



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Climbing up, letting down, or putting the ladder away? Regional ministers' movements in multilevel systems

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Abstract

Regional cabinet members (RCMs) are key political actors in subnational politics, especially in federal systems or in countries that have undergone a process of regionalization or devolution, even though they are still less studied than federal or national ministers. Italy and its regionalization process represent an interesting case study to understand how and under what conditions members of regional cabinets can exit from politics or move upwards, or downwards the different tiers of government. By using an original dataset of 721 RCMs in ordinary statute regions we tested through multinomial regression analysis whether political and institutional or personal factors influence their movements (both legislative or executive) upward, that is, toward national and/or European positions, backward toward local (both provincial or municipal) positions or their exit from politics. Our results show that both political–institutional and individual factors matter. In particular, displaying a previous national career favors upward movements while being a technician or independent favors the exit from politics.

Keywords: exit from politics; local career; multilevel systems; national career; regional executive

Introduction

Italian regional executives have proven they can proficiently exploit multilevel democracy to enrich their political careers through upward movements toward national positions in cabinet or Parliament and through backward movements toward local positions in municipalities such as those of mayors or municipal executives or councilors. In fact, despite many regional executives abandoning politics after the conclusion of their last term, there are several cases of people who can move across tiers of government to survive in politics.

On the one hand, there are several examples of regional presidents (RPs) who after the end of their commitment to regional executives jumped to national executive positions. The two most emblematic examples are those of Pierluigi Bersani and Giancarlo Galan. Bersani who was the President of Emilia-Romagna from 1993 to 1996, became Minister of Industry and Trade (1996–1999) in the Prodi I cabinet and Minister of Transports (1999–2001) in the D'Alema cabinet II. He was elected deputy in the 2001 election and in 2004 he won a seat in the European Parliament; subsequently, he returned to the Italian national parliament and from 2006 to 2008 he served as Minister of Economic Development in the Prodi II cabinet. Finally, after the 2013 elections, he failed to become PM and remained in Parliament until 2022 when he decided to retire from active politics. Similarly, the President of the Veneto Region (1995–2010), Giancarlo Galan became Minister of Agriculture (2010–2011) and then Minister of Culture

(2011) in the fourth Berlusconi cabinet and finally deputy from 2013 to 2016. Subsequently, he was disqualified from public office as a result of his plea bargain on the MOSE trial conviction.

On the other hand, there are also many examples of regional ministers who – after the conclusion of their last term in regional cabinets – moved downwards toward local positions. In particular, this is the case of Flavio Tosi, former Health regional minister in Veneto (2005–2007, under Galan III cabinet) who became Mayor of Verona (2007–2017) and is currently deputy and that of Flavio Delbono former vice-president of Emilia-Romagna (2003–10) who became Mayor of Bologna from 2009 to 2010.

All the above-mentioned examples clarify that Italian regional executives have exploited the increasing availability of valuable public positions offered by the change of the institutional rules that transformed Italy into a regionalized and decentralized system.

Such intriguing pieces of evidence need to be better generalized and explained. With this paper, we aim to identify what are the drivers for the upward or backward movement of regional cabinet members (RCMs) across different tiers of government and what drivers influence their exit from politics.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first section, after developing the theoretical framework, we present our research questions and our main hypotheses; in the second section we present our dataset and explain our measures of independent and dependent variables as well as the method employed; in the third section we present our model and results. The fourth section concludes.

