the analysis of subnational leaders, although the assessment of democracy at the subnational level is a rather new research topic in the political science literature (see Coppedge et al. 2022; McMann 2018; Sandoval 2023). Therefore, the longevity in office of regional leaders seems worthy of investigation.

On the other hand, Regional Ministers are often key political actors in subnational politics, especially in federal systems or in countries that have undergone a process of regionalization or devolution. Although research on this topic is relatively scarce, some case studies (e.g. in Canada) suggest that Regional Ministers have emerged as relevant political actors within their territory and also in shaping federal policy (Bakvis 1989). In Italy, the political role of regional executives has increased since the 1990s due to two relevant processes of institutional discontinuity (the regionalization process and the presidentialisation of the subnational political system) and one element of political continuity with the past (the fragmented party system). As mentioned above, the regionalization process has increased the level of authority at the meso level, as evidenced by the increase in the RAI index (Hooghe et al. 2021) from 1995 (on average from 1819) to 2020 (on average 2556). As a result, regional posts have become more attractive and appealing to political

leaders because there is more at stake than in the past, as their decisions are more autonomous and broader in scope. Moreover, this transformation coincided with the change in the institutional framework from a parliamentary to a presidential system. In this context, not only the figure of the regional presidents was empowered (Grimaldi and Vercesi 2018), but also that of the entire cabinet compared to that of the regional assembly and regional deputies. On the one hand, Regional Ministers are chosen by the regional president (Article 122 of the Constitution) and are linked to him or her by a relationship of trust. This means that they remain in power as long as the President remains in power and are forced to leave office if she or he resigns, dies, is prevented or loses a motion of confidence (art. 126 Const.). On the other hand, as the party system remains highly fragmented at the regional level (Bolgherini and Grimaldi 2017; Massetti and Sandri 2013; Vampa 2015), the role of the President in selecting and dismissing ministers is significantly reduced by the logic of the coalition agreement. As a result, Regional Ministers can hardly be dismissed by presidents, as was the case in two-party presidential systems. Instead, as in multiparty presidential systems, they are often untouchable because they are key subnational party leaders within the subnational ruling coalition or powerful local notables who also benefit from the personalization of politics. If this is the case, their longevity in office is also an indicator of their political strength.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review, linking the traditional concept of political professionalism with recent studies on political careers. It also presents our research questions and our main hypotheses. Section 3 explains the nature of our data and the method used to conduct our analysis. Section 4 presents the first descriptive results, namely what are the main similarities and differences of RMS in terms of socio-economic characteristics and political profiles, dividing them into three groups: those who stay in office for the full term, those who are dismissed and those who are replaced. Section 5 explains what are the main factors behind the stability of RMS' tenure, using an event history analysis (EHA). Section 6 concludes.

Political professionalism and political careers: theoretical framework and research design

The issue of political careers is closely linked to the classical theme of the professionalization of politics, which has been one of the foundations of all democratic political systems throughout the twentieth century and one of the preconditions for the supremacy of politics over other spheres of power. The concept of the political career first appeared with the elitist school and, in particular, with the works of Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, which focused specifically on the problems related to the selection

and circulation of elites. However, the real point of departure for all studies of pathways to power is Max Weber's masterpiece (1919), which distinguishes between those who live for politics and those who live from politics.

Subsequently, North American scholars took the lead in this area by emphasizing the central role of political careers in their work (see, for example, Dahl 1961; Lasswell 1948; Merriam 1926). However, Schlesinger (1966) marked a turning point in the study of political careers by shifting attention from the socio-economic origins of politicians to their ambitions. As a result, political careers were seen as the result of inputs and opportunities provided by social and institutional contexts. Subsequently, in the 1960s and 1970s, empirical research on political careers in Europe returned to the fore, with some important works emphasizing (in contrast to the American literature) the key role of parties for successful and durable political careers (Dogan 1967; Eliassen and Pedersen 1978; Herzog 1975). In addition, the concept of career politicians (King 1981) has been clearly defined and analyzed. Most recent studies define political careers in terms of elected political positions and (to a lesser extent) party experience before and (rarely) after the elected position under study.

From a theoretical point of view, political career research can be distinguished between actor-oriented and context-oriented (Jahr and Edinger 2015) approaches, which focus on individual and context as explanatory factors, respectively. Following the systematisation provided by Vercesi (2018), among the main actor-oriented approaches, it is worth mentioning the personality approach, which claims that individual personality influences career paths (i.e. Caprara and Silvester 2018; Lasswell 1948); the ambition theory approach (i.e. Lawless 2012; Schlesinger 1966), which posits that politicians are office-seekers and pursue different careers based on their ambitions; the social background and socialization approach (i.e. Allen 2013; Blondel and Thiébault 2010; Pilet et al. 2014; Putnam 1976), which posits that certain offices can only be reached by politicians with certain social characteristics and expertise; and the selection and deselection approach (Dowding and Dumont 2015; Searing 1991), based on a rational choice framework, according to which politicians (as agents) are selected according to their previous experience.

In contrast, contextual approaches include: the opportunity structure approach (Botella et al. 2010; Grimaldi and Vercesi 2018; Stolz 2003; 2015; Stolz and Fischer 2014), according to which career trajectories are influenced by the availability, accessibility and attractiveness of political posts; the intra-organizational approach (i.e. Hazan and Rahat 2010; Peters 2010; Thurber 1976), which posits that career choices and opportunities within an organization are influenced by formal and informal organizational rules and procedures; and the supply and demand approach (i.e. Carnes 2016; Krook

2010; Norris and Lovenduski 1995), which focuses on individuals as representatives of particular social sectors (e.g. women, workers, etc.) whose resources and motivations represent the supply, while the demand is given by the preferences of elites who act as gatekeepers. In short, this approach suggests that political careers are a step-by-step process influenced by the interaction of such supply and demand.

