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The role of local politics in the career path of political elites

Paper presented at the Annual Doctoral Conference

Central European University

Budapest, 31 March - 2 April 2008

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the place of local politics in the career paths of political elites. The local level offers many possibilities for participation in politics from local NGOs to formal political organizations. Entering the political arena has thus lower costs while these local political positions offer professional, financial and personal resources and experiences and thus can serve as a springboard for launching a professional political career. However, the importance of local politics seems to exceed the initial phase of career-building, since professional politicians and the members of the political elite seem to hold onto their local roles in order to have access to the accumulated resources there.

While the local level can be a springboard for individuals, it also serves as a recruitment base for political parties. Recruiting aspirants offers the possibility of reaching out to the local level as well as of training and socializing professional politicians at an early phase. For the candidates party positions are important assets since parties can offer solid financial and institutional support as well as a gateway to higher-level politics.

According to my hypothesis political careers follow similar patterns among which we can find careers starting at the local level. The aim of this paper is first, to discover the characteristics

of the career-path leading from the local level to the political elite; and second, to investigate the interaction of climbing the party ladder and building a successful political career.

Introduction

The professionalization of the political activity as well as the formation of the political elite has introduced new questions to the study of politics: where do politicians come from, how does a political career evolve and what kind of opportunities it offers. The field of elite research has focused on the sociological background of elites as well as on the issues of recruitment (Gallagher-Marsh, 1988; Fowler, 1993; Norris-Lovenduski, 1995, Norris, 1997; Caul, 1999), while in Hungary due to the historical context the field was dominated by the questions of elite change, elite circulation and elite reproduction (Szelényi-Szelényi, 1997; Hankiss, 1989; Szalai, 1998; Ilonszki-Kurtán, 1999; Ilonszki, 2005). Thus the study of elite political careers concentrated on political experiences or political positions gained mainly in the socialist era. Recent studies have introduced a new element in elite research by focusing on the quality and the content-side of elite's political activities (Ilonszki, 2003). In both cases the emphasis was placed on the participation of elites in national-level politics.

However, the picture is rather incomplete without the study of local politics that plays an important role in the career of political elites. On the one hand local politics can serve as a springboard for launching political careers since the entry to the political arena is considered easier there. On the other hand the importance of local politics seems to exceed the initial phase of career-building, since professional politicians and the members of the political elite seem to hold onto their local roles in order to have access to the resources accumulated there. The aim of this paper is to discover the place and role of local level politics in the career of political elites.

Since this research is yet at the initial phase, this paper focuses on introducing three core hypothesis about the role of local politics in the career of political elites and on testing these assumption on a chosen group of elites, namely those who are at the same time connect to local and national politics.

The study of political careers

Along with the appearance of the professional politician (Weber, 1918) came the idea of the political class whose members bear similar interests that they pursue in similar surroundings (Mosca, 1939). While a certain level of homogeneity characterizes the group, the distribution of power is far from even which was captured by Putnam in his work “The Comparative study of political elites” (1976). Although power structure is still the core question of defining political elites, more differentiated definitions have emerged and thus we can distinguish representative elite (members of the parliament), government elite, party elites and administrative elite. For the sake of this paper, we proceed with the representative elite understood as political elite while taking into consideration the need for a broader definition.

The appearance of a political elite accompanied through the professionalization of politics as a vocation suggest a certain exclusion, since only a few of the aspirants can enter. The question is who and how can become a member then? Studying political careers is a possible way of looking for the answer(s). The idea of a political career is based on the assumption that individuals are fueled by a certain progressive ambition (Schlesinger, 1966) that motivates them to reach higher influence. These individuals regard the actual legal-political environment, institutions and other actors as part of “the structure of opportunities” (Schlesinger, 1966) that they assess. Based on a cost-benefit calculation the aspirants decide if it is worth running for a certain political office or not. This approach that Norris calls the “supply side” (Norris, 1996:192) focuses on the individuals that aim at building a successful political career. On the other hand, the “demand side” (Norris, 1996:192) approach focuses on the recruitment processes where the critical role is played by the gate-keepers. In this institutional approach parties play a central role since they decide who to choose among the many aspirants, who meet the requirements for a certain position. Norris proposes the application of both approaches as she regards them as two-sides of a coin. Her three-level model includes the analysis of 1. the political system as a defining institution; 2. the recruitment processes including the role played by the parties; 3. the individual motivation and role (Norris, 1993:3-13). Borchert (2001) also suggest the analysis of both the institutional settings and the individuals, since according to him individual choices are based on evaluating three dimensions of the opportunity structure: availability that refers to the

