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POLITICAL LEADERS AND CHANGING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

THE EUROPEAN MAYOR

EDITED BY HUBERT HEINELT, ANNICK MAGNIER, MARCELLO CABRIA AND HERWIG REYNAERT

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Political Leaders and Changing Local Democracy

The European Mayor

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Hubert Heinelt, Annick Magnier, Marcello Cabria, and Herwig Reynaert

Aims of the Study and Origin of the Survey

Political leadership at the local level has gained more and more interest in the scholarly and political debate during the last 20 years. Political leadership has been seen as necessary to overcome a highlighted democratic deficit by increasing accountability of core policy makers involved not only in policy making in the city hall but also in administrative reforms or in governance arrangements in which different societal actors play a crucial role.[1] These debates about the importance of political leadership at the local level have had, for instance, a clear impact on the introduction of directly elected mayors in a number of European countries.

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The book aims to make a contribution to these debates by referring to a survey on mayors of cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants in 29 European countries carried out from the end of 2014 to the end of 2016. These countries were Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, England (that means, not the whole UK), Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey.[2] This research constitutes the extended reissue of a previous work, conducted about ten years ago on a more limited number of countries. That survey was based on a questionnaire similar to the current one. This is why the recent survey has been conceived not only in order to trace an updated picture of the present, but also to carry out a comparison with the results of the first survey. Therefore, the following (interrelated) research questions are addressed in the book in a comparative way between countries (or country groups) as well as over time:

- How did they become a mayor, what is their social background and how has their political career evolved?
- What are their role perceptions?
- What is the political agenda of mayors?
- How do mayors interact with other actors in the city hall as well as with societal actors and actors from upper levels of government?
- What is their notion of democracy, are there differences and how to explain them?
- What are their attitudes towards recent administrative and territorial reforms?
- Do party politics (or party politicization at the municipal level) play a role?

The survey was launched by a network of scholars (POLLEADER network) mainly organized in the standing group on Local Government and Politics (LOGOPOL) of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) or in the European Urban Research Association (EURA) and in partnership with the COST project ‘Local Public Sector Reforms- an International Comparison (LocRef)’.

The scholars of the POLLEADER network have carried out a number of surveys during the last 20 years.[3] The first survey referred to municipal executive officers (CEOs) or the highest-ranking appointed and non-elected civil servant or employee at the municipal level.[4] As the research was supported by UDITE (*Union des dirigeants territoriaux de l'Europe*), it was called the UDITE survey.[5] The next survey was the aforementioned one which dealt with European mayors from municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants.[6] It followed a survey on councillors from municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants—called the MAELG ('Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance') survey. It was based on a stratified sample that took into account the regional distribution of the total number of municipal councillors in a country.[7] The next survey concerned the second tier of local government—or more precisely councillors as well as executive heads (like prefects) and the highest-ranking appointed and non-elected civil servant or employee acting at this level of local government (Table 1.1).[8]

Because the surveys were only made possible by close collaboration of national partners in a European network, some other outcomes were also achieved.

This applies first of all to further elaboration of existing typologies and the construction of new typologies of local government systems with respect to the embeddedness of local government in vertical power relations, as well as horizontal power relations among mayors (political leaders), the council and the local administrative system (Heinelt and Hlepas 2006). It should be emphasized that such typologies did not previously exist for the second tier of local government (Bertrana and Heinelt 2011a, b) and in an updated form covering also most East European countries.

Second, the close collaboration of national partners was not only the precondition for conducting the surveys; it was also the basis for joint international projects funded by the European Union's Framework Programmes for Research and Development—namely the PLUS project (Haus et al. 2005; Heinelt et al. 2006) and the GFORS project (Atkinson et al. 2011). Furthermore, the close collaboration of national partners in conducting the surveys, jointly analysing their findings and publishing the results enabled the German and the Greek partners to successfully secure funding for a research project on how municipalities successfully managed to address their financial problems (Stolzenberg et al. 2016).

Table 1.1 Surveys on local government actors and the number of respondents by countries and time in which they were carried out