This research builds on both the social background and socialization approaches and the opportunity structure approaches and attempts to combine them. Indeed, on the one hand, Regional Ministers, like all executive officials, can be considered as apical figures, so that we can assume that certain specific characteristics play a role in their selection process, such as higher education, well-paid professions and gender. On the other hand, in Italy, as in all democracies with a territorial and institutional meso-level, politicians have tended to use regional offices as opportunities for their political careers, although not in all countries and not in every political season with the same importance. In fact, in some cases, regional offices have been a real springboard to national politics, as in the US (Wayne and Kenny 2000); in other cases, regional politicians have had their own autonomous path, not crossing any federal positions, as in Germany (Stolz and Fischer 2014); more rarely, national positions can be used as a stepping stone to regional arenas, as in Brazil (Samuels 2003). Finally, new important political positions, such as that of the directly elected regional president, can be used to gain visibility and/or consolidate certain territorial constituencies, such as regional executive and legislative offices (Grimaldi and Vercesi 2018).

Moreover, there are two elements that make this paper distinctive among contemporary studies of political careers. First, by focusing on politicians at the sub-national level, it contributes to reducing the imbalance of studies that focus on politicians at the national level. Indeed, despite the recent increase in the number of studies on multilevel democracies (i.e. Borchert 2003, 2011; Borchert and Stolz 2011; Di Capua et al. 2022; Dodeigne 2014, 2018; Pilet et al. 2014), most of the contemporary European and American literature focuses on (national) parliamentarians (i.e. Allen 2018; Best and Cotta 2000; Borchert 2003; Cairney 2007; Heuwieser 2018; Koop and Bittner 2011; Norris 1997; Ohmura et al. 2018; Saalfeld 1997; Searing 1994 Shabad and Slomczynski 2002; Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008; Squire 1993).

Second, this article focuses on executive leaders, who are still understudied compared to legislative ones. Indeed, even at the national level, the specific interest in the careers of executive leaders is still recent (i.e. Atkins, Heppell, and Theakston 2013; Berlinsky, Dewan, and Dowding 2007; Camerlo and Martínez-Gallardo 2017; Codato and Franz 2018; Dowding and Dumont 2008; Kaiser and Fischer 2009; Kerby 2009; Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli 2017; Müller and Wilfried 1991; Turner-Zwinkels and Mills 2020). Moreover, the partial interest for subnational politicians is again biased in

favour of members of the legislative assembly (i.e. Copeland and Opheim 2011; Santos and Pegurier 2011; Stolz 2003) rather than executive leaders (see: Astudillo and Martínez-Cantó 2020; Botella et al. 2010; Grimaldi and Vercesi 2018; Stolz and Fischer 2014 for exceptions).

This paper addresses both points by presenting a study of Italian Regional Ministers (RMs), i.e. subnational executives. However, even in Italy, the regional political elite has been little studied. In fact, most of the research is relatively recent and focuses mainly on regional councillors (Cerruto 2017; Vassallo and Cerruto 2007). Moreover, these studies mostly examine limited time periods or single regional case studies (Grimaldi and Riccamboni 2018), and they are often based on samples rather than on the whole universe of regional politicians (Cerruto 2017), given the difficulty of reconstructing careers from the origins of regional institutions, namely from 1970 (for OSRs).

More specifically, we are interested in understanding how specific elected positions prior to taking office, or socio-economic characteristics affect the tenure of Regional Ministers. Consequently, our research questions are the following:

1. Are there similarities or differences between Italian Regional Ministers in terms of their socio-economic characteristics and political careers?
2. Which socio-economic characteristics affect the probability of holding office for a full term?
3. What kind of previous political experience (municipal, provincial, regional, national) affects the probability of remaining in office for the whole term?

To answer these questions, we draw on several strands of literature dealing with political careers at both the national and local levels.

On the one hand, the international literature on gender representation points out that women are still underrepresented in national cabinets (i.e. Allen 2016; Bego 2014; Claveria 2014; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Hohmann 2017; Jalalzai 2004; Krook and O'Brien 2012; Lee and Park 2018). In Italy, local studies with a gender perspective (Carbone and Farina 2020) show that, since the mid-1990s, there has been a general increase in the number of women in municipal assemblies and executive bodies, due to the introduction of several laws promoting gender balance. However, parties seem to have learned how to circumvent such legislation (Pansardi and Pedrazzani 2023) and the gender gap is still a concern even at the sub-national level (Sampugnaro and Montemagno 2020).

On the other hand, the issue of the gender gap as the difference in the career length of male and female politicians has received limited attention in the international literature, and there are almost no studies in Italy. Praino and Stockemer's (2018) study on the career length of female politicians in the US House of Representatives pointed out that there is no

difference in the tenure duration between women and men once the former are elected, that is, once they have broken the glass ceiling. However, a recent study (Lazarus, Steigerwalt, and Clark 2023) contradicted such findings, claiming that women continue to face a different electoral world than men, and that these differences result in women both entering Congress later and serving shorter terms than men. Moreover, as some sociologists of work have pointed out, women in male-dominated occupations do not move up the career ladder, but rather are pressured to move out of these positions (Maume 1999). We assume that this is also true for political careers, as politics is still a male-dominated occupation. Consequently, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: The probability of remaining in power for the entire term as RM is higher for male RMs.

