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## Career models in the new tripolar order: political profiles of the Italian MPs after the 2022 general elections

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**Abstract.** The 2022 general election confirmed the instability of the Italian political system and in its shift from a bipolar to a tripolar competition dynamic. The article explores similarities and differences among MPs elected in 2022 during such electoral turmoil, aiming to understand their profiles and career paths. Specifically, the research investigates whether certain elements such as gender and affiliation with an organisational thick or thin party may influence the MPs' career models. We run a multinomial logistic regression to test the effects on multilevel career patterns by relying on an original dataset which comprises the socio-economic and political characteristics of the current MPs and their career trajectories for a total of 588 observations. Our findings show that women are often newcomers, and they are more likely to display an alternative career model. They struggle to fully capitalize on the opportunities offered by multilevel democracy, both before and after attaining their position as MPs. Furthermore, MPs belonging to a party with a strong organisation are more likely to develop unidirectional and integrated models, indicating their ability to navigate the multilevel context with well-planned and structured career paths.

**Keywords:** political careers; political professionalization; parliamentarians; multi-level systems; gendered career models, 2022 Italian general election.

### INTRODUCTION

The Italian party system has experienced significant changes over the past two decades. It transitioned from an imperfect bipolar system (D'Alimonte & Chiaramonte, 2010) – influenced by electoral law changes that introduced a majoritarian perspective (such as the *Mattarellum* and *Porcellum*) – to a new tripolar phase (Chiaramonte & De Sio, 2015). Following the 2013 general elections, mainstream parties of the centre-right and centre-left, which had dominated the political landscape from the late 1990s to the late 2000s, began losing votes. Concurrently, new populist parties like the Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*, M5S) (Chiapponi, 2017), and radi-

cal parties like the League under the leadership of Matteo Salvini (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018), as well as Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FDI) under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni (Baldini, Tronconi & Angelucci, 2023), saw an increase in their vote share.

Starting from 2013, the major party on the left of the political spectrum, the Democratic Party (PD), despite experiencing a decline in votes, maintained an average vote share of around 20%. In contrast, the centre-right political camp underwent several power shifts. In 2013, Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom (*Popolo della Libertà*, PDL) emerged as the largest party with a vote share of 21.6%. Later that same year, it became Forza Italia (FI), returning to its original name. In 2018, Matteo Salvini's League gained prominence with a vote share of 17.4%, and in 2022, Giorgia Meloni's FDI became the leading party with a vote share of 26%.

The third political pole, represented by the Five Star Movement (M5s), exhibited fluctuating results. Between 2013 and 2018, the M5s experienced a remarkable increase in vote share, rising from 25.5% to 32.8%. However, in the most recent election, their vote share declined to 15.6%.

Moreover, an important institutional change took place before the 2022 elections. The constitutional law n. 1/2020 reduced the number of parliamentarians by 600 MPs, impacting both the Chamber of Deputies (from 630 to 400) and the Senate (from 315 to 200). Consequently, this significant change in the rules of the game intensified competition for parliamentary seats for both incumbents and newcomers.

Against this backdrop, our article aims to examine whether the profiles of MPs belonging to different parties are similar or different in this new phase, and whether these electoral and institutional changes have resulted in coherent changes in the profiles of political personnel. Specifically, this paper addresses a gap in the literature by attempting to assess whether a specific career model is characteristic of women MPs. Despite the extensive body of research on women's under-representation in legislative bodies, it remains unclear whether a distinct pattern has emerged for women or not.

Additionally, drawing on the party organizational literature that distinguishes between "thick" and "thin" parties (Gunther & Diamond, 2003), we can anticipate that parties with a well-defined territorial structure are more likely to present similar political figures, especially in terms of their political careers. Conversely, parties with lower levels of institutionalization tend to offer candidates from diverse backgrounds, resulting in less predictable and stable career paths.

To examine these dynamics, we have compiled an original dataset from the 2022 general election, which

includes socio-economic data and political career experiences of 392 deputies and 196 senators, totalling 588 MPs.

This article is structured as follows: Section 1 presents our theoretical framework and outlines our main hypotheses; Section 2 explains our methodological approach and choices; Section 3 provides a descriptive analysis of our dataset; and Section 4 presents our findings. Finally, Section 5 concludes the article.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The study of parliamentarians holds a significant place in the field of political science and has long been associated with the concept of political professionalization (Weber, 1919). In fact, a substantial body of contemporary European and American literature on political professionalization primarily revolves around parliamentarians, encompassing both country-specific analyses and comparative studies. (e.g. Squire 1993; Searing, 1994; Norris 1997; Saalfeld 1997; Shabad & Slomczynski, 2002; Borchert, 2003; Cairney, 2007; Koop & Bittner, 2011; Siavelis & Morgenstern, 2012; Heuwieser, 2018; Allen 2018; Ohmura *et al.*, 2018). However, so far in Europe the most important comparative work with a longitudinal perspective is that of Best and Cotta (2000), which has analysed the socio-economic background, the political experience and turnover rates of the European parliamentary representatives from 1948 to 2000.

From a theoretical point of view, the research on political careers can be distinguished between actor-oriented and context-oriented approaches (Jahr & Edinger, 2015), which focus respectively on individual characteristics and on contextual features as explaining factors.