Country	*Municipal CEOs (1995–1997)*[a]	*Mayors (2002–2004)*	*Municipal councillors (2007–2008)*	*Councillors at the second tier of local government (2012–2013)*	*Mayors (2016)*
Albania	–	–	–	–	30
Austria	–	40	408	No second tier	34
Belgium	352	140	634	336	148
Croatia	–	–	233	331	34
Czech Republic	–	78	624	85	61
Denmark	200	108	–	No second tier	48
Finland	324	–	–	No second tier	–
France	266	188	720	308	69
Germany	414	636	894	1672	592
Greece	–	145	235	233	99
Hungary	–	82	–	133	71
Iceland	–	–	–	–	5
Ireland	21	20	–	No second tier	–
Italy	541	256	1201	131	251
Lithuania				No second tier	30
The Netherlands	404	234	1222	–	125
Norway	324	–	1134	226	46
Poland	–	229	328	120	220
Portugal	104	41	–	No second tier	82
Romania	–	–	–	177	–
Serbia	–	–	–	–	50
Slovenia	–	–	–	No second tier	24
Spain	366	155	520	188	303
Sweden	224	142	1346	1225	158
Switzerland	–	94	1616	No second tier	100
GB/England	284[b]	123[b]	700[c]	140[b]	43[b]
Total	3824	2711	11,815	5285	2623

[a]In Germany the survey was carried out in 1999
[b]The survey was carried out in England
[c]The survey was carried out in GB

Characteristics of the International Research Network

The originality of the network involved in these studies stands first of all in the large range of disciplinary perspectives it gathered. However, this is not its only peculiarity in the landscape of empirical comparative research. Others have to be mentioned too.

First of all it is surprising that these surveys were made possible, although no funding was available to conduct them. Instead, each national group or partner involved in the network had to mobilize the financial resources to carry out the survey in their country (see the acknowledgement at the end of this chapter of the book). Furthermore, some partners had to find the financial means to organize and to offer workshops for the network to develop the questionnaire, to coordinate the common analysis of the collected data and to manage getting findings published.[9]

A further evident peculiarity of this network stands in the method it chose to use. Cross-national surveys are a fundamental instrument for social research. They are often used as sources for studies on many core issues of political life—such as electoral behaviour, trust in institutions, evaluations or perceptions of policy outcomes or other topics and characteristics ranging from wealth, health and quality of life to political values. Nevertheless, since the 1960s when Almond and Verba (1963) launched the Civic Culture Survey, the academic community has increasingly refrained from applying this instrument. Surveys are used; but they are mainly conducted by statistical offices, pollster organizations and consultancy firms—in some cases jointly with academic researchers. The World Values Survey, and in the European context, the Quality of Life Survey and the European Values Survey remain exceptions. However, although the World Values Survey or the Quality of Life Survey is focused on the 'citizens', the relation of citizens with their local governments is not considered. The same applies to localities and specific governance arrangements at this level and to localities as social units where the identity of people is formed and reproduced: in these cases, the focus on the 'nation name' contributes to blindly disregard local factors that contribute to the construction of social phenomena. Presumably, also critique on positivism's inheritance and the notions of development or modernization that it promoted plays a role in social sciences to consider cross-national surveys as a legacy of an obsolete academic past. One should also consider that in traditional comparative local government studies surveys were and still are

not a widely used instrument. Instead, traditional comparative local government studies are inspired by historical institutionalism (as one of the different forms of 'new institutionalism'; Hall and Taylor 1996) or even blocked by a legalistic 'old institutionalism', emphasizing institutionally determined path dependency. As from the perspectives of these approaches, actors are merely perceived as puppets on a string, it is obviously not worth asking them for their 'world views', their interpretation or perception of challenges and the meaning given by them to their actions.

That the aforementioned network decided to carry out the outlined surveys is exactly the *interest in the international comparative analysis of 'world views', interpretations or perception of current urban challenges by leading political figures and the meaning on which their choices of action are based*. Sufficient instruments for this research interest are neither the analysis of available statistical data or expert interviews nor documentary analysis or secondary analyses of national research studies.

With this research interest, cross-national surveys on local political elites may eventually have the effect of giving attention to the 'intrinsic logic of cities' (Löw 2012). This may be the case because the comparison often highlights and draws attention to 'deviant cases' or observations which cannot be explained by typologies or 'law-like' cause–effect relationships (of dependent and independent variables) but point to the causal relevance of 'specificities'. Such specificities may be related to a social, economic or even physical context. However, at the end it depends on actors to interpret and give meaning to contextual constraints and opportunities and to take action accordingly (Heinelt 2010: 46–47; Heinelt and Lamping 2015, 2016).

An explanation of the surprising success of the surveys might be the kind of international research network behind them. It has an interdisciplinary character and their members are proponents of an *urban political science*. The interest in the analysis of local government institutions was not lost. However, by transcending the disciplinary borders between political science, political sociology, planning and urban studies as well as human and economic geography, it was possible to overcome on the one hand the scepticism in social sciences against surveys and on the other the actor blindness of the ('new') historical and the 'old' institutionalism. Overcoming this actor blindness means to conceptualize actors who are able to develop agency through interpreting collectively contextual constraints and opportunities and giving meaning to common policy choices.