The process of decentralization that took place in Italy from the mid-90s onwards (Vandelli 2013) led to the change of the regional electoral rules to a majoritarian one, which provided several incentives for the stabilization of a (fragmented) bipolar system at the regional level (Chiaramonte 2007). The bipolarisation in the Italian regions has been reinforced by the similarities between the national and regional party systems. In fact, despite the increasing differentiation between regions (Masseti and Sandri 2013) and the emergence of more region-centred patterns since the 1994 legislative elections (Mazzoleni 2002;), ‘a symmetry between electoral results at regional and national level is still largely present’ (Bolgherini and Grimaldi 2017, 487). In particular, the mixed electoral system adopted in the mid-1990s at both national and regional levels led to a change in the traditional logic of competition and the elaboration of electoral alliances became the main challenge for political actors (Di Virgilio 1996). However, this bipolarism remained ‘largely imperfect’ due to the presence of forces that rejected the binary logic of the vote, and it was accompanied by the survival of a fairly well articulated party-political pluralism (ibid.). As Di Virgilio (1996) points out, the main changes took place in the centre, previously occupied by Christian Democracy (Sartori 1976), which disappeared at the beginning of the 1990s. In fact, not only did many different Catholic heirs emerge (Baccetti 2007), but they also showed a high degree of intra-party fractionalization due to different coalition preferences (alternatively to the left or to the right), which led to splits, the creation of new parties and even later party mergers. In fact, after the collapse of the DC, ‘any attempt to elaborate and lead a Catholic political initiative, inside or outside a larger coalition, failed’ (Diotallevi 2016). This led to the weakening of the political centre and the inability of centrist parties to maintain a clear political direction from one election to the next. Due to these changes affecting Catholic forces, politicians belonging to centrist parties are less likely to remain in power than

those belonging to the leading parties of the left or right coalition. Our second hypothesis is therefore:

H2: The probability of remaining in power for the entire term as RMs is lower when they are affiliated with parties in the centre of the political spectrum.

The effect of bipolarisation also has implications for small parties. On the one hand, a number of studies have pointed out that the electoral success of small parties depends on the role of electoral institutions (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006) and social divisions (Harmel and Robertson 1985; Kitschelt 1988). In other words, permissive electoral systems facilitate the performance of new competitors, especially if they can identify and exploit untapped issues. On the other hand, a recent study (Dinas, Riera, and Roussias 2015) points out that parliamentary entrance is an important resource for small parties. Indeed, parliamentary entry signals organizational capacity and candidate appeal, and reduces uncertainty about the party's ideology. In particular, this study suggests that among the costs of not entering parliament that small parties face is the risk that 'ambitious, skilled political personnel may leave the party, especially if its future electoral prospects are perceived as limited by its members' (ibid.: 189). If this is also true in a multilevel perspective, especially when regional party systems mirror the national ones, as in the case of Italy, it means that especially those small parties that are active in the regional arena but never enter the national parliament are more likely to be abandoned by their political personnel, and thus we assumed that party membership in a small party affects the tenure of RMs.

Specifically, our third hypothesis is as follows:

H3: The probability of remaining in power for the entire term as an RM is lower if the RM belongs to a small party that did not enter parliament before.

Furthermore, most studies on political careers point out that the most widespread career profiles in Europe are still those based on the unidirectional model or the alternative model (Borchert 2011; Dodeigne 2014). The former implies a movement from local to regional to national level positions, whereas the latter implies that regional and national careers are clearly separated and that there is no movement from regional to national level. If this is the case, local positions seem to be important for both types of profiles, and we therefore assume that previous local positions can influence the tenure of RMs. In particular, in the Italian context, it is likely that municipal and regional positions are even more important after the reorganization and rescaling of the provinces (Del Rio Law: 56/2014). Therefore, our fourth and fifth hypotheses are as follows:

H4: If RMs have previous municipal government experience in legislative or executive bodies, they are more likely to remain in power for the full term.

H5: The likelihood of remaining in power for the full term as RM is higher if RMs have previous regional experience in legislative or executive bodies.

Data and methods

The research focuses on examining all RMs in 15 Ordinary Statute Regions (OSRs) in the period from 1995 to 2020. Data were collected from the National Register of the Ministry of the Interior and from official regional websites.¹ The choice to focus only on OSRs is due to avoid distortions related to the specific characteristics of special status regions, which enjoy greater powers and resources in terms of autonomy and have a longer history in terms of elected representatives. Furthermore, we chose to focus only on RMs since 1995 (the first regional elections of the so-called Second Republic) in order to provide a more detailed analysis. Indeed, the inclusion of RMs prior to this date would have posed problems of data comparability due to the significant political discontinuity that occurred after the Clean Hands scandal and the 1994 general election. In addition, the inclusion of RMs in power before 1995 would have posed some problems in terms of data availability, as information on local and regional politicians during the First Republic is not always available on regional websites and other secondary sources are often unreliable.²

We examined the positions of individual RMs, rather than focusing on individuals, by considering separately those individuals who held the position for more than one term. While this choice limits the possibility of fully reconstructing the entire institutional career at the individual level, it does allow us to examine in detail which factors (including the political career) influence the path to the position of RM. This approach is not new in this field of research, both at regional (Grimaldi and Vercesi 2018) and national level (Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli 2017), and it has been shown to provide a better picture of the degree of elite circulation and better results in terms of generalization.

Consequently, in this research we have a population of 1121 RMs. With regard to their profiles, the analysis examines the following characteristics: gender, age, original profession, type of nomination (whether from the pool of elected regional councillors or from outside), party affiliation and the length of their previous careers at the municipal, provincial, regional and national levels. The duration of their mandate as regional councillors is our dependent variable.

A quantitative analysis was considered the most appropriate way to examine the profiles of RMs in terms of socio-economic characteristics and career, and to understand what factors influence their ability to remain in power. The analysis was carried out in two ways.