Vercesi (2018) provides a systematic framework for reviewing both approaches in the study of political careers. Notably, among the former, the *personality approach* suggests that individual personality traits have an impact on career trajectories (Lasswell, 1948; Caprara & Silvester, 2018). The *ambition theory approach* (Schlesinger, 1966; Nicholls, 1991; Lawless, 2012) posits that politicians are office seeking and pursue different career paths based on their ambitions. The *social background and socialization approach* (Putnam, 1976; Pilet *et al.*, 2014) asserts that specific offices can only be attained by politicians with particular social characteristics and expertise. Lastly, the *selection and deselection approach* (Searing, 1994; Dowding & Dumont, 2015) operates within a rational choice framework, suggesting that politicians (as agents) are chosen based on their previous experiences.

In contrast, context-oriented approaches in the study of political careers encompass the following per-

spectives. The *opportunity structure approach* (Botella *et al.*, 2010; Stolz, 2003, 2015; Stolz & Fisher, 2014; Grimaldi & Vercesi, 2018) asserts that career paths are influenced by the availability, accessibility, and desirability of political positions. The *intra-organizational approach* (Thurber, 1976; Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Peters, 2010) suggests that career choices and opportunities within an organization are shaped by formal and informal organizational rules and procedures. The *supply and demand approach* (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Krook, 2010; Carnes, 2016) focuses on individuals representing specific social sectors (e.g., women, workers) whose resources and motivations contribute to the supply, while the demand is determined by elite preferences that act as gatekeeping factors. In summary, this approach posits that political careers evolve through a step-by-step process influenced by the interplay of supply and demand dynamics.

Our paper builds on the opportunity structure approach which proved to be the most suitable when it comes to consider the broad contextual factors that characterised multi-level democracies. In fact, in Italy, as in all multi-level democracies, politicians have tended to exploit all possible offices from local to regional and national level as opportunities for their political career (e.g. Grimaldi & Vercesi, 2018; Di Capua *et al.* 2022). By relying on Borchert' work (2011) which distinguished three career models based on the hierarchy of the political offices and the direction of career paths, the article investigates what career model prevail among MPs of the XIX legislature in Italy and to what extent such models are affected by the politicians' social background and by the structure of their party organisation. To recall, according to Borchert (2011) in multi-level democracies three career models are likely to emerge, *the unidirectional model* refers to a political system in which a clear hierarchy of political offices exists, and it implies a movement from local to regional to national or European level. *The alternative model* implies a less clear hierarchy of offices with a high degree of autonomy between the levels of government and scarce possibility of "multi-level jumps". Consequently, national and subnational careers are clearly separate as there is no movement from regional to national or European level. Finally, *the integrated model* implies that there is no hierarchy among territorial levels and, thus, movements from the European or the national level to the regional and local level are more likely. Party experience is excluded from this analysis since the career model framework only concerns the occupation of previous institutional positions.

In order to explain the prevalence of one of the three career models mentioned above, we identified specific

drivers that draw from the social background and socialization approach, the intra-organizational approach, and the influence of party organizational structures on career paths. In Italy, previous research (Grimaldi & Vercesi, 2018) have proved that, as a result of institutional changes towards greater regionalization, all such career models may coexist at the same time. On the one hand, MPs' socio-economic characteristics seem to be quite similar in comparative perspective (Best & Cotta, 2000) and thus we can assume that certain specific features matter in their selection process. In particular, several studies pointed out that there is a systematic under-representation of women in the legislative assemblies (e.g. Philipps, 1995; Caul, 1999; Matland, 2005; Matland & Montgomery 2003; Norris, 1996; Tremblay, 2008). Despite the introduction of rules to favour gender balance (Dahlerup, 2007; Krook ,2007; Franceschet *et al.* 2012; Hughes *et al.*, 2019) in many European contexts, women continue to represent a minority and in addition, they also have less stable career paths than their male counterparts (Vanlangenakker *et al.*, 2013, Brown *et al.*, 2019; Kerivel, 2019; Kroeber & Hüffelmann, 2021), whereas their longevity in parliamentary office shows mixed evidence (e.g. Praino & Stockemer, 2018; Lazarus *et al.* 2023). The most recent data on women MPs in Europe confirm that by the end of 2022 women were on average 31.1% of MPs in the Lower Chambers and 30.5% in the Upper Chambers (IPU, 2022). However, despite the numerous research on female parliamentary representation, the existence of a specific career model for female MPs has not been widely explored so far. In fact, differently from Verzichelli *et al.* (2022), our purpose is not only to emphasize the huge impact of newcomers and especially of the "female beginners" in the last legislatures (namely from 2013) but to understand if a different career model emerges for female MPs by considering those who show a certain degree of political experience. Consequently, our paper aims to fill this gap in literature.

On the other hand, the existence of a direct connection between the organisational dimension of political parties and the career model has been emphasized repeatedly in the literature (Janda, 1980; Panebianco, 1982; Gunther & Diamond; 2003; Deschouwer, 2006; Thorlakson, 2013). In a nutshell, a strong party organisation at the territorial level is correlated with the presence of more linear, stable and easily predictable career paths, while more fluid organisations may be more susceptible to "horizontal" inflows of political personnel (Panebianco, 1982). However, with a progressive party institutionalisation, the specialisation of internal roles and a greater vertical integration between the political elites of the different levels, career paths become considerably

long and stable (Tronconi & Verzichelli, 2019). The reasons for such influence must be sought precisely in the intermediary role that political parties play in recruiting the political class.

