3 ‘From the Few are Chosen the Few…’
On the Social Background of European Mayors

Kristof Steyvers and Herwig Reynaert

Even a quick look at the comparative literature on the social background and characteristics of local political elites undermines the ‘fata morgana’ of a ‘descriptive’ representation in which public bodies are socio-demographic samples of the society they represent (Pitkin 1967). Despite differences over time and between political systems the disproportional recruitment of certain social groups with distinctive characteristics into the (local) political elite is one of the most replicated and perpetuated findings. Furthermore, at the local level political decision-makers are predominantly male, middle aged, high in professional status and well-educated (Eldersveld et al. 1995: 31-55). This leads us to conclude that the political recruitment process, by which ‘from the many are chosen the few’ (Prewitt 1969: 169-188), does not operate in a random manner. Since local leadership selection is conceived as a process by which “individuals are screened by political institutions for elective office” (Jacob 1962: 708) a dynamic interaction of supply and demand side factors becomes apparent in which social background characteristics interfere at different stages. The political capital and motivations of aspirant office-holders intermingle with the demands of gatekeepers in the political system. The ‘structure of opportunities’ of the latter thus biases the nature of the recruitment function (Norris 1997: 209-231).

Leadership selection operates in such a way that it favours the possibility for individuals with certain characteristics to enter and to remain in public office. One of the central questions then becomes: what are these characteristics and how do they influence the selection chances of these specific individuals? Our aim here is to study a number of these questions for our mayoral population. Our intention thereby is to go beyond the mere drawing of a social sample of a specific local political elite. By scrutinising the background of mayors we hope to learn more on the recruitment process as a whole. Through study of the social composition of a selected leadership stratum we seek to link the impact of
certain social background characteristics to different stages in the ‘sifting out’ of the mayoral elite.

The comparative nature of this research will also stimulate us to transcend what could be called ‘the 3M-mantra’ of elite research: male, middle-aged and middle class. It will evoke questions on the similarity or divergence of social biases in leadership selection in different local political systems. For example: do the same social background characteristics distinguish ‘the many’ from ‘the few’ in all countries under study? Do these factors operate in a different way according to the political system and culture in which they occur? Do certain patterns in the ‘skewing’ of social background emerge and to what extent can they be linked to different institutional histories in local government (Hesse and Scharpe 1991: 605-608)? To what extent do shifts in these traditional frameworks (e.g. introduction of new methods of management, referenda, direct election of mayors, see Vetter and Kersting 2003: 11-28) point the way towards a ‘new political culture’ (Clark and Hoffman-Martinot 1998) of governance in which the executive leadership is strengthened (John 2001: 15-17)? This study is one of the first to structurally scrutinise the figure of the mayor in such a systematic variety of political systems. In some countries, however, even a simple view on mayoral background remains ‘terra incognita’. In this respect this contribution is also, paraphrasing Greenstein, ‘an attempt to clear away the underbrush’ (Greenstein 1967: 629-643).

Knowing who our mayors are and discovering patterns in their social background across local political systems leaves important lines of the recruitment story untold. Factors such as extensive political socialisation in adult lifetime, apprenticeship in a political party or the emergence of a ‘crystallising experience’ might add up to (or even compensate for) a (lack of a) favourable social background. Though social background should not be interpreted in a deterministic way (making inferences from ‘typical background characteristics’ only), the seminal study by Prewitt has extensively shown that social bias in leadership selection is the foundation of the recruitment process of decision-makers, which he describes as a Chinese box puzzle. The process by which from the many are chosen the few is gradual and longitudinal: each new phase is partly shaped by the residue of the former. In setting the few ‘mayoral rulers apart from the many ruled, having a ‘favourable’ social background is one of the most salient and delimiting factors (Prewitt 1970: 23-52).

1 Though studying a process by its outcome – an existing mayoral elite – is far from ideal from a theoretical point of view, the nature of this project prevents an attempt to go beyond this point. A comparison with e.g. unsuccessful candidates for mayoralty or the public at large would refine the insights derived from such a social background study.