Firstly, bivariate analysis and descriptive statistics were used to check whether there are similarities and differences in the profile of the RMs in

terms of gender, age cohort, profession, party membership and their career in different institutions (municipal, provincial, regional, national and European).

Secondly, a multivariate analysis was carried out to test the influence of the characteristics of RMs in determining the probability of remaining in power for the whole legislature.

Due to the longitudinal nature of the data and the fact that some individuals were still in office at the time of the research, the analysis was conducted using event history analysis. EHA is a method – widely used in the social sciences to study political careers (Jäckle and Kerby 2018) – that allows to study the timing and occurrence of a particular event in a group of subjects, overcoming some limitations of OLS regression, namely censoring and the distribution of residuals (Blossfeld, Golsch, and Rohwer 2001).

In addition, to test the effect of socio-biographical and institutional variables on tenure stability, the analysis was carried out using the Andersen and Gill (1982) model. This is a variation of the traditional Cox model (1975), which is more appropriate for this type of study, in which a subject may experience several chronologically ordered events (in fact, each RM may be in office for several terms, according to a precise sequence that is not independent in time).

In order to carry out an EHA analysis, it is first necessary to specify the type of event to be studied, the period over which the subjects are observed, the number of cases (and subjects), and whether censored data are present. In our analysis, the event is represented by the end of the term of office of the RM, while the time period is the length of their term of office, that is, the period between their entry into office and their departure from the regional government. As mentioned above, the analysis was applied to 1121 cases, with a total of 899 subjects and 132 right-censored cases (i.e. subjects in office at the time of the research, in August 2022).

We considered the following characteristics as independent variables: gender, the term of office covered by each RM at the municipal, provincial, regional and national levels, and party membership (both in terms of party size and party ideological position). They were operationalized as follows. Gender was operationalized as a dichotomous variable, taking the value 0 if the RM is male and 1 if it is female; the three variables representing institutional career were operationalized in the same way, using the number of days in power. In other words, the number of days spent before becoming a RM as a municipal councillor, member of the municipal executive and mayor for the municipal level; as a member of a provincial assembly, member of a provincial executive and president of the province for the provincial level; as a regional councillor, Regional Minister and regional president for the regional level; and as a

deputy, senator or minister for the national level and MEPs for the EU level.

In addition, membership of a small party was operationalized as a dichotomous variable with a value of 1 if the RM belonged to a large party (i.e. if it obtained at least 5% of the vote in the regional election) that entered the national parliament in the previous general election, and 0 if not³, and the political placement of the RM on the LR scale as a polytomous variable divided into independent⁴ if the RM does not belong to any party, centre, centre-left and centre-right, according to the left-right scale provided (Mid-dendorp 1978).⁵

Finally, we added some control variables to make the analysis more robust. First, we controlled for RM's initial age and occupation. Age in years was operationalised as a continuous variable, calculated by subtracting the date of birth from the entry in the RM office, profession, operationalised as a polytomous variable according to the classification of the register (1 for professional politicians, entrepreneurs and managers, 2 for professional and university professors, 3 for employees and clerks for technicians and 5 for other professions). Second, we controlled for the external or internal nomination of RMs among regional councillors. As noted in the literature, since the 90s the number of non-party figures (as technicians, independents and even trustees of the regional president) has increased within the Italian regional political class (Baldi 2011; Marino and Martocchia Diodati 2017). Therefore, the external nomination variable aims to control whether the type of RM nomination (whether internal or external among regional councillors) has an effect on the stability of tenure. This variable is operationalized as a dichotomous variable, with a value of 0 if the nomination is internal among the regional councillors and 1 if it is external. In the third place, we controlled for the geographical area. We chose to apply Valbruzzi and Vignati's (2021) classification of regional political systems, which divides regional systems based on government participation and electoral vulnerability into centre-right and centre-left strongholds, swing regions (with high government turnover and high electoral pressure) and competitive regions (with high electoral volatility and limited frequency of change of office). It was operationalized as a polytomous variable.

In addition, two dummy variables were introduced to avoid distortions related to the early resignation of the entire regional government (which would imply the early termination also for the RMs) and the later entry into office of the RMs. The former, which is related to the early interruption of the whole regional government, takes the value 1 if there is an early interruption and 0 otherwise; the latter is related to the late entry into office of the RMS and takes the value 1 if the RMS is a replacement and 0 otherwise.⁶

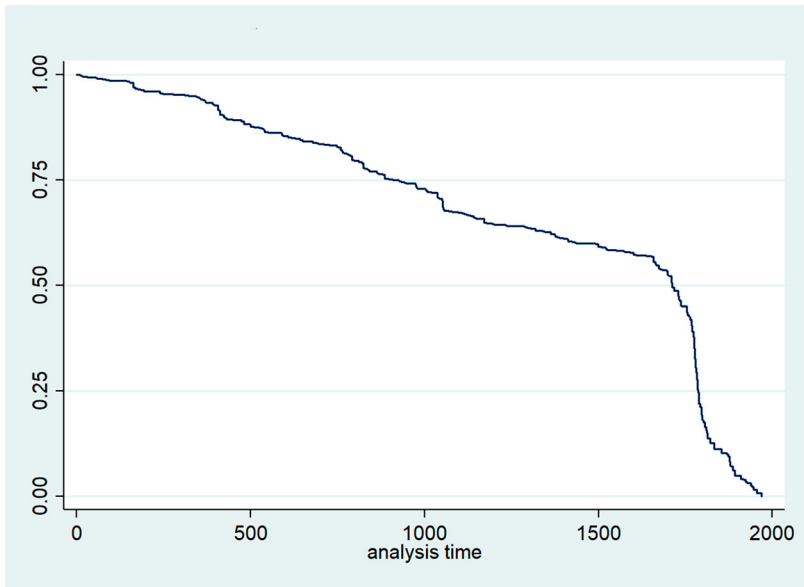


Figure 1. The Kaplan-Meier Survival Curve of the Regional Ministers' tenure.