In line with these premises, our research questions are the following:

1. Which characteristics do MPs elected in 2022 have? Are there similarities or differences in terms of socio-economic features?
2. What is the most widespread career model among the MPs of the XIX legislature?
3. Does social background and in particular gender affects the MPs' type of career?
4. Do party features affect the MPs' type of career?

To answer these questions, we rely on different streams of literature related to political class studies with a gender perspective and to organisational party literature.

In line with the international literature on women under-representation, the Italian case is not an exception. Although some researches have pointed out that important steps forward have occurred since the mid-1990s, especially at the local level (Carbone & Farina, 2020), gender equality is still far from being achieved, both in the national parliamentary arena (Verzichelli, 2010; Tronconi & Verzichelli 2015; 2019; Marino *et al.*, 2019; Sampugnaro & Montemagno, 2020), and in the local and regional ones (Carbone & Farina, 2020).

Notwithstanding the introduction of a strong system of quota provision since 2017 (i.e. art. 1.10, e law 165/2017), recent studies pointed out that parties seem to have learned how to circumvent such formal requirements by exploiting the electoral rules and in particular the possibility of multiple-candidacies, so much so that most of the female candidates have not been elected (Regalia 2021; Pansardi & Pedrazzani, 2022). Furthermore, many parties filled in the electoral lists with female political outsiders to comply with the norms (Pansardi & Pinto 2020) and therefore in the XVIII legislature more than 70% of the female newcomers have never held a political office before (Sampugnaro & Montemagno, 2020).

Additionally, as Verzichelli *et al.* (2022) have illustrated, following the peak in 2013, approximately 40% of newly elected female politicians were re-elected in subsequent elections. Consequently, these women exclusively gained political experience within the parliamentary arena, thereby exemplifying an alternative career model. Similarly, prior to the implementation of quota systems, studies by Sampugnaro and Montemagno (2020) revealed that a significant number of incumbent women

MPs had previously held solely national offices, further highlighting an alternative career trajectory. If these observations hold true for the XIX legislature, it implies that women not only continue to constitute a minority in Parliament, but regardless of their political affiliation, they seldom exhibit a “planned political career” characterized by ascending from lower-level territorial offices to higher-prestige positions.

Consequently, it is more likely for women MPs being picked up without previous experience to fill in party lists – also to comply with the formal regulations on gender balance – and later they gain political experience limited to the national level in comparison to their male counterparts. Therefore, our first hypothesis is that:

*H1: Women MPs are more likely to develop an alternative career model in comparison to men MPs.*

A second set of hypotheses is related to the territorial organisation of political parties. Party organisation represents one of the most investigated concepts in political science (Krouwel, 2006) and it is one of the most important criteria to classify political parties from the very beginning. Despite numerous scientific research having highlighted the diminishing importance of the organisational dimension (Kircheimer, 1966; Katz & Mair, 1995; Carty, 2004; Bolleyer, 2009), a strong heterogeneity among the different parties still exists and it should be considered, especially when it comes to evaluate mainstream versus new challenger or populist parties (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016; Scarrow *et al.*, 2017; Vittori, 2020).

In our paper we explicitly rely on Gunther and Diamond's (2003) classification of parties according to their organisational strength. They have made a distinction between “organisational thick parties” as parties characterised by a strong territorial structure, a large mass membership base and a strong collateral associative network and “organisational thin parties” as parties mainly centred on networks of personal relationships and with a weak (if not absent) territorial organisational structure. Therefore, according to this classification, parties of cadres or notables, purely personal parties (Blondel *et al.*, 2010; Calise, 2015; Pedersen & Rahat, 2021), but also movement parties (Kitschelt, 2006; Della Porta *et al.*, 2017), would be classified as “thin” parties as they are all characterised by a low level of organisational articulation; on the contrary, traditional mass parties and their heirs, endowed with a strong organisational structure, would be classified as “thick” parties.

In particular, in line with such distinction it is likely that thick parties- due to their strong territorial organisation in sections- may facilitate the movement of party personnel between the different levels of



government, thus favouring the affirmation of the unidirectional career model and (to a lesser extent) of the integrated model, whereas thin parties with scarce territorial organisation would favour the affirmation of the alternative career model (Pilet *et al.* 2014; Tronconi, 2018, p. 618) by allowing people to gain a political office and maintain it for a while to achieve a certain degree of specialisation.

Therefore, parties would constitute the instrument through which politicians could make the most of the career opportunities offered by the multi-level democracy. We expect that:

*H2: MPs belonging to thick parties with strong territorial organisation are more likely to develop a unidirectional career model in comparison to MPs affiliated with thin parties.*

*H2 bis: MPs belonging to thick parties are more likely to develop an integrated career model in comparison to MPs affiliated with thin parties.*

## 2. DATA & METHODS

The paper explores the profile of the parliamentary class (both from the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate) elected after the 2022 general election. The analysis has a twofold aim. First, it aims at pinpointing if similar profiles in terms of socio-economic characteristics and career models emerge among MPs affiliated with different political parties in the aftermath of the new tripolar phase of the Italian party system. Secondly, it has an exploratory purpose, investigating whether there is an influence of gender or party features in shaping the career profiles of the different MPs. In this sense, the choice to focus on both deputies and senators (notwithstanding the specificity of the Italian Senate among the European Upper Chambers) was due to the desire to investigate as much as possible the transformations of the Italian parliamentary class. Moreover, for the sake of comparability, we focused only on national MPs, thus excluding the representatives elected in the foreign constituencies. Consequently, our population is composed of 588 MPs (392 from the Chamber and 196 from the Senate).