Literature review and hypothesis

The topic of political careers is linked to the traditional political science theme of political professionalization (e.g. Borchert, 2003) and it has primarily focused – both with a country case or a comparative perspective – on parliamentarians (Norris, 1997; Best and Cotta, 2000; Siavelis and Morgenstern, 2008; Allen, 2018; Ohmura *et al.*, 2018). Notwithstanding from the 2000s onwards, an increasing interest in exploring also executive careers emerged (e.g. Dowding and Dumond, 2009; Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli, 2017; Müller-Rommel *et al.*, 2022), even with a gender perspective (e.g. Jalalzai, 2008; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Krook and O'Brien, 2012; Beckwith, 2015; Beer and Camp, 2020), most works display a prominent national level perspective or a sort of nationalization bias. The challenge of considering a multilevel view as proposed by the seminal work of Borchert (2003, 2011) has been fruitful and it has provided several country case studies and certain comparative works (Teruel, 2011; Borchert and Stolz, 2011a; Dodeigne, 2014, 2020; Pilet *et al.*, 2014; Di Capua *et al.*, 2022) so far. Furthermore, it has also included studies on European politicians (e.g. Scarrow, 1997; Daniel, 2015; Salvati, 2016; Aldrich, 2018) and it has also focused on the careers of national ministers with a multilevel perspective (see the recent special issue edited by Semenova and Dowding, 2023) or with a specific focus on the territorial links of their previous (Tronconi and Verzichelli, 2023) or subsequent careers (Claveria and Verge, 2015). However, regional executive research remains a limited field so far (see for exception: Botella *et al.*, 2010; Jäckle, 2013, 2023; Stolz and Fischer, 2014; Grimaldi and Vercesi, 2018; Astudillo and Martínez-Cantó, 2020; Semenova, 2022; Boldrini and Grimaldi, 2023a) and this paper may be placed in such niche branch of literature as it aims at understanding in which direction Italian RCMs (both presidents and ministers) move across different tiers of government once they conclude their experience at the regional level.

In Italy, the political role of regional executives has increased since the 1990s due to two relevant processes of institutional discontinuity: regionalization and presidentialization.

Despite some inconsistencies and limitations (Baldini and Baldi, 2014), regionalization in Italy can be traced back to the mid-1990s when several reforms were put in place to empower the sub-national level of government starting from the so-called Bassanini law on decentralization (l. 59/1997), the constitutional reform of 2001 which devolves new powers to the regions, and the subsequent law on fiscal federalism (l. 42/2009) which allows a certain degree of autonomous taxation

(Massetti, 2012). As a consequence, the level of authority at the meso-level has increased according to the regional authority index (Hooghe *et al.*, 2021) on average from 18.19 in 1995 to 25.56 in 2020.

On the other hand, this transformation coincided with the change of the institutional regional framework from a parliamentary to a presidential system (Musella, 2009), despite even previously an electoral reform foreseeing the direct election of RPs (since 1999) by mimicking the direct election of majors introduced in 1993. As a result, regional (and even local) posts have become more attractive and appealing to political leaders because there is ‘more at stake’ than in the past and executive decisions are more autonomous and broader in scope. In such a context, not only the figure of the RPs was empowered (Grimaldi and Vercesi, 2018), but also that of the entire cabinet compared to that of the regional deputies (anonymized for review).

Such transformations made Italy an intriguing case study to explore if and to what extent the emergence of attractive subnational alternative offices has changed the traditional ambition toward an upward career path that has traditionally characterized the Italian political class (Tronconi and Verzichelli, 2019). This topic is especially interesting also by considering two other political and institutional elements. On the one hand, the decentralization process has led to increasing stability of regional and local governments, especially in comparison to national cabinets (Tronconi and Verzichelli, 2023). On the other hand, recently the number of national posts in Parliament has decreased. The combination of such elements would likely lead an increasing number of politicians to prefer investing their efforts in a municipal or regional career rather than a national one in the future.

Our research questions can be synthesized as follows:

What factors are associated with upward movements (i.e. toward national offices) of regional cabinet ministers? Which ones to backward movements (i.e. toward local offices)? And which ones to exit from politics?

To address such questions, we combined context-oriented and actor-oriented approaches to political career research (Jahr and Edinger, 2015; Vercesi, 2018) taking into account both political–contextual factors (such as belonging to small or large parties; the party outsidership, certain positions within the cabinet) and individual factors (such as gender, age, the length of previous political career at the local, regional, or national level).

Among political–contextual drivers, international literature (Semenova and Dowding, 2023) suggested many factors that unfortunately cannot be used in single case studies because there is no (or not enough) variance, such as the electoral system or the national political system. Moreover, other drivers as party dominance and party system congruence are no longer applicable to the Italian case or are not fully convincing. In fact, in Italy, a dominant party across levels existed from 1970 to 1990 (DC) but later it disappeared, and its heirs got a handful of votes in comparison to new or refreshed parties. Furthermore, previous research pointed out that – contrary to international expectations – the unidirectional model prevailed before the 1990s (Grimaldi and Vercesi, 2018), and therefore movements upward the tiers of government were the most frequent. This is due to the postponed implementation of the ordinary statute regions that did not correspond to an actual decentralization, as Italy remained a unitary state until the mid-90s, making regional and local posts clearly less appealing than national ones.