Organization of the Last Survey and Main Characteristics of the Collected Data

The survey, initially promoted in 2014 by the Florentine team, extended to the final inclusion of researchers from 29 countries, who participated actively in the process of data collection (see Appendix 1).

The research was mainly based on a common questionnaire (see Appendix at the end of this book). In order to construct this tool and to manage the data collection phases, the network members held a series of international meetings and seminars (see Appendix 2). The entire process of data collection took place between the beginning of 2014 and the fall of 2016 (see Fig. 1.1). Some of the national teams sent out the questionnaire during this time in several waves to increase the number of responses (and the response rate). However, most of the data (about 90 per cent) were collected in 2015 and in the first quarter of 2016.

Although it was an aim of the project to enable a comparison with the results of the first survey carried out in 2003–2004, this aim could be reached only partly. As the questionnaire used in the last survey resulted out of the manifold current research interests of the involved partners, the questionnaire was modified in many parts. Compared to the one used in 2003–2004, only 74 items (about 30 per cent) remained unchanged—thus allowing direct comparison—while many others were added or modified. The final questionnaire consisted of 48 questions, divided into sections addressing the research questions outlined above.

The questionnaire included also a final section in which data on the respondents' social and professional backgrounds were collected—including data on their political careers and their relationships with the party system.

The base version of the survey was drafted in English (see Appendix at the end of the book). It was then translated by the national teams. In order to adapt the questionnaire to the institutional settings of the different countries, it was also contextualized and transformed into different national versions. Therefore, the same questionnaire was used in all countries—with one exception: In the Netherlands, the partners decided to distribute the survey only in a reduced and modified form.

The entire data collection process was coordinated by the Florentine team. Each research group followed the development of its own data collection, verifying the authenticity and the accuracy of the completions and of the overall work progress.[10]

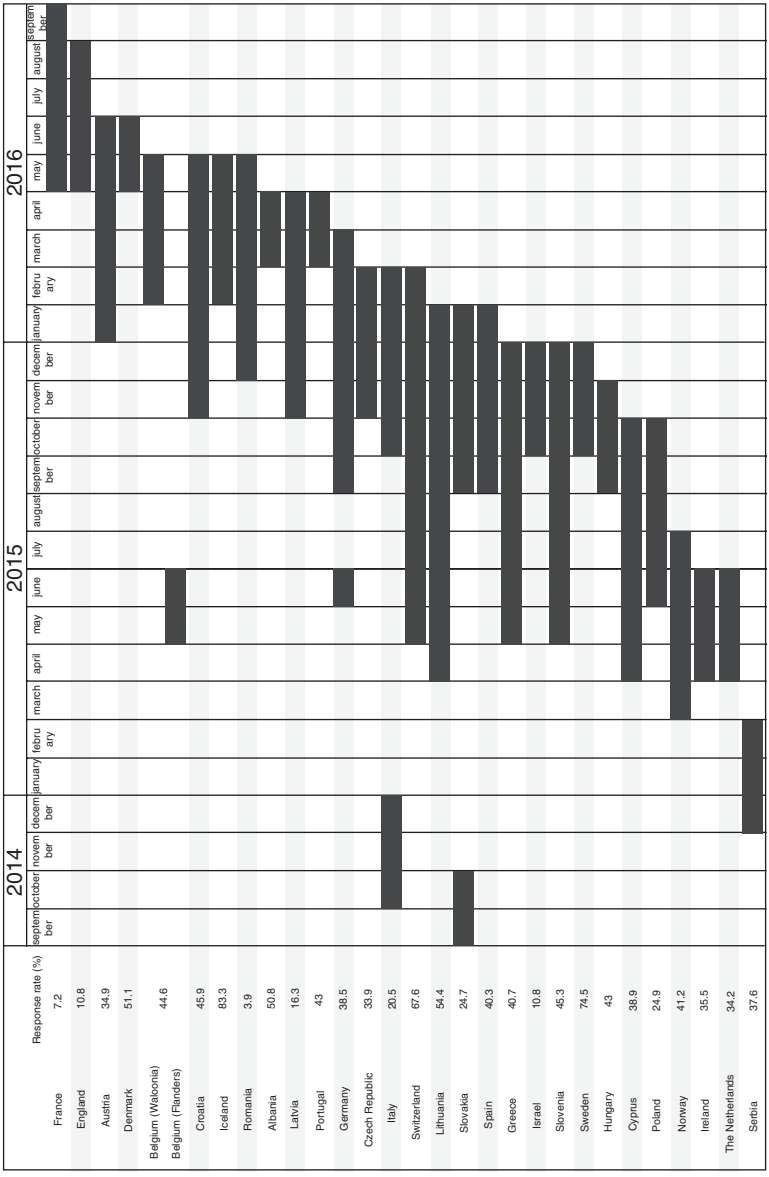

Fig. 1.1 Timetable of data collection by countries

To facilitate the work and the final creation of a single dataset, the Italian team activated a web-survey, built on an open source software, used by half of the teams—namely the partners from Albania, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Greece, England, France, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia and Switzerland. The interviewees, previously approached by the researchers, had access to the survey's website, where a common page let them opt for customized paths, which were predisposed under the supervision of the various teams. The average time per interview detected by the software was about 32 minutes. Since no time limit for completion was set by the system, it was possible to suspend the compilation and to resume it at a later stage.