To investigate the MPs' profiles and how gender and party characteristics affect their model of career, we deemed a quantitative analysis to be the most appropriate choice.

Bivariate analysis and descriptive statistics were used to check similarities and differences among the MPs' profiles related to gender, age cohort, education, profession, the career model and the party membership.

Then, a multinomial logistic regression was used to test our initial hypotheses, namely, to check to what extent gender and party territorial organisation affect the development of a specific career model.

Variables were operationally defined in the following ways. On the one hand, the career model, which constitutes the dependent variable of the logit regression model, is operationalised as a three-way polytomous variable related to the three different types of careers: "unidirectional", "integrated" and "alternative".

A career was labelled as "unidirectional" whether it occurred incrementally among different levels of government (municipal, provincial, regional, and national/European), regardless of the initial level and of the length of the career. For example, in the unidirectional career type fall MPs such as Chiara Appendino (M5s), municipal councillor (2011-2016) and then mayor of Turin between 2016 and 2021 and finally deputy (in the current legislature), and Beatrice Lorenzin (PD), municipal councillor in Rome between 2001 and 2006, then MP since the 2006 General election and currently senator.

Conversely, a career model was operationalised as "integrated" if it is not possible to trace a linearity in the career trajectories, due to the alternation of offices in the national and in the local governmental levels. This category includes politicians such as Matteo Renzi (IV), President of the Province (2004-2009), then mayor of Florence between 2009 and 2014, then Prime Minister and MP, but also Matteo Salvini (League), European parliamentarian between 2009 and 2018 and concurrently uninterruptedly municipal councillor in Milan.

Finally, a career type was considered as "alternative" if it was characterised only by experience at the national or at the European level (thus devoid of previous local or regional offices). Subjects such as Pierferdinando Casini (PD), MP continuously since 1983 and currently senator and Giuseppe Conte (M5S), Prime Minister between 2018 and 2021 and currently deputy, belong to this category. It is worth mentioning that we drop from the analysis the newcomers without any previous political experience such as Ilaria Cucchi who never held institutional positions and now she is senator among the ranks of Green – Italian Left Alliance. As a consequence, our analysis was run on a total of 516 observations. The alternative model represents the reference category of the multivariate analysis<sup>1</sup>. In Italy, it is important to note

<sup>1</sup> Conventionally, in multinomial logistic regression in which the dependent variable is not ordinal, the most numerous categories is used as a reference category (the unidirectional model in our case). However, for the purposes of the analysis that is proposing to test what affects the development of a unidirectional or integrated career, it seemed more appropriate to use the alternative model as a reference category.

that a parliamentarian can hold concurrent positions as a municipal councillor, municipal executive, and mayor of municipalities with a population under 15,000. However, it is not possible for the dates of assuming office to coincide in two different positions at different governance levels. Therefore, we can always distinguish between the unidirectional model (when entry into local office occurred first) and the integrated model (when entry into national office occurred after).

On the other hand, party organisation and MPs' gender were considered as independent variables. Both variables were operationalized in a dichotomous way.

Indeed, in accordance with Gunther and Diamond's (2003) classification, we opted to categorize parties as thin (assigned a value of 0) or thick (assigned a value of 1) based on their organizational structure. The choice of a dichotomous representation of such characteristic, although it constitutes a simplification of reality, was dictated both by reasons of practicality and comparability. We are aware that starting from the important studies of Janda (1980) and Panebianco (1986), scientific literature proposed a series of indicators to measure the territorial organisational strength of parties (e.g. Katz *et al.*, 1992; Harmel & Janda, 1996; Tavits, 2012; Poguntke *et al.*, 2016). However, some authors have pointed out that some of such indicators cannot be easily applied to new personal or populist parties (Vercesi, 2015, Musella & Vercesi, 2019), making their use in contemporary political systems more complex or scarcely reliable. Moreover, the collection with relative certainty of some of these indicators for small, newly founded parties or for electoral lists that include several different parties may be complex. For these reasons, we deemed the choice of a dichotomous, albeit simple, operationalization as the most appropriate.

Consequently, basing our evaluation on the rich scholarly literature on Italian party organisations (Diamanti, 2009; Ignazi, 2013, Ignazi & Pizzimenti, 2014; Ignazi & Bordandini, 2018, Pizzimenti, 2020; Vittori, 2020; Bordandini *et al.*, 2023), the Democratic Party (PD), the League and Brothers of Italy (FDI) were defined as "thick" parties, whereas Go Italy (FI), the Five Star Movement (M5S), *Noi Moderati* (NM), + Europe (+E), *Azione - Italia Viva* (AZ-IV) and the Green - Italian Left Alliance (AVS) were defined as "thin" parties<sup>2</sup>. Table 1 summarises the modalities of such a variable.