offices a candidate can run for, accessibility which describes the effort needed to gain an office and attractivity referring to the properties of the office itself. The available and accessible political positions define the space where political careers can be built up, thus the career possibilities are institutionally limited. The institutional context of political careers can be broken into six components: 1. state structure referring to the territorial organization of the state; 2. role of the national legislature; 3. the internal structure of the legislature; 4. the electoral system; 5. parties and interests groups; 6. political finance (Borchert, 2003). The possible career paths to follow are rather limited in this context and thus the assumption is that in a given political setting we can observe the emergence of typical career patterns. As Schlesinger states: “political careers do not proceed chaotically. There are patterns of movement from office to office; as the office becomes more conspicuous, the patterns become clearer” (Schlesinger, 1966:118).

Political careers in multi-level territorial setting

The territorial structure of the political arena is a key defining factor in the hierarchy of positions. In most states we can define a local level, a higher regional level, a national level and in some cases a supranational level of politics. This distinction is especially clear in the case of federal states where political activities are differentiated according to territorial levels. However, in non-federal states the growing importance of subsidiarity as well as the tendency towards decentralization point to the direction of territorial differentiation of politics since these tendencies support the allocation of competencies to the sub-national level which translates to growing available resources. The result is territorially more differentiated political activity that contributes to the a higher level of professionalization on these levels: “the meaning of the regional level for political careers has been greatly affected by the progressive professionalization of regional parliaments and regional politics more generally, transforming regional politics from an appendix of local amateur politics to an arena in its own right.” (Borchert, 2001:5; see also Stolz, 2001; Stolz, 2003). This differentiation does not only characterize governmental and administrative institutions but other political actors as well: parties also tend to build up a territorially structured hierarchy where the local organizations are at the bottom of the pyramid followed by regional groups and a national decision-making body (Körösényi-Tóth-Török, 2003).

Due to this differentiation political careers can also be studied and evaluated within this territorial framework. In a political career the territorial levels can be identified through the positions candidates occupy. Though at most levels there is an abundance of positions that can be linked to the political arena through the influence on decision-making or on allocating resources (as for example positions in local civil organizations, churches or in lobbying groups) this analysis focuses on two types of political positions: first public offices such as membership in municipal assemblies or the position of mayor on the local level, member of regional assembly on the regional level and member of parliament on the national level; second party offices such as head of local organization on the local level, member of regional party body on the regional level and member of national party body on the national level.

Within this territorial framework *the first hypothesis is that the movement of a political career fueled by progressive ambition is unidirectional*. “Positions in this type are clearly organized along hierarchy. As everybody wants to move up, the direction of all career moves is the same. (...) Typically, the unidirectional pattern should follow the organization of the state from the local over the regional to the national level.” (Borchert, 2001:8) As said this argument is in line with the assumption of progressive ambition that motivates individual choices and action. It is important to mention though that individual ambitions can not always be fulfilled due to institutional or other constraints that affect the accessibility of political offices. While it is important to discover these obstacles and reasons underlying them, the idea of an unidirectional career directed at becoming member of the political elite still holds.

Local politics in political careers

Local politics is often regarded as a “base office” (Schlesinger, 1966:70-88) where many politicians launch their political career. Borchert’s analysis of the role of local politics is more detailed since he distinguishes between 3 different functions of the local/regional office: 1. it can be a springboard for launching a career; 2. it can be a home base, a certain safety net; 3. it can be a potential career goal. (Borchert, 2001:13). In case of political elites the third case is negligible since local elites are not part of the elite definition used in this study. For the

remaining two functions there is an important distinction to make: in case the local level is only a springboard then we can observe a succession of offices along the career path of politicians meaning that as they move along they leave the lower level positions behind. However, if the local level represents a home base, politicians should hold onto their role as local politicians and the cumulation of offices should be observed. As the Hungarian legal system allows for the *cumul des mandats*, *the second hypothesis states that among the members of political elites the cumulation of offices is preferable.*