Party system congruence is not fully convincing as a driver both for its definition and then as it partially overlaps with other drivers in political career research. Party system congruence, namely the situation when a sub-national party system reflects that of a national and federal one, is intended by Semenova and Dowding (2023) as the existence of the same parties across territorial levels. This means that congruent parties compete at multiple territorial levels otherwise they are defined as incongruent parties. However, differently to Semenova and Dowding (2023), we believe that party congruence implies not only the identification of the presence of the same parties across different territorial levels but – following Schakel (2013) – the overall similarity in terms of votes between two party systems at different territorial levels. In particular, party system congruence measures how different electorates (e.g. national and regional) vote in different types

of elections (e.g. national and regional) (see also Bolgherini *et al.*, 2021). This aspect is important as we cannot use the findings of certain studies.¹ As a consequence, we decide to disregard this misleading conceptualization of party congruence and focus on the idea of the presence of the same parties in different territorial competitions. In this regard, two points are crucial. On the one hand, the differentiation between parties that are present or not across territorial levels in regionalized countries resembles the most widespread distinction between national/federal and regional/local party lists (Masseti and Sandri, 2013) as parties present in both types of elections are often – with only a few exceptions – national parties, whereas parties present only in one type of election are often regional/local parties which never enter national parliament.

On the other hand, the divide between national and regional parties partially overlaps with another contextual–political aspect that pertains to the organizational nature of parties, particularly their size. Indeed often, national parties are also the largest ones. In this respect, a breach of literature emphasizes how the size of the party may affect career trajectories. Large parties are generally those with better resources in terms of organization, money and especially available positions at the national level in comparison to small parties that have few resources, they struggle to be present across different tiers of government and have definitely fewer available positions to fill at the national level. In particular, small parties that fail to enter the national parliament show scarce organizational capacity and candidate appeal and favor the exiting of skilled political personnel (Dinas *et al.*, 2015).

Consequently, it is more likely that political personnel belonging to small parties exit from politics rather than move upwards toward a national position in comparison to politicians belonging to large parties.

However, it is also likely that politicians belonging to big parties (Jäckle, 2023) may move backward to fill local positions once they have terminated their regional career rather than exiting from politics.

Consequently, we prefer to focus on party size and hence our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1a: RCMs who belong to a large party are more likely to move toward national positions than those who belong to a small party.

H1b: RCMs who belong to a large party are less likely to exit politics than those who belong to a small party.

Another interesting aspect pointed out by international literature is related to non-partisan ministers both as experts and outsiders. Certain national-level studies pointed out that non-partisan ministers have fewer chances to develop a relevant ministerial career, staying in the cabinet shorter than political ministers (Teruel and Mir, 2018). In particular, they seem not able to maintain a position at the national level and also, they cannot move backward toward subnational positions. However, not all ‘non-partisan’ are ‘non-political’ ministers as both in France and Italy some of them used access to government as the first step in a political career (Bruerè and Gaxie, 2018; Verzichelli and Cotta, 2018). At the subnational level, the picture seems clearer as case-studies reveal (Jäckle, 2023) that non-partisan regional ministers are more likely to exit politics and return to their previous professions than partisan ministers. As a consequence, we also assume that:

H2: Non-partisan RCMs are more likely to exit politics than those who belong to a party list.

¹For example, studies that argue that parties congruent (but actually present) across territorial levels encourage unidirectional (Copeland and Opheim, 2011; Morgan, 2018; Semenova and Orji, 2023) or alternative (Borchert and Stolz, 2011b; Farooqui and Sridharan, 2014; Aroney and Sharman, 2018; Semenova, 2022) career models, hence upwards movements, or no movements at all. Alternatively, incongruent parties (those parties only present at one level) may lead to integrated career patterns and hence to backward movements (Santos and Pegurier, 2011; Di Capua *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, when it comes to understanding the role of prestigious or less prestigious portfolios on minister careers, there is certainly a gap in literature with few exceptions (e.g. Camerlo and Gallardo, 2022), as most of the interest revolves around how the distribution of portfolios is gender-biased (Reynolds, 1999; Studlar and Moncrief, 1999; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Krook and O'Brien, 2012). Such a gap is clearly larger at the subnational level where there is almost no debate on what portfolios are high or low prestige in regional executives and there is scarce literature also on specific cases (see as exception Jäckle, 2023).