<sup>2</sup> Beyond party organisational features, another aspect we had considered when analysing political career trajectories, is when the party organisation was founded. In fact, parties that have been active in the political scene for long (or that were founded in contexts of greater stability) are likely to make the most of the territorial dimension compared to recently founded parties (Sikk, 2011, Emanuele & Chiamonte, 2023). From an empirical point of view, this aspect has been raised in

**Table 1.** Distribution of organisation type and party type in 2022 General elections.

	Thin/Thick
AVS	Thin
PD	Thick
+E	Thin
SVP	Thick
AZ-IV	Thin
NM	Thin
FI	Thin
Lega	Thick
FDI	Thick
M5S	Thin
SCN	Thin

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Lastly, we operationalized gender as a dichotomous variable with value 0 if the MP is male and 1 if is female.

Specific control variables were also used to increase the robustness of the analysis.

The first set of control variables are linked to the MPs' socio biographical profiles. First, we consider age in years from the year of birth to 2022. Scientific literature (Verzichelli, 2010) underlined that most politicians reach the greatest availability of political capital and resources in the middle-aged cohorts 45-55. To avoid a bias related to the non-linear relationship between age and political career, in the multivariate analysis we chose to operationalize age as the square distance between the age of the MP and the apex of the career (50 years)<sup>3</sup>.

We incorporated also these other control variables: education (due to the small number of subjects with less than a bachelor's degree, operationalized as a dichotomous variable with value 1 assigned to bachelor's degree) and original profession, operationalised as polytomous variable divided in six modalities: professional politicians; entrepreneurs, managers and directors; professionals (lawyers, doctors, accountants, etc.); public employees; private employees; other professions.

We also included some context related control variables, such as the House in which the MPs are elected (value 0 for the Chamber of Deputies and 1 for the Sen-

some recent research on Italian political personnel (Tronconi & Verzichelli, 2015; 2019), which highlighted how recently established parties tend to recruit eccentric parliamentarians compared to the others. We discussed this aspect in the Supplementary material where we also replace our thin and thick parties variable with a specific new and old parties variable as robustness test.

<sup>3</sup> This operationalisation, although more complex than an operationalisation with an ordinal variable, allows to avoid some distortions related to the numerosity of some categories (eg. the 25-29, the 70 or more).

ate), whether MPs are elected in a single-member district (SMD) or not and the geographical area of election of each MP, operationalised as a variable with three modalities, North, Red-Belt and South<sup>4</sup>.

Data were extracted from the National Registry of the Local and Regional Administrators available on the website of the Ministry of the Interior<sup>5</sup>, from the Chamber website and from the Senate website<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS: THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS AND THE CAREER MODELS OF THE MPS OF THE XIX LEGISLATURE

In this section we focus on the socio-economic characteristics and career models of the Italian MPs of the XIX legislature by pinpointing differences and similarities among parliamentary parties.

The over-representation of men in the Italian Parliament compared to women comes as no surprise. However, this time the share of women in the Chamber (Fig. 1) is less in comparison with that in the Senate (Fig. 2), namely 32.7% vs. 34.7%, and there was a drop in comparison to the last legislature (where women were 36% in the Chambers and 34% in the Senate, Tronconi & Verzicelli, 2019).

Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 show the Deputies and Senators distribution per parties and gender. Starting with right-wing parties in the Chamber of Deputies, both the League and Go Italy (FI) elected around 72% of men and 27% of women. Similarly, the electoral cartel “Noi Moderati” which comprises several centrist parties (like UDC which has been present in Parliament since 2002) elected 75% of men and 25% of women to the Chamber. Among centre-left parties both the Democratic Party and the Greens with the Left elected around 66% of men and 33% of women. In the Senate, only the PD and FI have less women than in the Chamber of Deputies, whereas the general trend is an increase of women in the Senate. On the left of the political spectrum AVS elected 50% of women, and in the centre-right Noi Moderati reached 40% of women and, on the right, even the League elected 37.9% of women.

The M5S and AZ-IV have the most gender-balanced parliamentary delegation. In fact, both parties elected

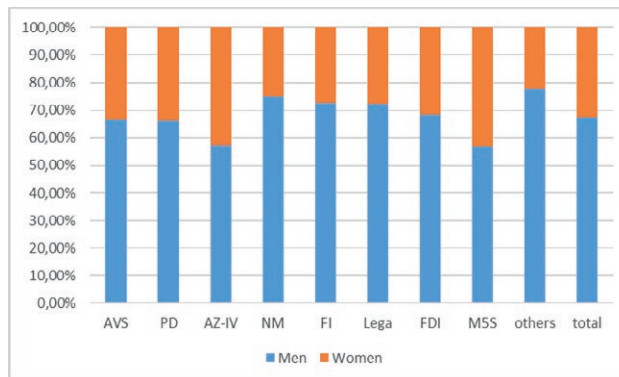


Figure 1. Deputies distribution per gender and parties. (Percentage values). Source: Authors' elaboration.