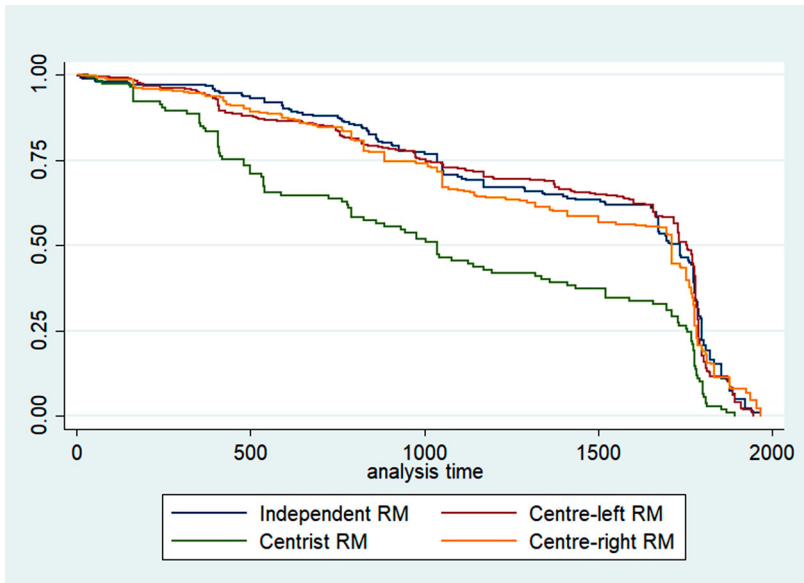


Figure 2. The Survival Curve of the Regional Ministers' tenure per party type.

Figure 1 presents the Kaplan-Meier survival curve of the RMs' tenure. Figure 2 displays the survival curve by party type, by showing that the tenure of RMs from centrist parties is significantly shorter than that

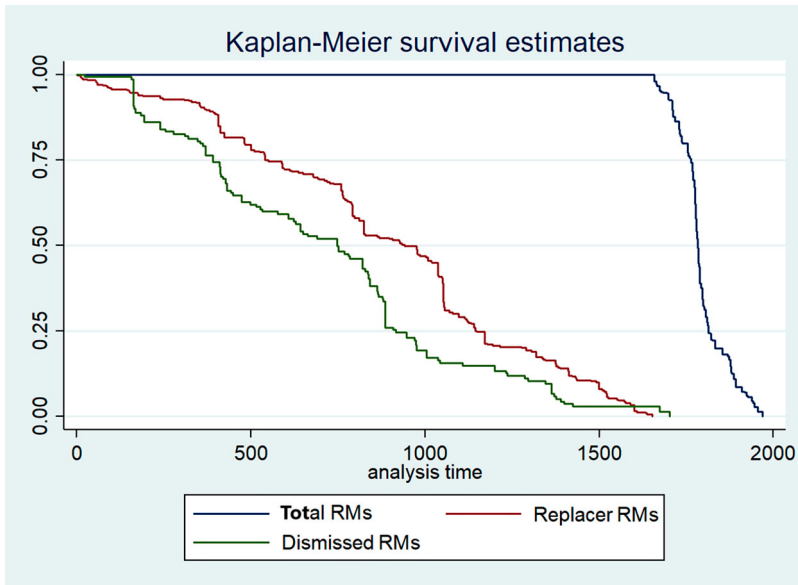


Figure 3. The Survival Curve of the Regional Minister's tenure per Regional Ministers' types.

of RMs from right-wing and left-wing parties (which have the longest tenure).

Lastly, [Figure 3](#) shows the survival curves among the total RMs, the dismissed and the replaced ones.

Descriptive findings

In this section we look at the specific characteristics of the Italian Regional Ministers (RMs) in the ordinary statute regions (OSRs) to understand whether or not there are specific patterns. To provide a more fine-grained analysis, the RMs were divided into three different categories based on the length of their tenure within each regional government: (1) those who completed their term; (2) those who resigned before the end of their term (the dismissed); and (3) those who replaced the dismissed during the legislature (the replacements).

The majority of Italian RMs completed their term of office (61.4%), as only one third (30.5%) resigned before the end of the legislature and only 8% were replaced by new RMs.

Socio-economic characteristics are similar for the three categories of RMs, with a few interesting nuances. On the one hand, men are in the majority for all three categories (78.7%, 84.9% and 83.7% respectively; see [Table 1](#)). However, the proportion of women is higher among RMs who completed

Table 1. Distribution of socio-economic and political characteristics of the Italian Regional Ministers.

	RMs who complete their term	Dismissed	Replacements
Gender			
Women	21.3	15.1	16.3
Men	78.7	84.9	83.7
Age-cohort			
<29	0.4	0.6	1.1
30–39	10.7	9.7	16.3
40–49	36.2	32.6	30.4
50–59	40.1	35.7	37.0
60–69	11.5	12.3	13.0
>70	1.1	0.6	2.2
Education			
Elementary or middle-school	1.9	1.7	1.1
High school diploma	30.0	22.6	31.5
Degree or more	67.9	75.1	64.1
Profession			
Political professionals-entrepreneurs-managers	25.1	15.1	23.9
Professionals	35.8	48.0	29.4
Technicians	9.1	5.1	9.8
Employees	23.0	21.7	23.9
Other professions	3.9	6.0	6.0
External nominee	33.5	32.3	41.3
Party membership			
Independent	19.5	20.9	22.8
Left-wing	4.0	3.1	7.6
Centre-left	36.2	24.9	35.9
Centre	4.8	13.7	5.4
Centre-right	18.0	24.9	17.4
Right-wing	17.1	12.6	10.8
M5S	0.0	0.0	0.4

their term of office and lower among those who resigned early (21.3% and 15.1% respectively). Therefore, although the number of women in the regional executive is limited, the majority of women completed their term of office and only a minority of them had resigned before the end of the legislature.

