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Relational leadership in local governance: the engagement of mayors with citizens, public managers and politicians

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ABSTRACT
This paper studies how mayors engage with citizens, public managers and politicians across the policy cycle and specifically in four local governance processes: agenda setting, decision-making, public services design and delivery. Drawing from a survey of 1,067 Italian mayors, we identify four clusters of engagement: Centralized Leadership, Semi-Inclusive Leadership, Conventional Leadership and Multi-Actor Leadership. We find that some mayors prefer to engage with politicians for issues related to public service design and delivery, rather than with public managers, and that if mayors engage citizens in local governance, this is generally done across all the stages of the policy cycle.

Introduction

Research on public leadership is increasingly expanding within the discipline of public administration and management (PAM) (e.g. Andersen et al. 2018; Chapman et al. 2016; Crosby and Bryson 2018; 'T Hart and Tummers 2019; Hartley 2018; Ospina 2017; Tummers and Knies 2016; Van Wart 2003, 2013; Vogel and Werkmeister 2021). In this respect, to advance the study of public leadership, both Ospina (2017) and Crosby and Bryson (2018) have recently suggested drawing more fully on the vast range of leadership approaches, and more specifically, adopting theories taking a collective and relational view of leadership.

In this paper, we try to address that claim, adopting the lens of relational leadership (e.g. Uhl-Bien) to study how Italian mayors engage with the three main categories of actors in local governance, namely citizens, public managers and politicians (T Hart and Tummers 2019; T Hart and Uhr 2008). The recent rise of multi-actor and interactive governance (Bryson et al. 2017; Torfing et al. 2012) has made it even more important to understand the dynamics of leadership in collaborative governance

(Cui and Osborne 2019; Haus and Erling Klausen 2011; Kinder et al. 2021; Sørensen and Torfing 2019; Sullivan, Williams, and Jeffares 2012; Vangen and Huxham 2003; Vivier, De Jongh, and Thompson 2020) and how politicians and managers relate between them and with citizens (e.g. Fung 2006; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017).

Relationships are indeed at the heart of leadership because leadership is manifested in relations of influence among people (Day and Antonakis 2012). However, given the different logics, values and resources that multiple actors might bring within a public sector context (Bryson et al. 2017), understanding the nature of these relationships is of fundamental importance to understand public leadership (Hartley 2018; 'T Hart and Tummers 2019). Moving from this conceptual backdrop and focusing on the local and horizontal level of public leadership, in this paper we aim to address the following research question: how much do mayors engage with citizens, public managers and politicians across the policy cycle and specifically in four local governance processes: agenda setting, decision-making, public services design and delivery?

There were several intellectual reasons behind this research question, for example the debate on centralized vs. collective local leadership (e.g. Jan Verheul and Schaap 2010; Steyvers 2012), the discussion on the nature of citizen engagement and how it occurs in the input and/or output side of the policy cycle (e.g. Pestoff 2018), and the different institutional logics brought by citizens, public managers and politicians within the dynamics of local governance (e.g. Sancino et al. 2018).

Drawing on an extensive survey of 1,067 Italian mayors, and combining exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis with a two-step clustering approach, we identify four different clusters of mayoral engagement of citizens, public managers and politicians, which are presented in the findings. Beyond offering new empirical data on the phenomenon of public leadership at the local level, the article contributes to theory by offering an understanding of mayoral leadership as co-produced through patterns of interactions with multiple actors (see also Bello-Gomez and Avellaneda 2021) that result in different 'leadership configurations and its power laced foundations' (Fairhurst et al. 2020, 604). One of the originalities of our study is indeed related to the use of quantitative data in the interpretative epistemological posture, which, as recently argued by Fairhurst et al. (2020, 600), is a gap in studies focusing on the social and relational dimension of leadership.

The paper is structured as follows: the second section provides the theoretical foundation of the study, the third section presents the methodology and the setting of our research, and the fourth and fifth sections present the findings and discussion. The final section summarizes our contributions and conclusions and highlights the limits of our research, also suggesting some areas for future research.

Theoretical background

Mayors and relational leader-ship

Uhl-Bien (2006, 655) defines relational leadership as 'a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e. evolving social order) and change (e.g. new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, and ideologies) are constructed and produced. This perspective does not restrict leadership to hierarchical positions or roles. Instead, it views leadership as occurring in relational dynamics throughout the organization'. According to this perspective, leadership would thus reside not in the attributes of individuals but in the relationships connecting individuals (Cristofoli et al. 2021).

Here, we take a hybrid approach, and we use the term 'relational leader-ship' with the dash (as in the title of this paragraph) to signal both the focus on the system of relationships (Ospina 2017, 281), which, borrowing from Grint (2005), can be seen as the ship of leadership, and also the focus on the single leader (in our case the mayor), given that a collective level of analysis would have required measurements at that multi-actor level (Fairhurst and Antonakis 2012).

Relational leadership has already been studied in public administration (e.g. Beer et al. 2019; Craps et al. 2019; Kinder et al. 2021; Orr and Bennett 2017; Schlappa, Imani, and Nishino 2021), albeit not with analyses based on quantitative data, which is one of the gaps that our paper addresses. There are previous studies within the sub-field of urban political science (e.g. Alba and Navarro 2006; Denters 2006) that have investigated mayoral relationships with quantitative data but have not built upon relational leadership as a conceptual foundation. For example, scholars of mayoral leadership (e.g. Avellaneda 2013; Bäck, Heinelt, and Magnier 2006; Heinelt et al. 2018; Kotter and Lawrence 1974; Svara 1987, 2003) have focused on the relationships of mayors with councillors (e.g. Denters 2006), with public managers (Alba and Navarro 2006; Boynton and Wright 1971; Morgan and Watson 1992), with politicians and public managers (e.g. Navarro et al. 2018), with other municipalities and stakeholders (e.g. Hlepas, Chantzaras, and Getimis 2018) and with citizens (e.g. Haus and Sweeting 2006). Similarly, Hambleton and Sweeting (2014) and Denters et al. (2018) studied mayors' cooperation with and dependency on different actors: political and administrative actors, local citizens and community organizations, local businesses and corporations, and other municipalities and levels of government. However, these studies have not considered the different types of local governance processes. In the next section, we present our theoretical framework to study mayoral relational leadership configurations across different local governance processes.