Despite Jäckle (2023) not distinguishing between high- and low-prestige portfolios, he found that in Germany the regional prime minister, the minister of federal affairs, and the head of state chancelleries are those with the better chance to move upwards because they already work with the federal government, whereas the regional ministers of economy, finance, transportation, and construction and housing are those who have the better chance to enter the private sector. In Italy, the only cabinet members who can work together with national politicians regularly are RPs in the so-called State-Regions Conference (Conferenza Stato-Regioni). Consequently, we can hypothesize that:

H3: Regional presidents are more likely to move upwards in comparison to all other RMs.

Among individual factors, gender and the length of previous political careers have been considered.

As pointed out elsewhere (Boldrini and Grimaldi, 2023b) gender likely affects the length and the type of political career. In particular, looking at comparative national literature, we see that female national ministers are less likely to return to politics in comparison to male counterparts and they are more likely to return to their previous occupation (Claveria and Verge, 2015), hence being a minister is a one-shot experience for women. This evidence has been found also at the regional level as Jäckle (2023) found that female regional ministers in Germany are less likely to jump to the federal level than male ministers. Therefore, we can assume that:

H4a: Female RCMs are less likely to move upwards to national positions than male RCMs.

H4b: Female RCMs are more likely to exit from politics than male RCMs.

Another important individual aspect to consider is the degree of political professionalism of RCMs which can be evaluated through the length and type of their previous career as a fundamental resource. In fact, recent studies have pointed out that previous political experience at local and regional levels is key to maintaining offices (Boldrini and Grimaldi, 2023a) for regional ministers and it is likely that the length of a previous career is also crucial for moving upwards toward national positions. However, to assess the role of political professionalism we think it is useful to take into account not only the length of the career *per se* but also the type of previous positions covered across territorial levels. In other words, political professionalism should increase not only as time spent in politics increases, but also as different positions and roles held at various territorial levels increase. Consequently, we can assume that politicians with longer political careers in multiple positions across different territorial levels are more likely to move upwards in comparison to those with shorter careers or with careers concentrated on local positions only. In particular, politicians with long careers and who previously held national, regional, and local posts are more likely to be considered political professionals and hence have more chance to move or return to national offices. On the other hand, politicians whose previous career is long but only focused on local positions are less likely to move upward, but they can at least hope to return to the local level once their regional cabinet experience ends.

Consequently, our last hypothesis is as follows:

H5a: RCMs with longer previous careers at the national level are more likely to move upwards to national posts.

H5b: RCMs with longer previous careers at the local level are more likely to move backward to local positions.

Data and method

As previously mentioned, the research investigates what factors influence the movements toward positions at the national or local level, or the absence of any of such movements and therefore the exit from politics of RCMs once their executive mandate has fully ended. To this end, the research focused on RCMs at the end of their last term (i.e. those who did not receive subsequent appointments as RCMs) in the 15 Italian ordinary statute regions starting from the regional elections of 1995 to those of 2018. Data were extracted from an original dataset on Italian RMs (Grimaldi and Boldrini, 2022) and integrated, based on the research needs, with data from the National Registry of Local and Regional Administrators and the National Archive of Elections of the Italian Ministry of the Interior.

We decided to focus on RCMs who fully ended their regional executive career to assess what are the drivers that favor jumps upwards and backward within the subsequent 5 years or the exit from politics.

The selection of such a time frame was dictated by the need to provide the most comprehensive analysis as possible. In particular, the decision to focus on RCMs starting from the regional elections of 1995 was due to the possibility of analyzing reliable and comparable data. As observed by other studies (Boldrini and Grimaldi, 2023a), information on local and regional politicians during the so-called First Republic (1948–1990) is often unreliable, and the inclusion of RCMs before 1995 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.²

In contrast, the choice of 2018 as the endpoint of our study (hence, the inclusion of all RCMs who finished their last mandate in that year) was dictated by specific research needs. For the purposes of the analysis, it was chosen to consider the career movements within the 5 years after the end of RCMs final term. The decision to consider political positions in this time span, although it may appear discretionary, was driven by both theoretical and empirical reasons. Firstly, 5 years is the maximum length of each legislature at the local, national, as well as European level. This time span, therefore, ensures coverage of at least one election for each level, and it also allows the inclusion of any assignments at various levels obtained following these elections. Moreover, from an empirical standpoint, almost all RCMs who obtain a new position after the end of their term got it precisely within 5 years.³

Consequently, we have a population of 721 RCMs.