Most RMs are in their 40s or 50s in all three categories identified, as the average age is around 50 in all cases. Comparing these data with those of regional councillors, it is clear that RMs are relatively older (Cerruto 2017; Grimaldi and Riccamboni 2018). In fact, 40.1% of those who completed their full term are between 50 and 59 years old, while the same cohort is around 36% for the other two categories, and in all cases the 50–59 cohort is the most common. This means that RMs in their 50s are more likely to retain their position, and when a replacement is needed, people in their 50s are again more likely to get the job. In fact, 37% of replacements are in the 50–59 cohort compared to 30.4% in the 40–49 cohort.

The majority of RMs had a tertiary level of education, with a higher level of graduates compared to regional councillors (Cerruto 2017). This is true for all three categories of RMs, but among those who left early, the percentage of the most educated is the highest (75.1%), while among the replacements it is the lowest. In fact, those with a diploma reach 31.5%. This counterintuitive finding shows that a high level of education is not a concrete strength in maintaining the position of RM and, in addition, in the case of early retirements, the replacements may have a lower level of education.

In terms of occupation, Table 2 shows that the three most common original occupations of RMs are: (1) political professionals, entrepreneurs and managers; (2) professionals; and (3) employees. However, the most common occupation for all three categories of RMs is that of professionals such as architects, engineers, accountants, notaries, doctors, etc. This makes sense, since professionals are the ones most likely to retain their previous position in the private or public sector when their political experience comes to an end, or alternatively, they are more likely to succeed in working in their original sector while serving as RMs. Among those who complete their term, 35.8% are professionals, while 25.1% are political professionals, entrepreneurs and managers. On the other hand, among those who are dismissed, 48% are professionals, but the second most common category is that of employees (21.7%). Finally, among the replacements, both employees and political professionals/entrepreneurs/managers are the second most common category after professionals (both 23.9%). Consequently, apical positions and, in particular, political professionalism seem to be the key to maintaining the office of RM, as they are the second most frequent category both for those who completed their term of office and for the replacements, while it is the third category for the dismissed.

We also considered two political characteristics: the number of RMs appointed without being elected (the so-called external nominees) and the party membership of RMs. External nominees account for one third of the total universe, in particular 41.3% of the replacements, 33.5% of those completing their terms and 32.3% of those dismissed. These data suggest that regional presidents tend to appoint someone close to them, regardless of party dynamics, especially when they have to replace certain executive positions. This finding is consistent with the data on party membership of RMs. On the one hand, it is likely that external ministers have more technical expertise than a clear political affiliation. Indeed, independents are the second most common category, very close to that of centre-right ministers, while the first is that of centre-left RMs. On the other hand, our data confirms that 87.9% of independents are not elected but appointed by the president. Overall, these data point in the same direction of interpretation, namely that, since the 1990s, parties have partially lost their grip on regional politics due to the presidentialisation of the form of government (Musella 2009). Indeed, the

Table 2. Results of the multivariate analysis.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	
									Coefficient	HR
Independent variables										
Female		-0.0513 (0.0572)							-0.144* (0.0654)	0.86
Municipal career			-0.0000356** (0.0000112)						-0.000034** (0.0000108)	0.99
Provincial career				-0.0000405 (0.0000208)					-0.0000638** (0.000024)	0.99
Regional career					-0.000146*** (0.0000248)				-0.00015*** (0.0000269)	0.99
National career						-0.0000537 (0.0000423)			-0.0000339 (0.0000375)	0.99
Major party							-0.106 (0.0145)		0.281 (0.0156)	1.02
Political positioning. Reference category: Independent										
C-L party								0.179 (0.135)	0.109 (0.11)	1.11
Centrist party								0.477* (0.186)	0.647*** (0.13)	1.91
C-R party								0.104 (0.168)	0.0703 (0.125)	1.07
Control variables										
Geographical localisation. Reference category: C-R Stronghold										
C-L stronghold	0.0219 (0.0764)	0.0226 (0.0764)	0.0300 (0.0787)	0.0272 (0.0753)	0.0427 (0.0848)	0.00937 (0.0766)	0.0302 (0.0868)	-0.0295 (0.109)	0.0248 (0.117)	1.02
Swing Region	0.212* (0.0825)	0.212* (0.0825)	0.206* (0.0819)	0.203* (0.0821)	0.194* (0.0854)	0.211** (0.0817)	0.0487 (0.0907)	0.243* (0.111)	0.0131 (0.107)	1.01
Competitive region	0.109 (0.0787)	0.109 (0.0787)	0.101 (0.0796)	0.103 (0.0778)	0.0774 (0.0848)	0.100 (0.0783)	0.0233** (0.0781)	0.131 (0.0893)	0.138 (0.0948)	1.15
External nomination	0.0294 (0.0601)	0.0359 (0.0616)	0.0141 (0.0593)	0.0212 (0.0605)	-0.202** (0.0713)	0.0399 (0.0559)	0.00562 (0.0713)	0.155 (0.104)	-0.143 (0.090)	0.87

Profession.