Mayors and relational leader-ship in local governance: a framework

Mayors are pivotal actors in local governance and can enact different relational leader-ship configurations depending on the type and intensity of the actors engaged and the processes in which they are engaged. Drawing on Gronn (2011, 445–446, 2015), Fairhurst et al. (2020, 604) defined a leadership configuration as 'a constellation of parts emerging as wholes, such that the latter are no longer reducible to their parts, and they exert a downward causal role in influencing members' thinking and acting'.

Relational leadership configurations may be created by a leader with actors both within and outside an organization, something Childe (2004) has described as an inward vs. outward management tension. Relational leadership configurations share some common conceptual elements of the so-called collaborative public management (e.g. Agranoff 2004; McGuire and Agranoff 2011) when collaboration is intended as a leadership capability of the public manager in enacting a networking behaviour (Cepiku and Mastrodascio 2021) and as a process of network management (e.g. Agranoff and McGuire 2001). However, if we consider network both as a structure and, using the words of O'Toole (2004), as a theme or networking behaviour, then, as recently discussed by Kinder et al. in this journal (2021), relational leadership is different from practices of network management occurring at the formal multi-organizational level (e.g. Agranoff and McGuire 2001; O'Toole 2015). Indeed, relational leadership more generally and the relational leadership configurations we study

in this paper do not imply an inter-organizational formal structure (for example public managers are mostly within public organizations), so we distinguish between the network as a structure and as a process (e.g. Miles and Snow 1978). Moreover, given the positioning of our paper within the (public) leadership literature, we do conceptually distinguish between leadership and management, where the first refers to dynamics of influence, change, inspiration and meaning-making and the latter to dynamics of, among others, planning, budgeting, control and performance management (e.g. Day and Antonakis 2012; Kramer 2002).

Relational leadership configurations enacted by mayors can be defined by the mix of individual and distributed leadership exercised in the pursuit of different local governance processes. Accordingly, to identify what leadership configurations entail in practice, we need to define who the actors are and the types of local governance processes.

Regarding the former, resuming the work of 't Hart (with Uhr in 2008 and with Tummers in 2019), these actors can be classified according to the three main forms and sources of public leadership: political, administrative (or bureaucratic) and civic. The first sphere consists of all political players of a place, e.g. the mayor, the council and the cabinet; the second consists of the senior public administrators who manage public organizations, and thus sometimes called public managers; and the last sphere consists of all actors 'outside the governmental system' ('T Hart and Tummers 2019; 'T Hart and Uhr 2008, 8).

Following this classification of public leadership, we identify here the main actors of local governance in politicians, public managers and citizens. Investigating mayoral engagement with these actors recognizes the interdependent and overlapping role of politicians and managers and advances studies on the complementary view of politics and administration (Svara 1999) by considering also the role of citizens (e.g. Sancino et al. 2018). The choice to focus on these three actors does relate to the idea that citizens, public managers and politicians should bring different institutional logics into the governance process because, according to Skelcher and Rathgeb Smith (2015, 437), 'these logics give identity and meaning to actors'. Institutional logics can be defined as 'systems of cultural elements (values, beliefs, and normative expectations) by which people, groups, and organizations make sense of and evaluate their everyday activities and organize those activities in time and space' (Haveman and Gualtieri 2017, online). Accordingly, the mayoral decision to engage more or less some of these actors may reveal which kind of logics, resources and support the mayors are seeking from those actors.

After having clarified who the actors that we consider in our framework are, we now deal with 'the what type' of local governance processes issue, also paying attention to when they occur (see also Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017 on this). Drawing upon the works of several authors (e.g. Avellaneda 2013; Edelenbos 1999; Fung 2006; Ingold and Leifeld 2016; Jakobsen et al. 2016; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017; Osborne 2010; Svara 1999; Svara and Denhardt 2010), we distinguish four main processes of local governance that occur at different stages of the policy cycle (Howlett and Ramesh 2003): i) agenda setting (i.e. the definition of the priorities of the municipality); ii) decision-making (i.e. the definition of the policies of the municipality – policy formulation); iii) public services design (i.e. the design of the public services – policy implementation); iv) public services delivery (i.e. the delivery of the public services – policy implementation). This taxonomy, like in Svara and Denhardt (2010), has the

merit of including both public policy and management processes, something Pestoff (2018) has also described as input and output sides of policy making. This is an original approach as other studies, for example Jakobsen et al. (2016) and Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia (2017), focused mainly on public (service) management processes, whereas Avellaneda (2013) and Fung (2006) concentrated mainly on public policy and decision-making processes.

Summing up and as highlighted in Figure 1, our paper aims to explore how Italian mayors engage with politicians, public managers and citizens in local governance processes throughout the different stages of the policy cycle (agenda setting, decision-making, public services design and delivery) and whether there are different engagement patterns. We found no previous studies that have used this approach and have investigated in the same survey mayoral relationships with these three categories of actors in different local governance processes.

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the research question, we developed a survey aimed to investigate how mayors involve citizens, public managers and politicians in the four identified processes of local governance, namely agenda setting, decision-making, public services design and delivery. The survey was pre-tested with several mayors and was administered from an Italian university account. One of the authors of this paper was a mayor at the time the research was administered. The survey was endorsed by a regional association of the Italian association of municipalities, and the research followed national and international guidelines for research on humans. In this section, we present the research setting, the process of data collection and the methodological design of the paper.