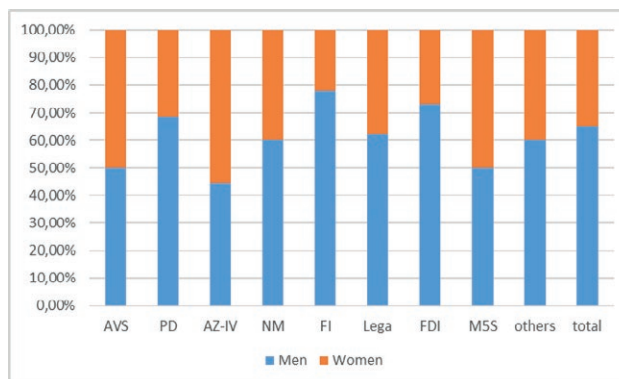


Figure 2. Senators distribution per gender and parties. (Percentage values). Source: Authors' elaboration.

around 57% of men and 43% of women to the Chamber and in the Senate, they elected 50% of women or even more (AZ-IV 55.6%). This does not hold for FDI as it elected 31.6% of women to the Chambers and only 27% to the Senate. This result is probably due to the fact that the bulk of FDI personnel comes from the post-fascist National Alliance (AN), which was founded in 1995 and merged into the People of Freedom (PdL) in 2009, notwithstanding the current FDI emerged from a right-wing split within Silvio Berlusconi's party.

Turning to the age of MPs, the difference between the two Chambers is impressive as 53.1% of the deputies are younger than 50 years old whereas 73% of the senators are 50 and above. In fact, the majority of deputies are in the 40-49 years old categories (37.2%) and in the 50-59 cohort (29.6%). Among senators the most frequent cohort is 50-59 years old (46.4%) followed by that of 40-49 (27%) (Tab. 2).

In the Chamber of Deputies there are only two parties that elected a high number of people over 50s: the

<sup>4</sup> The North includes the following regions: Aosta Valley, Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige. The Red Belt comprises: Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and the Marche. Finally, the South and islands comprises: Lazio, Abruzzi, Campania, Basilicata, Molise, Apulia, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://dait.interno.gov.it/elezioni/anagrafe-amministratori>

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.camera.it/leg19/28> and <https://www.senato.it/leg/19/BGT/Schede/Attsen/Sena.html>

**Table 2.** Deputies (C) and senators (S), distribution per Age cohorts and parties. (Percentage values).

	25-29 C	30-39 C	40-49 C	50-59 C	60-69 C	70+ C	40-49 S	50-59 S	60-69 S	70+ S
AVS	0.0	8.3	50.0	8.3	25.0	8.3	25.0	50.0	0.0	25.0
PD	1.5	9.2	33.8	41.5	10.8	3.1	14.3	60.0	25.7	0.0
AZ-IV	0.0	9.5	42.9	38.1	9.5	0.0	66.7	33.3	0.0	0.0
NM	0.0	0.0	50.0	25.0	12.5	12.5	0.0	40.0	40.0	20.0
FI	0.0	13.6	22.7	31.8	27.3	4.5	11.1	27.8	50.0	11.1
Lega	0.0	21.5	44.6	23.1	7.7	3.1	41.4	51.7	6.9	0.0
FDI	0.9	12.0	40.2	28.2	15.4	3.4	19.0	50.8	23.8	6.3
M5S	3.9	29.4	33.3	21.6	9.8	2.0	46.4	39.3	3.6	10.7
Total	1.0	14.8	37.2	29.6	13.8	3.6	27.0	46.4	20.9	5.6

Source: Authors' elaboration.

PD (55.4%) and FI (63.6%). In the case of FI, the second most frequent cohort among deputies is that of 60-69 (27.3%). Conversely only the League and the M5s elected a high share of people under 50s, both around 66%. In fact, these are the only parties where the 30-39 cohort is above 20% (21.5% for the League and 29.4% for the M5s). Therefore, not all old parties have relatively old political personnel, as the League is undoubtedly the exception. On the other hand, most of the deputies of the other parties are younger than 50 but as mentioned only the M5s has a high share of under 40s. Among the senators the most frequent age cohort is the 50-59, as already mentioned, but with some important exceptions. In fact, 50% of the FI senators and 40% of NM senators are in the cohort 60-69. Thus, they are older than the average. Conversely, the most frequent cohort for AZ-IV and the M5s is that of 40-49 years old, respectively 66.7% and 46.4% of the senators. Furthermore, despite the most frequent cohort being 50-59, 41.4% of senators of the League are between 30 and 39 years old, confirming that the political personnel of the League is generally young. The case of FDI is peculiar since their senators are generally old. The representatives mostly belong to the 50-59 (50.8%) and 60-69 (23.8%) age categories like those of the PD.

As far as education is concerned, there are no relevant differences among the MPs of different parties, since most of the deputies (76.3%) and senators (74%) of all parties have a degree.

Looking at the original profession both in the Chamber and in the Senate the three most frequent categories are: liberal professionals (respectively 40.3% and 48%), managers or entrepreneurs (respectively 16.1% and 19.9%) and employees in the private sector (13.8% and 11.7%). However, in the Chamber of deputies there is also a consistent number of political professionals (12.5%).

For almost all parties, the majority of deputies are liberal professionals, followed by managers or entrepreneurs.