Given the nature of our investigation, a quantitative method was deemed the most appropriate and a multinomial logistic regression was used to test which variables significantly influence career movements once their regional executive experience ends. Considering our interest in the movements upwards toward national offices or backward toward local offices or on the exit from politics, we also opt for multiple logistic regression as a robustness test, by testing different models with various operationalizations of the dependent variable corresponding to the different career outcomes of RCMs (see Annex 1).

²For the same reason, the choice to focus only on ordinary statute regions (OSRs) aims to avoid distortions related to the specific characteristics of special status regions (SSRs). In particular, beyond the fact that most SSRs have started functioning since 1948, whereas OSRs have only since 1970, it is likely that in states or regions with high autonomy, politicians are less interested in competing for national/federal offices and that their entire career is spent at this specific level, as occurred in the German States (Borchert and Stolz, 2011b).

³Only 46 RCMs (6% of the population) received an appointment more than 5 years after the end of their mandate. In the analysis, those RCMs who, although in office after 2018, underwent a multilevel career advancement at the end of their previous experience as RCMs were still included. An example is Luca Zaia, Regional minister in Veneto between 2005 and 2008, then Minister of Agricultural Policies between 2008 and 2010, and subsequently Regional President, and Alberto Cirio, Regional minister in Piedmont until 2014, then an MEP and later Regional President (since 2014).

The dependent variable in our analysis is related to the office gained by each RCM within 5 years of the end of his/her term. Hence, there are four modalities: (1) whether as an RCM, an individual obtained another office at the regional level (no movement) within 5 years of the end of their mandate; (2) whether the RCM obtained as first office within 5 years of the end of their mandate a (both legislative or executive) role at the national/EU level; (3) whether the RCM obtained as first office within 5 years of the end of their mandate an office at the local level; or (4) whether the RCM did not obtain any institutional role (neither at the local, regional, national, nor European level) within 5 years of the end of his/her term. [Table 1](#) illustrates the frequency distribution of different operationalizations of the dependent variable across all RCMs.

As shown in [Table 1](#) around 23% of our sample succeeded in exploiting the multilevel structure of Italian institutional arrangement with basically the same quota of RCMs who decide to move upwards such as the president of Tuscany (1992–2000) Vannino Chiti and the president of Apulia (2000–2005) Raffaele Fitto who became junior ministers, and those who moved downwards such as Carlo Masci former Budget minister of Abruzzi (2009–2014) who became Mayor of Pescara in 2019.

Furthermore, 57.3% of the sample exits from politics once the executive commitment ends. In particular, this is especially true for female executives such as Maria Rita Lorenzetti, the first female directly elected RP in Italy, who after the conclusion of her term in the Umbria cabinet, stepped down from any other institutional offices, and even for her successor, President Catuscia Marini (2010–2019). Finally, 19.7% of the sample remains at the regional level, thus we cannot observe any kind of movement.

As far as the independent variables are concerned and in line with the theoretical perspective outlined above, both personal and political factors were considered. These include gender, non-partisanship, being a RP among RCMs, belonging to a small party, and the length of the previous career at the local, regional, and national levels.

Gender, non-partisanship, being an RP, and belonging to a small party were all operationalized as a dichotomous variable with a value of one if the RCM is respectively female, if appointed externally to the members of the regional council or indicated as ‘independent’ or ‘without a political party’, if holding the position of RP and if elected with a list that in the previous regional elections received less than 3% of the votes.⁴ [Table 2](#) illustrates the frequency distribution of such independent variables.