Research setting

Two principal typologies of mayoral leadership were identified in previous studies (Steyvers 2012): a strong leadership model, when the mayor is often directly elected and has a presidential or notable role (for example in Southern Europe and in the mayor–council government system in the US and Canada), and a weak leadership model, where different actors and committees share leading roles (Northern Europe), or a city manager is delegated, with the mayor playing mainly an ambassadorial role (for example in the council–manager government form in the US).

Italy is a unitarian parliamentary republic, which in the last two decades has embarked on federalist reforms that have widened the statutory services in charge of municipalities (Fedele 2008). In particular, Italy is one of the European countries with a *strong mayor government form* (Mouritzen and Svara 2002) and with the strongest type of mayors (Heinelt et al. 2018). Recent research has confirmed the central role of Italian mayors in local governance (e.g. Heinelt et al. 2018; Sancino and Castellani 2016).

The power of Italian mayors has consistently increased over the past years. Since 1993, they have been elected directly, and the winning coalition obtains a majority bonus in terms of councillors to ensure more stability for the governance term; according to the law, the length of this mandate is five years for every municipality. Mayors have a crucial role in the municipality, as well as being the legal representatives,
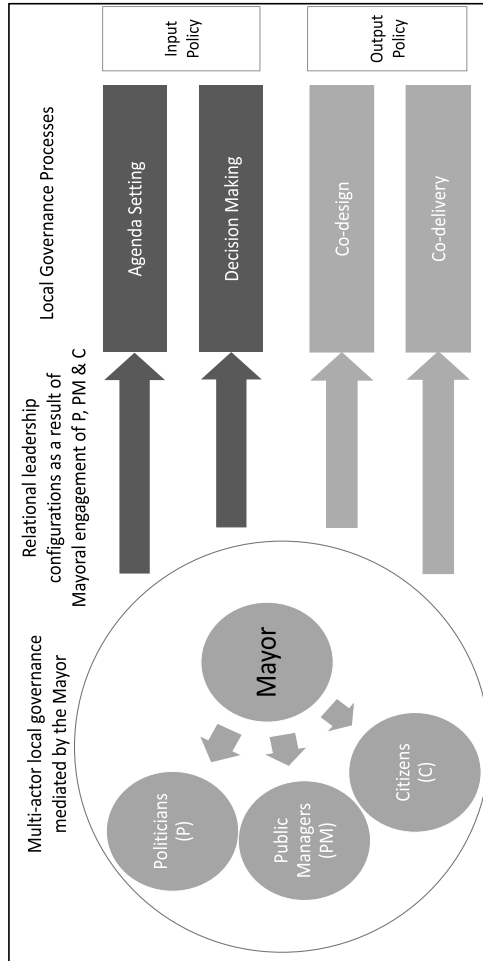
Figure 1. Relational leadership configurations in local governance processes: different combinations of mayoral engagement.

and they appoint cabinet members and can remove them at any moment (Carreri 2021; Giacomini and Simonetto 2020). In this respect, with direct election, one of the most important objectives has become that of promoting the formation of a local executive who does not suffer heavy conditioning from the parties (Vandelli 1995) and the upper levels of government. However, the survival of the cabinet (the executive) is still dependent on council support; mayors can still be defeated by a vote of no confidence by the council. Hence, Italian mayors are extremely powerful, but they must keep the trust of the council. Italy is a good setting for an empirical study on mayoral leadership because it has a large base of mayors that enables a vast data collection.

Survey design and data collection

Our survey design is focused on identifying the contribution of several actors – citizens, public managers and politicians – in the four main stages of local governance. Items are divided according to each type of actor examined in the study. Table 1 lists the items of the survey which were answered on a 7-points Likert scale.

The survey was distributed by email to all the Italian municipalities (7,960) and 1,067 mayors' answers were collected in two rounds in 2016. The response rate is approximately 13.4%. Our sample is composed of 152 women (14.3%) and 915 men (85.7%). According to the Italian Ministry of Agriculture's classification of territories (2010), 957 mayors (89.7%) exercise their role in areas classified as rural, while the remaining 110 (10.3%) exercise their role in areas defined as urban. We assessed the representativeness of our sample within the Italian population of municipalities (N = 7960 in 2016), controlling for distribution of mayors across gender, and for the distribution across population (less than 5,000, between 5,001 and 20,000, between 20,001 and 100,000 and more than 100,000) and across rural vs. urban location of the municipality. All these chi-squared tests confirmed that there were not significant differences between the frequencies of the sample and of the population. We also compared the average density of the municipalities of our sample with the Italian population density, without finding a significant difference in the t-test (p > .05). Supplementary A reports the full set of descriptive analyses of the variables used in the study, including the survey items. We also conducted further analyses on the sample selection bias, applying a Heckman test and comparing the clusters obtained from our analysis with an instrumental variable. We comment on the results of these tests in the Supplementary Table A1 and Table A2.

Data analysis

Exploratory factor analysis

We first conducted an exploratory factor analysis to evaluate the validity and reliability of the measurement model. We assessed the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of factorial simplicity (Kaiser 1974) which showed an adequate level (.72) to conduct factorial analysis. A Bartlett's test of sphericity confirmed that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix (Dziuban and Shirkey 1974).

A principal components analysis was chosen as the exploratory factor technique since it is able to account for the largest proportion of total variance in the dataset and does not suffer from factor indeterminacy issue (Hair et al. 2010, 106–107). A varimax

Table 1. Survey items.