The only exceptions are the AVS, where a significant portion of deputies (25%) are employed in the public sector, and the PD, where the majority of deputies (27.7%) are political professionals. Other peculiarities are the following. For AZ-IV it is worth mentioning that the second most frequent category is that of employees in the private sector (28.6%) rather than manager-entrepreneurs and that there is a high share of political professionals (19.1%). For NM the most frequent category is that of managers-entrepreneurs (37.5%) rather than liberal professionals which is the second category along with employees in the private sector (both 16.9%). For the League, the second cohort is that of managers-entrepreneurs and employees in the private sector (both 16.9%) whereas the third is that of political professionals (12.3%).

Most of the senators, irrespective of their party affiliation, are liberal professionals. The only exception in this respect is that of Greens and the Left, where a large portion of senators are union officials (50%) and employees in the public sector (25%). The second most frequent category is that of manager-entrepreneurs for all parties with the exceptions of the PD and the M5s. In the former case, the second most frequent category is that of union officials (14.3%), in the latter case that of artisans and shopkeepers (17.9%). Finally, it is worth mentioning that 13.8% of the League senators are political professionals. All in all, deputies and senators seem to be a rather homogeneous class with regards to the original profession. There are only a few differences among parties, and these are typical of leftist parties and the M5S. On one hand, for the leftist parties (AVS and PD), having a background as union officials remains an important factor for serving as MPs.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, particularly with regards to the M5S senators, the pro-

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of the analysis, trade unions officials were included in the "private employees" category.



files are most dissimilar compared to those of other parties, as both artisans and shopkeepers, as well as public employees, are highly represented.

When it comes to the career models of MPs, the unidirectional model is the most frequent (respectively 44.1% of the deputies and 41.8% of the senators), followed by the integrated model (23.2% of the deputies and 25% of the senators) whereas the alternative model is the least widespread (respectively 20.2% of the deputies and 21.9% of the senators). In addition, the share of newcomers is quite similar in both chambers (respectively, 12.5% and 11.2%).

However, when analysing gender-based data, it was found that despite the unidirectional model being the most common for both men and women, there is a notable proportion of female deputies (30.5%) and female senators (26.5%) who follow an alternative career model, which ranks as the second most frequent in both cases. Furthermore, a significant percentage of female MPs (15.6% in the Chamber and 17.7% in the Senate) are newcomers without prior political experience. Consequently, considering both categories, it becomes apparent that women face challenges in fully harnessing the opportunities provided by multilevel democracy, as the integrated model remains marginal, and the unidirectional model falls well below the 50% mark for both female deputies and senators. Moreover, there are certain interesting differences in the career paths of deputies and senators according to their party affiliation.

Starting with the Chamber of Deputies, the most common model for most deputies, regardless of their political affiliation, is the unidirectional model, followed by the integrated model. This indicates that deputies are generally more inclined to pursue political offices by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by a multilevel democracy, moving between different territorial levels when political positions are available, rather than solely focusing on national posts. Specifically, this is particularly true for AZ-IV and the League, where the integrated model is characteristic of 33.3% and 38.5% of their deputies, respectively.

In contrast, the M5S is the party where approximately 65% of deputies follow an alternative model. Specifically, most M5S deputies have only experienced national political positions or are newcomers without previous experience (17.6%), while a minority (15.7%) had some prior experience at the subnational level (Fig. 3).

When examining the senators (Fig. 4), both AZ-IV and League senators confirm the distribution observed among the deputies. In both cases, the most frequent

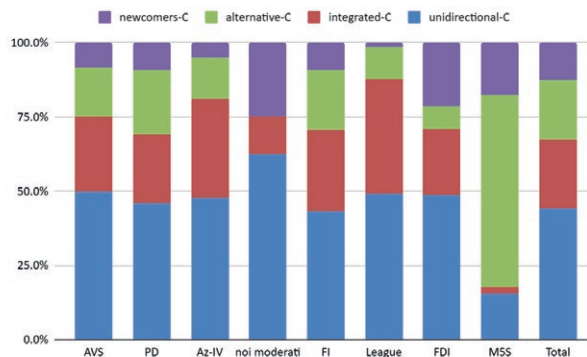


Figure 3. Career models of Deputies per party (percentage values). Source: Authors' elaboration.

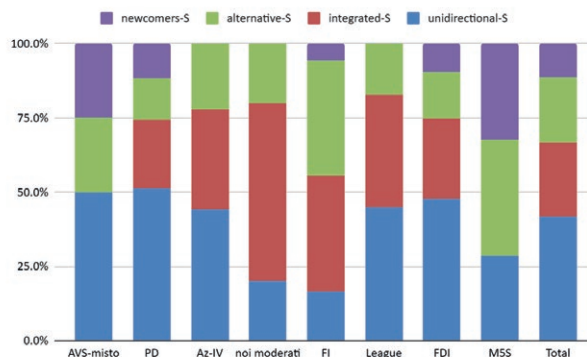


Figure 4 Career models of senators per party (Percentage values). Source: Authors' elaboration.

career model remains the unidirectional model (44.4% for AZ-IV and 48.8% for League), followed by the integrated model (33.3% for AZ-IV and 37.9% for League). Additionally, the same pattern observed among deputies holds true for M5S senators as well, with the alternative model being the most widespread (39.3%), despite an increase in the unidirectional model (28.6%) and the presence of newcomers (32.1%). However, the career paths of senators in two parties (NM, FI) diverge from those of deputies. Among NM senators, 60% followed an integrated model, while the remaining two models appear marginal (both 20%). As for FI senators, the most prevalent career models become the alternative and the integrated ones (both 38.9%). Overall, the integrated model is more common among senators compared to deputies for most parties, except for AVS where the alternative model is prominent, and M5S where the unidirectional model experiences a slight increase.