Turning to the previous career of RCMs, the three variables were all operationalized in the same way as a continuous variable, calculated according to the number of days in office. In particular, the local career, which includes institutional posts such as municipal councilor, municipal executive, mayor, provincial councilor, provincial executive, and provincial president, was calculated as the number of days in office before the conclusion of their last term as RCM. The regional career includes roles such as regional councilor, regional minister, and RP and it was calculated as the number of days in office before the conclusion of their last term as RCM. The national career includes roles such as deputy, senator, minister, junior minister, or member of the European Parliament and it was calculated as the number of days in office before the conclusion of their last mandate as an RCM. For comparability purposes, in the logistic regression, all these three variables were standardized. The previous career at the local level is highly prevalent among RCMs being held by 62.4%, while predictably, the national one is much less frequent, covered by only 8.6% of RCMs.⁵ [Table 3](#) presents the descriptive statistics related to the previous career at the local, regional, and national levels of RCMs.

⁴As the literature highlighted, defining what constitutes a small party is an open issue in political science, as it is difficult to identify a universally valid criterion applicable to different contexts (Nascimento *et al.*, 2016). For the purposes of this research, considering the process of fragmentation and deconstruction of regional political systems (Bolgherini and Grimaldi, 2017), it was decided to set the threshold at 3% to avoid including an excessively large number of RCMs, on the one hand, and to prevent excessive variability among more or less de-structured regional systems, on the other.

⁵By exploring the career progression of RCMs after the end of their mandate, all the subjects considered here have a previous career at the regional level.

Table 1. Distribution of the dependent variables

Dependent variable	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Upward	82	11.1	11.1
Downward	86	11.93	23.03
No movement	142	19.69	42.72
Exit	411	57.28	100
Total	721	100	

Table 2. Distribution of the independent variables

Independent variables	Yes	No	Total
Regional president	6.4% (<i>N</i> = 46)	93.6% (<i>N</i> = 675)	100% (<i>N</i> = 721)
Small party	35.1% (<i>N</i> = 253)	64.9% (<i>N</i> = 648)	100% (<i>N</i> = 721)
Women	15.8% (<i>N</i> = 114)	84.2% (<i>N</i> = 607)	100% (<i>N</i> = 721)
Non-partisan	36.9% (<i>N</i> = 266)	63.1% (<i>N</i> = 455)	100% (<i>N</i> = 721)

Furthermore, we also added the following control variables to the analysis: age, geographical origin, and early termination. First, we controlled for RCM's age as it can deeply influence the subsequent career paths of each RCM. The basic idea is that as regional ministers get older, they have fewer opportunities to serve in other political roles or positions once their last term is over. To this end, age was calculated in years by subtracting the RCM's date of birth from the end of their last term, and it was operationalized as an ordinal variable with four different categories: under 40 years old, between 40 and 49 years old, between 50 and 59 years old, and 60 years old or older. We decided to include only four categories due to the low number of RCMs under 30 and those over 70 (only 12 in the entire sample).

Secondly, given the relevance of political geography in the Italian context, we control for the geographical origin of the RCMs. In other words, to verify if any specificities related to the traditional strongholds exist, that is where the two different political alignments prevail. Such a variable was operationalized according to the classification used by Valbruzzi and Vignati (2021) into center-left stronghold (C-L) when only center-left regional cabinets were in power from 1995 up to 2018, center-right (C-R) stronghold when only center-right regional cabinets were in power up to 2018, and swing and competitive regions in all other cases.

Finally, we also control for early termination, that is, when RCMs' term ends prematurely compared to the natural expiration of the legislature. In fact, early resignation – both as the result of an individual resignation or as the resignation of the entire cabinet – can influence the career path of RCMs by favoring or hindering subsequent movements across territorial levels. In particular, it has been operationalized as a dichotomous variable with a value of 1 if early resignation occurred and 0 otherwise.