Components	Label	Items	Theoretical domain
CITENG (Citizens Engagement)	CITENG1	As a Mayor I always involve citizens to define the agenda of my municipality	Agenda setting & Citizen engagement (Fung 2006; Fung 2009; Vetter et al., 2018)
	CITENG2	As a Mayor I always take decisions about local policies with citizens	Decision Making & Citizen Engagement (Fung 2021; Vetter et al., 2018)
	CITENG3	As a Mayor I always involve citizens when my municipality designs public services	Co-Design & Citizen engagement (Jakobsen et al., 206; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017)
	CITENG4	As a Mayor I always involve citizens when my municipality delivers public services	Co-Delivery & Citizen engagement (Jakobsen et al. 2016; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017)
PMENG (Public Managers Engagement)	PMENG1	As a Mayor I always involve public managers to define the agenda of my municipality	Agenda setting & Public Managers engagement (Navarro et al. 2018; Svara 1999)
	PMENG2	As a Mayor I always take decisions about municipal policies with public managers	Decision Making & Public Managers engagement (Navarro et al. 2018; Svara 1999)
	PMENG3	As a Mayor I always work with public managers to design municipal services	Co-design & Public Managers engagement (Navarro et al. 2018; Svara 1999)
	PMENG4	As a Mayor I always work with public managers to deliver municipal services	Co-delivery & Public Managers engagement (Navarro et al. 2018; Svara 1999)
POLENG (Politicians Engagement)	POLENG1	As a Mayor I always involve local politicians* to define the agenda of my municipality	Agenda setting & Local Politicians engagement (Navarro et al. 2018; Svara 1999)
	POLENG2	As a Mayor I always take decisions about municipal policies with local politicians	Decision Making & Local Politicians engagement (Navarro et al. 2018; Svara 1999)
	POLENG3	As a Mayor I always involve local politicians when the municipality designs public services	Co-design & Local Politicians engagement (Navarro et al. 2018; Svara 1999)
	POLENG4	As a Mayor I always involve local politicians when the municipality delivers public services	Co-delivery & Local Politicians engagement (Navarro et al. 2018; Svara 1999)

* Local Politicians are Councillors and Cabinet Members

rotation was applied in order to achieve a simple factorial structure, and the results were compared with a non-orthogonal rotation. In this latter case, the highest correlation in our sample is .275, thus confirming the possibility to adopt an orthogonal rotation. The correlations between factors extracted with an oblimin rotation were assessed against the ±.32 threshold (Tabachnick, Fidell, and Ullman 2007, 646) to avoid the risk of an overlap between factors higher than 10%.

We assessed factor loadings for convergent validity. Although our large sample would have required a limited factor loading (.30) to reach significance (Hair et al. 2010, 116), we adopted a more conservative approach. The assessment of discriminant validity was conducted to avoid cross-factor loadings not differing more than .20. Subsequent analysis of items' communalities, i.e. 'the amount of variance accounted for by the factor solution for each variable' (Hair et al. 2010, 118), was conducted to verify they were below the .50 threshold. The assessment of internal reliability was conducted though the estimation of Cronbach's alphas (Hinkin 1998).

Confirmatory factor analysis

We assessed for convergent validity following the procedure suggested by Hair et al. (2010, 678–680). Then, we built a factor model with the items selected from the exploratory factor analysis, and, finally, we assessed if their factor loadings were higher than .40 (Ertz, Karakas, and Sarigöllü 2016). Besides controlling for goodness of fit parameters (chi squared, chi-squared/degrees of freedom, CFI, AGFI, RMSEA, PCLOSE) according to Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommendations, we measured the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each factor; a value greater than .50 means that the variance explained by a factor is larger than the error. A further check on reliability was conducted comparing the construct reliability of each factor with the cut-off value of .7.

An analysis of discriminant validity was conducted, checking whether the AVE values of the factors were higher than the squared correlation between any two items. To control for common method bias, i.e. the existence of a single factor able to account for the majority of the variance in the model, a Harman's test was performed (Fuller et al. 2016). Furthermore, we assessed the effects of a single unmeasured latent factor on all the items retained in the confirmatory factor analysis (Podsakoff et al. 2003) to establish whether there may be measurement errors equally distributed on all the items. The goodness of fit indexes and the regression weights of the model with the common method factor were compared with the correspondent parameters of the model without common method factor. We finally extracted the factors using the regression scores.

Clustering

A cluster analysis was performed on the factor scores extracted from the confirmatory factor analysis. Here, we adopted the two-step approach suggested by Hair et al. (2010, 508) to limit the weaknesses of a single approach and to check for validity; a hierarchical clustering method was used to define the correct number of clusters, and a non-hierarchical method was applied to refine cluster memberships. To minimize inter-cluster variance and produce clusters with a similar number of observations, the Ward method was used (Mojena 1977) with Minkowski distance measure (Murtagh and Contreras 2012). To define the optimal solution, we analysed the level of dissimilarity between groups, and we compared it with the dendrogram (Ketchen and Shook 1996).

The solution obtained with the hierarchical clustering method was then used to generate cluster seeds for the k-means algorithm.

We then proceeded to the interpretation and validation of the generated clusters. We assessed cluster stability, measuring the consistency of clusters across the solution generated with the two different algorithms, and an ANOVA was used to measure the significance of the difference between cluster variables.

As a final step, in order to assess criterion validity, an ANOVA was conducted on variables not used in the clustering and deemed to assume different values across the cluster. The final cluster solution found was profiled analysing the differences exhibited by the clusters on the gender and geographical location variables.

Findings

Exploratory factor analysis

We did not impose the number of factors to extract, and the solution able to explain the largest amount of variance in the sample (66.04%) has four factors. The results of the exploratory analysis with the factor loadings and the Cronbach's alphas are shown in Table 2.