So far we have dealt with the supply side on local level but in order to carry out a complex analysis the demand side or the recruitment process should also be observed. There is abundant literature about political recruitment mainly in relation with political opportunities of different minorities such as women or ethnical groups (Swain, 1993; Thomas, 1994; Young, 1997; Norris, 1997; Williams, 1998; Canon, 1999; Matland-Montgomery, 2003). These studies point to the direction of parties as key factors in the recruitment process which is underlined by party literature as well (Gallagher-Marsh, 1988; Katz, 2001; Rahat-Hazan, 2001). For the local aspirants the process of recruitment applied by parties is critical since it defines the accessibility of local offices and reduces the number of competitors. According to Cotta (1982) there are two different types of party structures: in one aspirants need to climb a hierarchical party-ladder in order to build a successful career while in the other recruitment for offices is defined by party-patronage. In the first case aspirants become member of their party at an early phase of their career and they aim at gaining public as well as party offices on the local level. In the second case aspirants only enter the party (if they enter at all) before occupying certain positions, and thus the early phase of their career is characterized by accumulating resources outside the party structure or even outside the political arena. The recruitment process is also influenced by the weight of local/regional actors within the party network. According to Rahat and Hazan (2001) the applied recruitment mechanisms is related to the structure of the party (centralized vs. decentralized), the pressure potential of members and the aims of party leaders. In case the party structure is decentralized and the local/regional bodies take part in the recruitment or nomination process, local political activity is valued, while in case of a centralized party it is not of great importance. Katz (2001) states that different types of parties apply different types of recruitment processes. According to his hypothesis the shift towards cartelization resulted in the growing influence of party centers on

recruitment processes and local bodies' competencies are reduced to choosing between alternatives elaborated by the center (Katz, 2001:292). But recruitment itself is not the only function of parties regarding political careers as according to Gruber: "intra-party careers are a crucial precondition for achieving higher elective political office" (2007:2). Thus parties are not only present as gate-keepers to public offices but offer valuable party offices themselves opening another alternative path of career building for politicians.

The dominant role of parties have been observed in Hungarian politics, the proportion of party membership have increased among the members of the representative elite (Ilonszki, 2005). According to my third hypothesis the dominance of parties can already be observed at the local level: *members of the political elites with local background became party members at an early stage of their career (3/1) and aimed at developing a career within the party (3/2).*

Empirical study: local background of mayors sitting in the parliament

The study of the research question namely the role of local politics in the career of political elites calls for a complex methodological approach. Using the three-level method proposed by Norris (1996) the following fields will be analyzed: 1. the political environment (legal regulation, voting system, party competition and party system); 2. parties (hierarchical structure of parties, recruitment regulation and mechanisms); 3. politicians (individual careers based on CVs). In this paper empirical research will only be carried out on the third level of analysis, on level of individual politicians. For the sake of preliminary empirical testing I have identified a group of politicians within the representative elite who are connected to both the local and the national level, those who occupy the office of mayor along with being a member of the parliament. This selection calls into question my second hypothesis that among the members of political elites the cumulation of offices is preferable since I explicitly deal with members who were selected based on the criteria of cumulation. The hypothesis thus cannot be verified or falsified within this paper although the relatively high number of representatives holding mayor office (68 out of 386 members) is already a strong indication that cumulation of offices is preferable.

The number of cases in the empirical study is 68 which means that the local background of 68 representatives holding mayor office have been revealed and coded based on CVs available from the Hungarian Parliament's website (www.parlament.hu). Concerning local/regional public offices the coding sheet included member of the municipal assembly, member of the regional assembly; concerning party offices the coding sheet included local party executive, regional party executive, national party executive. In order to correspond to the research question of unidirectional career paths, the coding referred only to offices hold before winning the seat of mayor for the first time. The coding sheet also included reference to party membership and parliamentary mandate (was s/he a party member or member of the parliament at the time of being elected as mayor) as well a reference to how many times the representative won the mayor seat.

Regarding the hypothesis of unidirectional movement one of the most relevant question is whether there is a unidirectional movement from the local office (mayor) to the national office (representative) or there are politicians who went the other direction gaining first a national office and then a local one. The data show that out of the 68 members 33 gained the major seat prior to gaining a national seat while the rest, 34 members, gained first a national seat and then became mayors. The picture is even more detailed if we look at it in a time perspective (1. table). From the table we can see that there is a movement from local politics towards national politics since some of those who have been involved on a local level managed to build their career toward the national level. However, there is also a movement towards the local level, since those who have been already been members of the parliament oriented their career towards becoming mayors and this tendency is definitely gaining momentum. Thus on this sample the hypothesis of unidirectional movement doesn't hold since the movement seems to go both directions.