Explicative analysis

Table 4 shows the results of the multinomial logistic regression. In the table the relative risk ratios and in parentheses the standard errors clustered at the regional level are displayed. In our model, RCMs remaining at the regional level represent the baseline, so the model tests the influence of the independent variables, respectively, in exiting from politics, moving downwards, and moving upwards against remaining at the regional level.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of previous local, regional, and national careers (in days)

	Local career	Regional career	National career
Mean	4442.4	2690.5	2710.3
Median	3448	1898	2524
Standard deviation	2860.3	1563.4	2195.2

Table 4. Results of the multinomial regression analysis

	Exit	Downwards	Upwards
Regional president	0.399* (0.181)	0.095* (0.093)	0.924 (0.567)
Woman	1.461 (0.566)	1.171 (0.676)	0.172 (0.676)
Small party	1.323 (0.248)	0.959 (0.301)	0.680 (0.213)
Non-partisan	3.834** (1.600)	2.187 (0.826)	3.379* (1.883)
Early interruption	2.662*** (0.752)	2.557** (0.826)	7.220*** (3.275)
Local career	0.795 (0.117)	1.092 (0.147)	0.923 (0.115)
Regional career	1.174 (0.226)	1.301 (0.272)	1.415 (0.409)
National career	1.529** (0.236)	1.115 (0.357)	1.753** (0.317)
<i>Control variables</i>			
Age: reference category 39 or less years			
40–49	2.290** (0.584)	1.383 (0.665)	1.759 (0.750)
50–59	3.132*** (1.081)	0.900 (0.487)	1.001 (0.407)
60 or more	6.993*** (2.198)	2.180 (1.418)	0.779 (0.402)
Geographical localization			
Reference category: swing/competitive region			
C-R stronghold	0.543 (0.244)	0.321** (0.135)	1.269 (0.306)
C-L stronghold	1.441 (0.680)	1.159 (0.553)	1.007 (0.803)
_cons	0.508** (0.131)	0.413* (0.159)	0.143*** (0.064)

Note: Results of multinomial regression, relative risk ratio displayed, standard errors in brackets; $P < 0.10$, * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$.

First, our analysis shows that RPs are less likely to exit from politics or move downwards toward local offices, but they are more likely to stay at the regional level. On the contrary, there is no statistical significance for moving upwards. These results may seem somewhat counter-intuitive, as they seem to highlight a greater ease of holding office at the regional level for RPs. However, it should be specified that this result is heavily influenced by those RPs who decide to run for a second term and lose and consequently they obtain as first position that of regional councilor. Furthermore, the result is also due to the overall number of RPs that is relatively small. However, our third hypothesis (H3) is not confirmed.

Non-partisanship shows a positive statistically significant effect both for exiting from politics and for a movement upwards. In other words, as literature pointed out RCMs who are not affiliated with a political party are more likely to exit from politics after the end of their mandate than remain at the regional level. Therefore, our second hypothesis (H2) is confirmed.

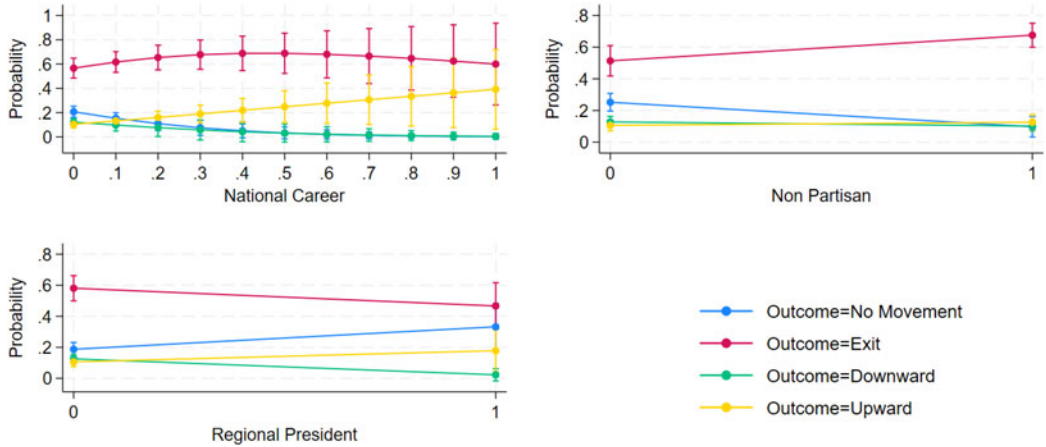


Figure 1. Predictive margins of statistically significant variables with 95% CIs.
 Note: The dependent variable is standardized from 0 to 1.

Furthermore, the marginal effect of non-partisanship in relation to an upward movement is neglectable (see marginal effects in Figure 1).