The factors related to citizens and public managers were retained with the loss of two items, as we will discuss in the next section. Conversely, the items related to the engagement with politicians loaded on two different factors. The first factor, named Strategic Politicians, grouped together the items related to the involvement of politicians in the stages of agenda setting and decision-making (POLENG1 and POLENG2), while the second factor, named Executive Politicians, grouped together the items related to the co-design and co-delivery of public services with politicians (POLENG3 and POLENG4). As anticipated by the labels used, this split of the factor related to the involvement of politicians could be due to the different roles that these actors may play in the local authority. We will further examine this interesting matter in the Discussion.

Following the conservative approach described in the methodology section, we assessed factor loadings for convergent validity. Although our large sample would require a limited factor loading (.30) to reach significance (Hair et al. 2010, 116), our indicators showed loadings higher than .60, excluding just two items, PMENG1 and

Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis Rotated Component Matrix[a].

	Components				Communalities	Notes
	1	2	3	4		
CITENG3	.779				.679	
CITENG1	.774				.623	
CITENG4	.720				.595	
CITENG2	.689				.527	
POLENG1		.870			.768	
POLENG2		.834			.719	
PMENG1	.401	.543			.497	Dropped because of high cross-factor loading and low communality
POLENG3			.895		.864	
POLENG4			.888		.861	
PMENG3				.869	.787	
PMENG4				.858	.779	
PMENG2				−.341	.226	Dropped because of low communality
alphas	.780	.729	.876	.785		

Table 3. Composite Reliability, Average Variance Extracted, Maximum Squared Variance and correlations between factors.

Nr	Components	CR	AVE	MSV	Citizens	Managers	Strategic Politicians	Executive Politicians
								Correlations
1	Citizens	.790	.500	.182	1			
4	Managers	.791	.655	.137	.370	1		
2	Strategic Politicians	.770	.627	.071	.267	.255	1	
3	Executive Politicians	.877	.781	.182	.427	.353	.245	1

PMENG2, which presented high cross factor loadings. The assessment of discriminant validity confirmed that those two items should be dropped from the final solution as their cross-factor loadings did not differ more than .20. This choice was also confirmed by the analysis of the items' communalities; for both the items, the communalities were below the .50 threshold (as shown in Table 3).

The assessment of internal reliability revealed that all the factors have good Cronbach's alphas (Hinkin 1998), with the minimum level registered for the second factor (.729) above the .70 threshold suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994).

Confirmatory factor analysis

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis are reported in Figure 2, showing standardized coefficients for the regression weights (single-edged arrows), the correlations (double-edged arrows) and the variances (besides the factors, items and error terms). The levels of significance for all the regression weights and the correlations are < .001.

The chi-squared of the model was 73.1 with 28 degrees of freedom. As suggested by Hair et al. (2010, 640), the p-value associated to the chi-squared test, although significant, did not provide reliable information for a large sample like ours. According to the thresholds suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999), our model presented a good level of fit: chi-squared/degrees of freedom = 2.443; CFI = .964; AGFI = .947; RMSEA = .037; PCLOSE = .975; and SRMR = .0372.

The regression weights of the items related to Strategic Politicians, Executive Politicians and Public Managers are all above .70, which is considered an ideal level (Hair et al. 2010, 678). The same level is reached by two items of the factor Citizens, CITENG3 and CITENG4. The modification indexes of the model showed that introducing a correlation between the error terms of the other two items, CITENG1 and CITENG2, would yield an improvement of the model fit. Nevertheless, this choice reduced their loadings slightly: while CITENG1 (.55) is above the .50 threshold (Hair et al. 2010, 678), CITENG2 is .49, which is deemed acceptable (Ertz, Karakas, and Sarigöllü 2016). The correlations between the error terms remained low (.39).

The squared correlations between factors are shown in Table 3, which also reports the composite reliability and AVE for each factor. All the factors showed a good reliability with composite reliability values above .7. The AVE values were all higher than the corresponding values of the maximum squared variance, indicating that the model reached a good discriminant validity. Finally, the evaluation of convergent
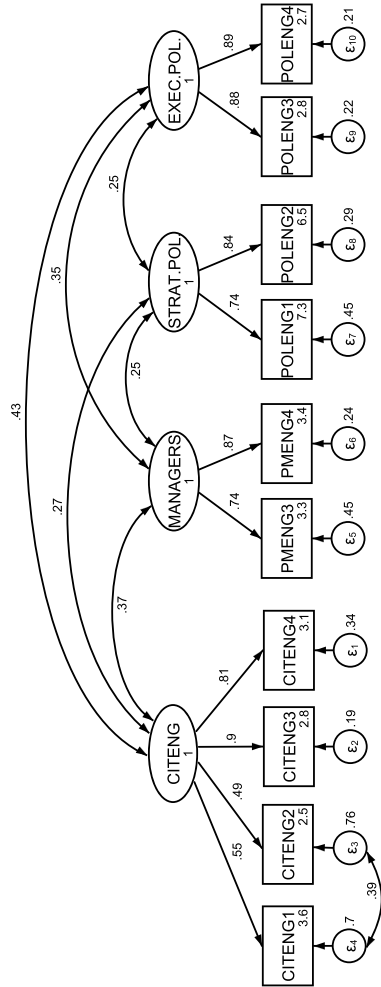
Figure 2. Confirmatory factor analysis.

validity reported AVE values higher than .5 for all factors, Public Managers, Strategic Politicians and Executive Politicians. Although the AVE for Citizens was .500, the high value of composite reliability (.790) confirmed the model reached a good convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

The Harman's test for common method bias showed that a single factor was not able to account for the majority of the variance in the model (31.68%). To complement this test, we added to the confirmatory factor model a single latent factor, named common method factor, linked to all the observed measures constraining the measurement factor loadings to be equal. The test of chi-squared change between the initial model and the model with the common method factor showed no significant difference (p = .653), confirming that common method variance is distributed equally across the items of the survey. The differences between the factor loadings of the two models were all very low (< .076), with the exception of POLENG2 (.179), but its factor loading on Strategic Politicians in the model with the common method factor remained considerably higher (.662) than the loading in the model without the common method factor, testifying that the difference did not affect the estimates.