Reference category: Politicians, entrepreneur and managers

Professionals and university professors	0.0439 (0.0717)	0.0441 (0.0718)	0.0284 (0.0728)	0.0343 (0.0691)	-0.0252 (0.0758)	0.0477 (0.0711)	0.00847 (0.0788)	0.0792 (0.0723)	-0.0798 (0.0781)	0.92
Employees	0.108 (0.102)	0.109 (0.102)	0.0789 (0.104)	0.104 (0.100)	0.0720 (0.111)	0.106 (0.103)	0.0466 (0.103)	0.0968 (0.105)	-0.0292 (0.114)	0.97
Technicians	0.0851 (0.0820)	0.0826 (0.0821)	0.0661 (0.0845)	0.0831 (0.0806)	0.0701 (0.0846)	0.0821 (0.0826)	0.0260 (0.0804)	0.0755 (0.0855)	-0.0150 (0.0831)	0.98
Other professions	0.115 (0.110)	0.113 (0.110)	0.0734 (0.114)	0.0948 (0.110)	0.102 (0.126)	0.116 (0.111)	0.128 (0.124)	0.190 (0.119)	0.0729 (0.127)	1.07
Age	-0.0121*** (0.00357)	-0.0127*** (0.00357)	-0.0110** (0.00354)	-0.0115** (0.00355)	-0.00965** (0.00357)	-0.0116*** (0.00351)	-0.0141*** (0.00331)	-0.0129*** (0.00348)	-0.0105** (0.00352)	0.99
Early demission of the Giunta Replacer	0.916*** (0.116)	0.915*** (0.169)	0.918*** (0.116)	0.934*** (0.117)	-0.941*** (0.116)	0.918*** (0.115)	-0.915*** (0.116)	-0.902*** (0.113)	0.934*** (0.116)	2.54
	1.144*** (0.166)	1.138*** (0.166)	1.171*** (0.158)	1.141*** (0.167)	1.207*** (0.146)	1.147*** (0.164)	1.093*** (0.169)	1.163*** (0.165)	1.169*** (0.145)	3.21
N	1121	1121	1121	1121	1121	1121	1121	1121	1121	
PR2	0.021	0.021	0.021	0.021	0.025	0.018	0.021	0.022	0.028	
Log pseudolikelihood	-5615.2885	-5615.1055	-5610.8066	-5613.9202	-5591.8366	-5614.5207	-5594.7797	-5609.6168	-5554.2632	
WaldChi2	86.22	86.05	121,32	86.00	212.61	90.987	151.72	100.70	281.34	
Prob > chi2	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$ ** < 0.05 *** < 0.001 .

selection of RMs is no longer the exclusive result of party dynamics and, in line with the personalization of the presidential campaign (Seddone 2021), the preferences of regional presidents also play a role in this process. Returning to the party affiliation of the RMs, the data show that 36.3% of the RMs who remain in power for the whole term come from the centre-left, followed by independents (19.5%) and centre-right ministers (18%). Centre-left and centre-right ministers are equally represented among those who resign (24.9% each). However, among the replacements, centre-left is the most common (35.9%), while independents are the second most common (22.8%). This means that centre-right regional presidents in particular tend to replace their ministers with independents rather than with other politicians from their party or coalition.

Explicative analysis

As mentioned above, in order to investigate which specific career positions or socio-economic factors influence the tenure of RMs, we selected an EHA and ran the Andersen and Gill model mentioned above. The results are shown in Table 2. In order to determine not only the effect of the independent variables, but also their explanatory power, several different models were tested. In Model 1 only the control variables were used, whereas in Models 2–8 each of the independent variables was introduced to measure their contribution to explaining the variance. Finally, model 9 was tested with all the variables. The first column shows the coefficient and the standard errors whilst the second column displays the hazard ratio (HR).⁷ Such a general model, although it does not have a particularly high explanatory power, seems to contribute to explaining the stability of RMs' tenure (the PR2 value of Model 9 is 0.028, compared to 0.021 calculated for Model 1 with only the control variables).

Turning to the results, the analysis shows an impact of certain socio-biographical variables. Indeed, the general model shows a negative correlation between stability of tenure and gender. In particular, being a woman is associated with a lower hazard rate (0.86 HR, 90% CI) and hence it narrows the risk of early resignation. Contrary to our expectations, there is no statistically significant negative effect of gender on tenure stability. On the contrary, there is an effect, but it is in the opposite direction, with women showing greater tenure stability than men. Thus, hypothesis 1 is rejected and our results seem to be in line with the findings of Praino and Stockemer (2018), namely that once women break through the glass ceiling, their tenure stability is slightly longer than that of men.

Regarding political affiliation, the analysis shows a negative impact of belonging to a centrist party (compared to the baseline, independents) on stability of tenure. The bipolarisation of the party system at the regional

level affects the different parties differently, which explains this finding. Specifically, it had a negative impact on centrist RMs in terms of less stable careers in comparison to independents and other parties. Furthermore, belonging to a centrist party is associated with a higher hazard rate (1.91 HR, 99% CI) and hence it increases the risk of early termination. This confirms hypothesis 2. Furthermore, our models show that being a member of a small party that did not enter the national parliament has no effect on the tenure of RMs. In other words, since there is no statistically significant effect of party size on the early termination of RMs, RMs belonging to such parties do not seem to have shorter tenures than others. Hypothesis 3 is therefore rejected.