In the other countries, the questionnaire was sent to the mayors in paper form. At the end, the collected data was delivered through the web-survey or, alternatively, by using a format suitable for including the collected data in the common dataset.

Most groups adopted telephone campaigns in order to invite the mayors to complete the questionnaire. Whenever possible, the survey was officially supported by the national local government associations. As already mentioned, some national teams repeated the data collection in order to increase the sample's response rate.

In the spring 2016, upon completion of the data collection, the Florentine group met with the members of the Darmstadt team in Florence to finalize the data collection by checking and eventually adopting the coding of the data and to aggregate them into a single dataset.

Finally, a number of context variables were added to the dataset—namely institutional (see the appendix of Chap. 2 of this volume) and geographical ones to be able for considering in the analysis the particular context in which mayors have to act.

The Florentine group coordinated the work. No control was exerted over the data collection process. Instead, in the spirit of the horizontal character of the research network that animated the entire project, each national team ensured the methodological correctness of its own work, with regard to both the geographical distribution of the sample and the authenticity of the data collected.

At the end of the work, each team provided information which allowed an overall assessment of the national samples and of the entire dataset. Based on the information of the national research groups, our sample covers 30.7 per cent of the entire population of mayors from municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants in the countries covered by the survey.

The average response rate per country is 37.8 per cent, ranging from the 3.9 per cent in Romania to 83.3 per cent in Iceland.

Finally (at a meeting held in Bensheim in September 2016; see Appendix 2) an agreement was reach by the partners for the analysis on which the following chapters of this book are based. This agreement should guarantee consistency and comparability of the results presented in these chapters. In the following, this agreement is summarized, which the reader of this book should bear in mind.

- All country samples constituted by less than 20 cases have been excluded in performing frequencies and univariate statistics and in tables where results are presented per country. This threshold excludes Cyprus, Ireland, Israel, Latvia, Romania and Slovakia. The only exception to this general agreement is Iceland, where the very high response rate (83.3 per cent) warrants the consistency of the sample in relation to all mayors in the country.
- Sometimes—due to non-response—for some countries the number dropped below the threshold of 20 cases. In this way, it has been assured that all tables list the same set of countries.
- In multivariate analyses, the respondents from all countries have been included.
- A weight variable, computed in order to adequately balance differences of the national samples, has been inserted in the dataset. In the following chapters, weights have been used only to perform univariate descriptive analyses. Since the weights are constant for all the respondents within a single country, the weighting does not affect the results per country: it only affects the frequencies and the means for the total sample results (which includes all countries). No weights have been used by the authors in the case of cross-tabulations, or in any multivariate analyses.

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Appendix 1: Countries Covered by and Partners Involved in the Survey

The following countries were covered by the survey carried out in 2015–2016 (by the mentioned partners):

- Austria (*Werner Pleschberger*),
- Belgium (*Régis Dandoy, Jérémy Dodeigne, Vincent Jacquet, Johannes Rodenbach, Min Reuchamps, Herwig Reynaert, Kristof Steyvers*),
- Croatia (*Ivan Koprić, Jasmina Džinić and Mihovil Škarica*),
- Cyprus (*Andreas Kirlappos and Kalliope Agapiou-Josephides*),
- Czech Republic (*Daniel Čermák, Renáta Mikešová, Josef Bernard and Dan Ryšavý*),
- Denmark (*Morten Balle Hansen*),
- England (*Colin Copus, Thom Oliver and David Sweeting*),
- Finland (*Pekka Kettunen and Siv Sandberg*),
- France (*Jacques de Maillard, Patrick Hassenteufel, Tanguy Le Goff, Eugénie Pétaillat*),
- Germany (*Björn Egner, Hubert Heinelt, Sabine Kuhlmann, Markus Seyfried and Angelika Vetter*),
- Greece (*Nikos Hlepas, Panagiotis Getimis, Alexandra Timotheou*),
- Hungary (*Gábor Dobos, Zsófia Papp, Gábor Soós*),
- Iceland (*Gretar Eythorsson, Eva Marin Hlynsdottir and Magnús Árni Skjöld Magnússon*),