Clustering

Mayors were categorized into distinct groups/clusters according to the four factorial variables: Strategic Politicians, Executive Politicians, Public Managers and Citizens. This procedure aimed at creating groups of mayors maximizing the inter-group differences across all the four factorial variables and minimizing the differences between mayors of the same cluster.

Combining the inspection of the dendrogram with the computation of a dissimilarity measure, a solution with four clusters was selected as the most appropriate. The resulting profiles of clusters were discussed between the authors to refine their interpretation. The seeds of the hierarchical methods were introduced in a k-means clustering algorithm. The resulting cluster solution was cross-validated, comparing hierarchical solution with the non-hierarchical cluster assignments. Only 23.4% of the observations changed cluster membership, which is considered a stable solution (Hair et al. 2010, 512).

The profiles of the clusters are reported in Table 4: each cluster showed a different value for each of the four factorial variables (see section Factors of the table). The ANOVA on all the mean differences between clusters proved to be significant (p < .000). Additionally, the ANOVA conducted on an item excluded from the analysis during the exploratory factor analysis (PMENG1) to test for criterion validity was significant (p < .000). The tests conducted showed that the clusters' profiles were significantly different from each other and the four clusters represented four different types of mayoral relational leadership.

Figure 3 represents the clusters' profiles on radar charts rescaling the values from 0 to 1.

First of all, all four clusters show a high level of engagement with Strategic Politicians, revealing the significant consideration that all mayors give to engaging local politicians for agenda setting and decision-making processes. It is, therefore, the involvement of the other three actors examined that shapes the four clusters and brings
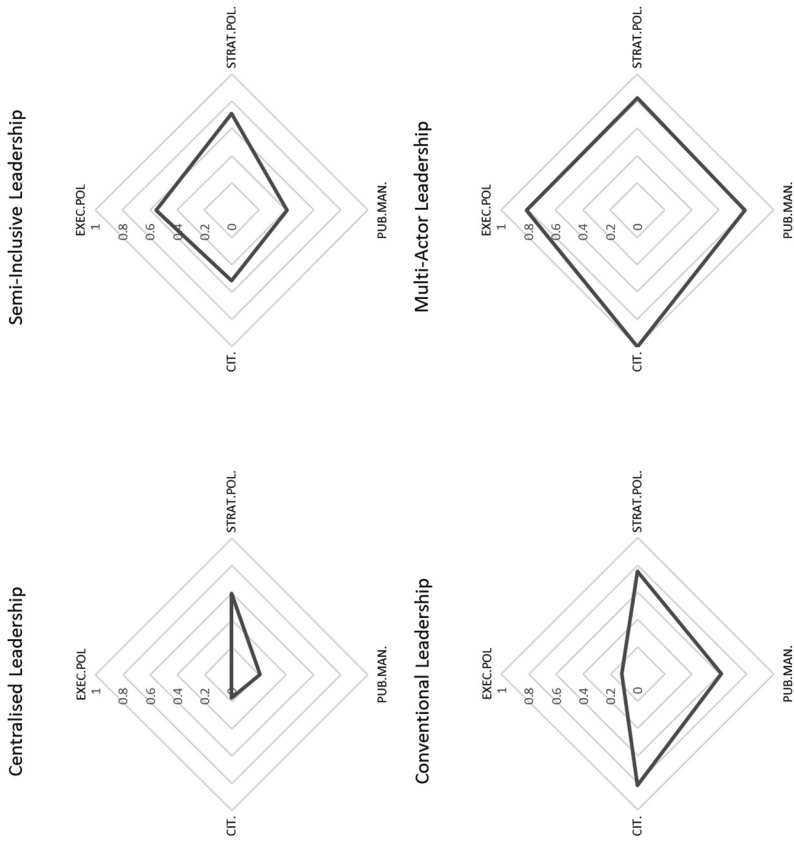
Semi-Inclusive Leadership

Centralised Leadership

Multi-Actor Leadership

Conventional Leadership

Figure 3. Radar charts representing the profiles of the four clusters.

Table 4. Profiles of the four clusters.

Cluster number	1	2	3	4	Total
Cluster names	Centralized Leadership	Semi-Inclusive Leadership	Conventional Leadership	Multi-Actor Leadership	
# of observations	276	346	213	232	1067
% of observations	25.90%	32.40%	20.00%	21.70%	100%
Factors					
Executive Politicians	2.91	4.87	3.33	5.81	
Strategic Politicians	5.02	5.42	5.6	5.84	
Managers	3.64	4.36	5.09	5.72	
Citizens	3.51	4.75	5.82	6.47	
Gender					
Male	88.00%	86.70%	84.00%	83.20%	85.75%
Female	12.00%	13.30%	16.00%	16.80%	14.25%
Education					
Middle school	9.06%	7.80%	8.45%	9.05%	8.53%
High school	46.38%	41.04%	47.42%	38.79%	43.21%
Degree	42.75%	48.27%	42.72%	50.43%	46.20%
Master/PhD	1.81%	2.89%	1.41%	1.72%	2.06%
Election margin	29.38%	31.57%	36.00%	34.10%	32.44%
Rural vs Urban					
Rural	89.10%	88.70%	92.50%	89.20%	89.69%
Urban	10.90%	11.30%	7.50%	10.80%	10.31%
Location					
North	67.40%	65.30%	64.30%	60.80%	64.67%
Centre	12.70%	14.20%	13.60%	10.30%	12.84%
South	19.90%	20.50%	22.10%	28.90%	22.49%
Population					
0–5,000	64.86%	63.58%	77.00%	74.57%	68.98%
5,001–20,000	26.81%	28.03%	16.90%	17.67%	23.24%
20,001–100,000	7.97%	7.51%	5.16%	5.60%	6.75%
More than 100,000	.36%	.87%	.94%	2.16%	1.03%
Assemblies done					
None	24.28%	17.92%	17.84%	20.69%	20.15%
From 1 to 4	57.25%	56.36%	58.22%	54.74%	56.61%
More than 4	18.48%	25.72%	23.94%	24.57%	23.24%

to light different patterns of mayoral relational leadership. Accordingly, the following descriptions of the four clusters focus on the different level of attitude to engage with Executive Politicians, Public Managers and Citizens.