With regard to the variables related to political career, the analysis highlights a positive correlation with previous municipal, provincial and regional involvement. In fact, RMs with relatively longer previous municipal (0.99 HR, 95% CI), provincial (0.99HR, 95% CI) and regional careers (0.99 HR, 99% CI) seem to stay in office more than others (namely those without such experience and those with shorter regional careers). In particular, previous regional experience seems to have the strongest effect, both in terms of statistical significance and the strength of the relationship. On the contrary, the analysis shows no relevance of previous experience at national level. Therefore, the set of skills, knowledge and resources accumulated at the local, but mainly at the regional level, seems to be the most important career factor favouring the stability of tenure for all RMs. Thus, both hypothesis 4 on the importance of the municipal career and hypothesis 5 on the importance of the regional career are confirmed. Regional experience is also the variable that contributes the most to explaining the variance compared to the others, highlighting the particular importance of this type of experience in defining career stability.

Overall, the analysis highlights the importance of both certain socio-biographical factors (gender) and political factors (type of party affiliation and previous career at local and especially regional level).

Conclusion

Our analysis examines similarities and differences in the socio-economic characteristics and political career positions of Italian Regional Ministers and which of these characteristics affect the stability of their tenure. This case study reveals some interesting implications about the stability of regional executive elites, also from a comparative perspective. Indeed, it is likely that similar dynamics occur in other systems that have experimented with a significant decentralization process that has led to the empowerment of the regional level or in federal systems characterized by multipartyism. In particular, it is likely that the same drivers, namely certain socio-biographical

factors such as gender and previous political career at the regional level, have an impact on the tenure of the regional executive.

From an empirical point of view, the analysis shows a broadly similar profile of RMs, regardless of when they took office. In fact, the majority of RMs are men, in the 50–59 age group, with higher education, and they used to hold apical and high-level professions (mostly political professionals, entrepreneurs, managers and professionals). Also from a career point of view, the analysis highlights a strong diffusion of previous career experience at local and regional level. Finally, most RMs belong to the centre-left or are independents, while those belonging to a centrist party are a minority due to the process of bipolarisation. However, the analysis also highlights some important differences. Indeed, there are some relevant differences regarding the tenure of RMs according to the type of RM. Although they represent a minority of RMs, women – and, to a lesser extent, RMs appointed outside the regional councils – are more prevalent among RMs terminating their mandate than among those dismissed and replaced.

From a theoretical perspective, the research shows the importance of political resources associated with regional careers. Indeed, as the EHA analyses showed, RMs with longer regional careers have a higher probability of remaining in office. Career stability is strongly linked to the duration of political experience at the regional level. Although this is a partial result, focusing only on executive careers and tenure, the research suggests that it is likely that the most recurrent career model for Italian Regional Ministers is the alternative one, namely that they are politicians who pursue and develop their careers only at the regional level – similar to what happens in the German case. Therefore, as shown by Borchert and Stolz (2011), despite the incentives offered by multilevel democracy to switch between positions, two separate career profiles prevail: those who stay at the regional level (such as Italian RMs) and those who mainly occupy national (federal) positions.

Furthermore, the paper shows that the stability of tenure can be strongly influenced by the different political opportunity structure. RMs belonging to centrist parties have a lower probability of remaining in office than their counterparts. This difference can be explained precisely by the different opportunity structure in terms of changing party competition. In fact, it is precisely the combination of belonging to a party of the centre that struggles with coherent coalition logic under the fragmented bipolarism that is likely to shorten regional careers.

Both from a national perspective (i.e. comparing the different patterns of RMs, for example at national or municipal level) and through a cross-country comparison, our study may be useful for future comparative research. In addition, the research opens up future avenues of investigation related to the study of the career paths of RMs. Indeed, the results of the analysis lead to further questions related to the entry into office (i.e. what are the

factors that influence the entry into office as compared to those that ensure the stability of the mandate) and to the prevailing career model for RMs, taking into account their whole career.

Notes

1. The construction of the dataset was a particularly challenging task given the relatively large time period and the large number of cases. The National Registry of Local and Regional Administrators of the Ministry of the Interior collects all information on local and regional politicians' characteristics since 1985 representing one of the most comprehensive archives in the landscape of European countries. However, it has some weaknesses and limitations. Two types of problems were mainly encountered in the course of the research, related to inconsistencies or incoherences and material errors in the archive. Inconsistencies were mainly found in relation to internal changes in the regional government, the entry date of replacers, and the political affiliation of individual RMs, which was not always consistent within each coalition. On the contrary, material errors were related to genuine errors in the archive (e.g. Basilicata Region President Angelo Michele Iorio recorded as Angelo Iorio) contributing to creating "holes" in the careers of individual RMs. Both problems were solved by comparing the registry results with those on the websites of the various regions.
2. As pointed out in the literature (Turi 2007), data are not always available for the period before 1995, and even within this official dataset they are quite uncertain.
3. To control for any bias due to this operationalization, robustness tests were conducted with different operationalisations of the variables. The results can be found in the supplementary material. In particular, with regards to the size of the parties, we adopt an inductive empirical strategy by testing different threshold from 3% to 20% (see the supplementary materials). However, our findings do not change as the variable is not significant.
4. For the sake of simplicity, the three M5S regional councillors (all replacements) in Lazio and Puglia have also been included among the independents.
5. This operationalization, although it may seem too reductive, has the double advantage of avoiding excessive fragmentation of the categories (such as the radical left, which has less than fifty cases) and ensuring greater reliability of the data on political affiliation.
6. We are aware that RMs may resign early if they are individually affected by political scandals, but we do not have complete data for our 1121 observations on this aspect and could therefore only control for early resignations of the whole regional government and for replacements.
7. The hazard ratio (HR) represents the risk that the adverse event will occur among the conditions defined by the variables considered. In this case, the adverse event is the early resignation of regional ministers. A HR less than 1 indicates that the variable considered narrows the risk of early resignation occurring whereas, HR greater than 1 means that such variables increases the risk of early resignation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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