		Parliamentary representative at the time of becoming mayor	
		yes	no
Mayor since*	1990	0	7
	1994	1	7
	1998	6	7
	2002	12	10
	2006	15	2

* including those who became mayors during the indicated political cycle

The idea of unidirectional movement can also be analyzed at a lower level, since we can discover whether the mayors in the sample have occupied local or regional public offices before their election as mayor. The unidirectional movement as a unique way of building a political career falls again since only 57% of mayors have been members of the municipal assemblies prior to their election and only 30% have been members of regional assemblies. However, if we consider that mayors elected in 1990 and 1994 did not truly have the opportunity to build a local political career before becoming mayors, the numbers are a bit more solid: for those who have only served 1, 2 or 3 terms as mayors the proportion of those who have hold a seat in the municipal assembly is 59%, 68%, 77% respectively.

The hypothesis about the party connection stating that *members of the political elites with local background became party members at an early stage of their career (3/1)* can only be verified in relation to being member of the party at the time of election as a mayor. With this restriction the hypothesis holds since 52 mayors (76%) declared to be member of a party at the time of election. Concerning the career building within the party the group is divided: half of the mayors have occupied local party office, 38% have occupied regional party office and 27% have occupied national party office prior to their election as mayors. Again, it is important to note that those who have been in the seat of mayor since 1990 or 1994 had not had the opportunity to build a real intra-party career but still if we only regard those who serve their 1, 2, 3 term as mayors the numbers are still similar (59%, 68%, 46% for local party office respectively, 30%, 50%, 61% for regional party office and 35%, 32%, 23% for national party office).

Regarding the party offices one more feature is worth to be observed: among those who had hold local or regional or national party offices prior to being elected as a mayor the proportion of those who had been parliamentary representatives is relatively high. It may be translated as among those who occupied party offices there is a motivation to seek national (representative) as well as local (mayor) roles.

2. table: Parliamentary representatives holding party offices

		Parliamentary representative at the time of becoming mayor		Total
		yes	no	
Local party office	yes	24 70%	10 30%	34
	no	11 33%	22 67%	33
Regional party office	yes	19 79%	5 21%	24
	no	16 38%	26 62%	42
National party office	yes	17 89%	2 11%	19
	no	18 37%	30 63%	48

Conclusions

The results of the preliminary research point to the need of further analysis. First, it seems that the career paths of the political elites are not unidirectional since politicians are moving back and forth between local and national level. But while progressive ambition would explain the direction from local to national level the movement from national to local poses interesting

questions. It suggests that those politicians who did not come from a local background or have not got an important local mandate (such as a mayor seat) seek the local connection. Supposedly the local level can offer important resources in terms of financial, social or knowledge capital. The exploration of these local resources is one possible dimension of further research.

While the hypothesis of cumulation of mandates has not been analyzed in this paper, it seems that the cumulation is an important phenomenon in the Hungarian political field. This issue connects to the one stated above since the cumulation suggest that there are important resources on the local level that are worth keeping. As Knapp states: “Mayors seek national office either for itself or for the resources that access to Paris can deliver. Deputies seek municipal office either for itself or for the local resources – in terms of goodwill, cash and logistical – that a town hall can deliver. Thus national office reinforces local office and vice versa.” (Knapp, 1991:30) Concerning cumulation it can not only be done vertically but horizontally as well. If cumulation proves to be an important element in the political careers, horizontal cumulation – holding several offices on the same level – deserves attention as well.

Based on the preliminary findings parties seem to be a must in political careers, since most of the candidates were party members or at least won with the support of certain parties or party-alliances. However, party careers were not present as ladders to climb but rather as local offices that could be exploited. Again, further research is needed to establish the advantages of holding party offices since the idea of the importance of the party ladder seem to struggle. Also in order to understand party careers better, there is a need to study recruitment processes in connection with party structure and membership involvement.

While this research gave an insight into the place of local politics in the career of political elites, more research is need to reveal career patterns. It seems that in the Hungarian political arena the classical “climber” career (Borchert, 2001) is not the only path connecting local and national politics. Supposedly elite career patterns will include alternative tracks among which one can find office-collectors who focus on the cumulation of positions, bouncing politicians

who go back and forth between political levels as well as politicians with strong local roots who have strong connections to their home base.

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