The first cluster represents mayors who tend to produce public leadership mainly on their own. Indeed, mayors in this cluster (26%) declare the lowest levels of engagement with all other actors considered in this study (between 0 and .2). Additionally, this cluster is the one with the highest percentage of male mayors (88%). We named this cluster *Centralized Leadership* as it clearly recalls the vast literature on this

relational leadership style and its contrast with the more shared, collective leadership one (e.g. Bryson et al. 2017; Fletcher 2004; Hambleton and Howard 2013; Pearce, Conger, and Locke 2008).

Mayors in the second cluster (34%) declare a mid-level involvement of all actors (between .4 and .6). Hence, mayors recognize the role of all actors in the pursuit of local governance, but they involve them only to some extent. We named this cluster *Semi-Inclusive Leadership* because mayors moderately engage with all other actors, although no specific pattern of engagement nor central role of a specific actor stands out.

Mayors in the third cluster (19%) largely involve public managers and citizens (between .6 and .8), whereas executive politicians are involved very little (less than .2). We named this cluster *Conventional Leadership*, as it recalls the classical and to some extent still expected way of mayoral relational leadership in the Italian context, where according to the law, local politicians should not engage with managerial dynamics related to public services provision (policy implementation), but just with policy formulation issues. Mayors in this cluster show an attitude to largely engage citizens and tend to engage public managers (and not executive politicians) in the design and delivery of public services, as supported by the dichotomy model of the politics–administration relationship (Aberbach et al. 1981).

The fourth cluster represents mayors (22%) who are oriented towards a more collective mayoral relational leadership, with high levels of engagement with all actors, within and outside the municipality. We named this cluster *Multi-Actor Leadership*, drawing upon the recent literature on multi-actor theory of public value co-creation (e.g. Bryson et al. 2017).

Discussion

This study was designed to explore whether differences in mayors' engagement with citizens, public managers and politicians across the policy cycle and particularly in four local governance processes might depict different patterns of mayoral relational leadership. Our findings provide interesting insights from several perspectives.

First, the result of the factor analysis shows that if mayors engage citizens in local governance, this is generally done across all the stages of the policy cycle (agenda setting decision-making, public services design and public services delivery; the first two are part of the so called 'input policy', and the latter two of 'output policy' – e.g. Pestoff 2018). If mayors tend to not engage citizens at all, this happens independently from the local governance process under examination. This finding is relevant because it portrays an attitude to engage citizens in both input (agenda setting and decision making) and output policy (public services provision). Previous literature highlighted the risks of having just an instrumental role of active citizenship, involving citizens in public services provision but not in agenda setting and decision-making, with consequences on power delegation and on the relationship between local government and civil society, which shed light on the risk of 'manufacturing' civil society, as argued by Brandsen, Trommel, and Verschuere (2017). In this perspective, as shown by Sørensen and Torfing (2019), a promising area of research might be exploring how to institutionalize this active citizenship into formal governance processes across the entire policy cycle.

Second, another result of the factorial analyses is the mayors' attitude towards engagement with politicians and public managers. As anticipated, mayors in our study engage politicians not in a unitary way along the whole policy-making cycle but in two distinct ways, leading to the creation of two different factors: Strategic Politicians and Executive Politicians. The first are involved in the stages of agenda setting and decision-making, whereas the second are involved in the co-design and co-delivery of public services. Conversely, we did not find proof of a consistent engagement of public managers by mayors across the policy cycle but only of their participation in policy implementation (public service design and delivery). Indeed, two items related to Public Managers (PMENG1 and PMENG2 – i.e. public manager involvement in agenda setting and decision-making) were excluded from the final analysis because of their high cross factor loadings and thus structural inconsistency. Our empirical context highlights a tendency of Italian mayors to not involve public managers in agenda setting and decision-making, which is consistent with a dichotomous view of politics and administration. Contrary to this dual view, our findings show a tendency to engage politicians for issues related to public services provision (co-design and co-delivery). This finding might be specific to a context such as Italy. Indeed, in Italian municipalities below than 5,000 inhabitants (69% in our sample and 69% in the entire population of Italian municipalities), local politicians part of the cabinet members may take on public manager roles as they are entitled by the law with the powers of signing administrative acts, which is an important element in a Napoleonic State based on administrative law such as Italy (Ongaro 2009). This is a controversial feature of the Italian administrative system, as politicians may have a different logic of public managers; moreover, it does contradict the formal separation between politics and administration, which was identified since 1990 as a key principle for local government administration in Italy, also to avoid risks of corruption (e.g. Vandelli 1995). Other three interpretations of this result are that, firstly, in countries like Italy, politicians might be more highly regarded than public managers, so mayors may still prefer to consult and/or engage with politicians even on issues about public services provision. Secondly, as described more generally by Seal and Ball (2005) speaking about 'political managerialism', other studies (e.g. Sancino 2021) have found that Italian local politicians tend to expand their formal role in local government administration and may take on a more managerial role within public services provision. Thirdly, in Italy the large majority of the public managers are not appointed by mayors, but they are career civil servants, so mayors may work with public managers who may not reflect their values and/or be less or more supportive of their political and policy agenda.