As far as the previous career is concerned, our analysis shows that only a national one does have a clear impact on future movements. In particular, those RCMs who previously had a national career are more likely to move upwards toward a national or EU office or at least to exit from politics than remaining at the regional level. As a consequence, our H5a hypothesis is confirmed.

However, looking at the marginal plot in Figure 1, there is a clear non-linear effect of the previous national career especially in exiting from politics. So, it can be argued that certain RCMs with a relatively shorter previous national career are likely to exit from politics but, as far as the previous national career became longer and more relevant, they likely survive in politics. However, further specific analysis is needed to explore this aspect.

Turning to previous local career, our model shows that there is not a significant effect concerning a downward movement toward local positions, despite the association going in the correct direction and the effect approaching the statistical significance. In fact, when opting for multiple logistic regression as a robustness test, we found that previous local career is statistically significant for RCMs who move backward (see Annex 1). Nevertheless, our H5b hypothesis is not confirmed.

Alternatively, there is no statistically significant effect on being a woman in relation to an upward movement or to the exit from politics, even though the direction of the correlation goes in the expected direction in both cases. However, hypotheses H4a and H4b are not confirmed.

Finally, we did not find any evidence that belonging to a large party influences moving upwards or decreasing the possibility of exiting from politics. Thus, our H1a and H1b hypotheses are not confirmed. Nevertheless, when running a logit analysis, the size of the party size matters. In particular, we found RCMs belonging to small parties have less probability to jump at the national or EU level and more probability to exit from politics (see Annex 1).

As far as control variables are concerned, age is positively correlated with RCM who exit from politics and the effect is stronger when the age increases. This makes sense as aging increases the possibility of exiting from politics. Finally, being in a CR stronghold is negatively associated with a movement downward. This is probably because the large mainstream party of the right – Forza Italia (from 2000 to 2010 in most of the regions) – had a weaker control of the territorial structure

in comparison to the main left-wing party and therefore its political personnel was less likely to move downwards than remaining at the regional level.

Conclusion

RCMs are key political actors in subnational politics, especially in federal systems or in countries that have undergone a process of regionalization or devolution, even though they are still less studied than federal or national ministers. We argue that Italy and its regionalization process represent an interesting case study to understand how and under what conditions members of regional cabinets can exit from politics or move upwards, or downwards the different tiers of government.

In particular, our results show that despite the majority of RCMs exiting from politics (57.3%) once they ended their regional executive experience, and around 20% remaining active in regional Councils, an important share (around 23%) continues their career path upwards or backward the different tiers of governments. This finding is key to proving that the regionalization and decentralization processes positively affected the possibility of displaying integrated careers rather than separate ones as happens in other countries (Borchert, 2011).

Moreover, our results identify what political–institutional and individual factors matter for upward movements as well as for exiting from politics. In particular, displaying a previous national career favors upward movements toward national or EU posts, while being a technician or independent favors the exit from politics.

Our results seem relevant beyond the specific case study and in particular two important aspects that are in contrast with the populist tide of the last decade emerge.

First of all, to keep on doing politics it is essential to have previous political experience, and therefore political professionalism results being a fundamental asset for ambitious politicians.

Secondly, our research in line with international literature (despite most of it focusing on the national level only) shows that regional non-partisan ministers are more likely to exit from politics after the conclusion of their last mandate. This piece of evidence also confirms the importance of parties for career politicians. In other words, despite being in the declining age of parties and notwithstanding the changes in electoral rules toward majoritarian competitions that favor candidates and personal politics, parties still own those fundamental organizational resources that can actually decide political careers.

As a consequence, if political scientists pointed out that in a democratic context parties remain fundamental in influencing politics being essential actors of electoral competitions, in the same vein we argue they are also crucial for careers. In fact, despite parties being less pervasive in society there is no way of building a stable and long political career without belonging to them.

Comparative research would be essential in the future to assess if and to what extent such findings are sufficiently robust. In particular, even though our expectation about gender has not been confirmed, we think further research extended to other country cases – where the number of female executives is higher than in Italy – can clarify if women are generally more discriminated against and marginalized in politics than men. In particular, we believe that future lines of research to disentangle this specific issue should also include qualitative approaches and in particular semi-structured or in-depth interviews with female regional ministers. Indeed, this is the only way to capture those nuances or to identify new factors that push women upwards, or out from politics in a multi-level context.

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