Third, another important finding, and perhaps the most striking and unexpected one, is related to the emergence of two clusters that represent two highly contrasting patterns of mayoral engagement: (1) the *Centralized Leadership* cluster, where mayors scarcely engage with executive politicians, public managers and citizens; and (2) the *Multi-Actor Leadership* cluster, where mayors strongly engage with all other actors considered. The existence of both these clusters suggests that the shift towards a more collective and shared leadership style (e.g. Bryson et al. 2012; Fletcher 2004; Hambleton and Howard 2013) is concrete and that the centralized leadership style is not a myth and is still largely exercised (Pearce, Conger, and Locke 2008).

Fourth, even though there are not significant and strong differences among clusters, our findings are also interesting in relation to the descriptive variables: gender, urban vs. rural, and macro areas (the north, centre and south of Italy). By looking at the findings under the gender lens, it is possible to notice that male mayors tend to exercise a slightly more *Centralized and Semi-Inclusive Leadership*, whereas female mayors tend to exercise a slightly more *Conventional and Multi-Actor Leadership*. These results seem to confirm previous research outcomes, which found that men tend to behave in a more autocratic and task-oriented manner, i.e. masculine approach, whereas women tend to adopt a more participative, democratic and people-oriented manner, i.e. feminine approach (e.g. Appelbaum, Audet, and Miller 2003; Jago and Vroom 1982). However, these findings also call for further investigation as some scholars have pointed out that the link between gender and the associated type of leadership style should not be taken for granted since leadership is situational and context-dependent (Ferreira and Gyourko 2014); hence, male leaders could lead in a feminine manner and vice versa, or both male and female leaders could lead in similar ways when they assume the same role in the same context (Alonso-Almeida and Bremser 2015, 57 paraphrasing Eagly and Carli 2007).

By looking at our clusters and the degree of urbanization, it emerges that mayors who exercise their role in rural areas tend to lead in a slightly more conventional way. Finally, looking at our findings and Italian geographic areas, mayors who exercise their role in northern Italy tend to lead in a more centralized way, whereas mayors who exercise their role in southern Italy tend to lead in a more multi-actor way. This could seem counterintuitive as usually the multi-actor and participatory leadership is associated with a positive view of public governance, yet southern Italy historically tends to perform (at an aggregate level) relatively worse than other parts of Italy (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994). However, this finding might be also related to other social, economic cultural factors typical of Italy which has a much bigger public sector role in the economy and society in the South than in the North (Galli and Gottardo 2020). More broadly, this finding calls for avoiding a positive bias towards participatory local governance (Dudau, Glennon, and Verschuere 2019) and for more studies investigating in a multi-dimensional way the effects of different relational leadership styles on the performance of municipalities.

Conclusions

Moving from the recognition that leadership is relational and socially constructed, this paper investigated the attitude of mayors towards engaging with citizens, public managers and politicians in four distinct types of local governance processes: two parts of the input policy (agenda-setting and decision-making – policy formulation) and two parts of the output policy (co-design and co-delivery of public services – policy implementation). We identified four main types of mayoral relational leadership, ranging from *Centralized Leadership*, where the mayor shows a relatively negative attitude towards engaging other actors in local governance, to *Multi-actor Leadership*, which is the opposite, i.e. a relatively positive attitude towards engaging citizens, public managers and politicians.

The issues of who is engaged and for what purpose are fundamental elements for understanding public leadership dynamics. If leadership unfolds as relational and given that time and attention are limited resources in the dynamics of leadership

(Van Wart 2011), engaging and giving more time and attention to a type of actor has implications on the type of leadership that is enacted. Paying attention to the actors and practices of public leadership from a relational perspective is thus especially important for public leadership, where there are democratic stakes to be considered. In this respect, with this paper we have provided an example of how, even with a micro level of analysis, the empirical understanding of the relative importance of different actors in governance processes can potentially shed light on important themes and trends occurring at a macro level, such as the managerialisation of local politics (Seal and Ball 2005) and the rise of citizen participation in public governance (e.g. Strokosch and Osborne 2020). Bridging micro and macro levels of analysis is important for advancing public administration (Moynihan 2018).

Our findings also contribute to research on the relationship between politics and administration. To this regard, while the overlapping roles of politicians and managers in governance are acknowledged (Svara 1999), additional empirical studies are needed to explore the different combinations of engagement that may occur across the policy cycle considering that citizens are now also entering in these interactions with politicians and managers.

This paper is not devoid of limitations. First, notwithstanding the extensive dataset, it is based on data from a single country. Future comparative studies could expand the empirical base to challenge the generalizability of these results. Moreover, we focused on the institutional logics that may be brought in into the local governance processes by three main categories of actors (citizens, public managers and politicians), while, of course, we recognize the existence of different subgroups of actors within these categories, as well as other actors that may bring in a different institutional logic (e.g. business leaders). Another limitation is that all the categories deal with local-level actors and refer to actors within a given municipality. However, in a multilevel governance system, it is likely that actors operating at a higher level (e.g. provincial, national), or from other local governments, also play a role in the policy process. Similarly, other characteristics that might explain variables in leadership styles can be investigated (for example age, professional occupation and participation in professional and political organizations) by developing hypotheses on how individual or contextual factors may influence the clustering we identified in this study. Future studies might continue to investigate this topic by also employing interview-based, mixed or other methods. In particular, social network analysis seems a promising approach to studying relations among different actors, while qualitative techniques could be better suited to investigate power dynamics among different actors, which from a relational leadership perspective is a relevant issue, as pointed out by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011). Finally, future studies might take a longitudinal approach and consider if, how and why some leaders might change their engagement styles.

Disclosure statement

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