#### 4. FINDINGS

As stated before, we tested our hypothesis with a multinomial logistic regression with the alternative career type as a base reference. The results of the logit regression are displayed in Table 3; the first part of the table shows the effect on the unidirectional versus the alternative career type whereas the following shows the results on the integrated versus the alternative career type. In the second column is also presented the relative risk ratio (RRR)<sup>8</sup>.

As shown in Table 3, both gender and the party organizational feature are statistically significant in the two different models. Regarding gender, the correlation is negative, indicating that women MPs are less likely to develop a unidirectional or integrated career pattern compared to men. Instead, they are more likely to develop an alternative career pattern. This result confirms our initial expectation that women face challenges in developing a linear career trajectory that progresses through various territorial levels and eventually leads to parliamentary positions. On the other hand, women are frequently elected directly to national bodies without having prior political experience. Therefore, hypothesis H1 is confirmed.

Regarding the organizational nature of parties, the data reveal a significantly positive correlation with “thick” parties. This finding aligns with our expectations, indicating that highly structured and organized parties are more inclined to provide their MPs with stronger and more linear career planning. Furthermore, these parties demonstrate a greater ability to leverage the various institutional incentives that characterize a multi-level system compared to parties with limited structure. The relationship is particularly strong, as indicated by the high RRR values.

The analysis demonstrates that women are less than half as likely as men (0.404 and 0.29, respectively) to develop a unidirectional or integrated career pattern. On the other hand, representatives of thick parties are more than three times as likely (3.103 and 3.201, respectively) to develop these two career patterns. Overall, the results appear to confirm the initially proposed hypotheses, H2 and H2 bis.

Finally, although not originally included in our set of hypotheses and not being the primary focus of our

analysis, we briefly discuss the results of the control variables. While providing definitive interpretations is challenging, we can speculate on these variables, which may suggest potential directions for future research.

Within model 1, we observe a negative correlation between age and the unidirectional model. This implies that as age deviates further from the central age group, the probability of developing the unidirectional career model slightly decreases (RRR equals 0.99) compared to the reference group (the alternative model). We can speculate that the impact of age is likely attributed to the relative ease of accessing political office within the political system.

In other words, politicians belonging to the central age group are likely to have longer political and institutional experience, which enhances their ability to navigate the institutional system and move more seamlessly between different levels of government. On the contrary, younger or older politicians are more prone to direct election to national institutions, bypassing intermediate levels. These speculations highlight the potential influence of age on career patterns and warrant further investigation.

Furthermore, the regression analysis reveals a significant negative effect of being elected in the South in both Model 1 and Model 2 (coefficients -0.839 and -0.783, RRR 0.43 and 0.46). This finding is somewhat surprising considering the existing literature, which suggests that southern politicians often have career patterns characterized by extensive local experience before ascending to national positions (Emanuele & Marino, 2016). However, we believe that this result can be attributed to the strong emergence of the M5S (Five Star Movement) in the South.

In other words, the M5S’s substantial electoral success in the southern region resulted in a higher proportion of Southern MPs without significant local experience. This may have contributed to the observed negative effect. Nevertheless, these speculations warrant further empirical investigation to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying dynamics.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

This article examined the composition of the Italian parliamentary class that emerged from the last general elections in 2022. More precisely, through a quantitative statistical analysis, the research highlights the similarities and differences of the socio-political characteristics among parliamentarians of different party groups both in the Chamber and in the Senate and it also provides

<sup>8</sup> When a multinomial logistic regression is used, the relative risk ratio is used more frequently (Kleinbaum & Klein, 2010). It is calculated exponentiating the multinomial logit coefficients and it shows the risk of the outcome falling in the comparison group compared to the risk of the outcome falling in the referent group changes with the variable in question.

**Table 3.** Results of multinomial logistic regression.

	Model 1 (Unidirectional vs. alternative)		Model 2 (Integrated vs. alternative)	
	B	RRR	B	RRR
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Female	-0.906*** (0.262)	0.404 (0.106)	-1.235*** (0.285)	0.29 (0.082)
Thick Party	1.132*** (0.250)	3.103 (0.776)	1.146*** (0.279)	3.201 (0.894)
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Age	-0.00393*** (0.000971)	0.99 (0.001)	-0.000132 (0.0008)	0.99 (0.000)
Degree	-0.215 (0.310)	0.80 (0.249)	-0.400 (0.347)	0.670 (0.232)
Senate	-0.143 (0.266)	0.867 (0.230)	-0.0632 (0.300)	1.065 (0.319)
Single-Member District	0.523* (0.256)	1.688 (0.432)	0.638* (0.279)	1.829 (0.527)
<i>Profession (Reference category: Professional Politicians)</i>				
Entrepreneurs, Managers and Directors	0.0712 (0.501)	1.073 (0.538)	-0.680 (0.544)	0.506 (0.275)
Professionals	1.288 (0.703)	3.62 (2.548)	0.795 (0.763)	2.213 (1.689)
Public Employees	0.277 (0.450)	1.318 (0.593)	-0.273 (0.485)	0.760 (0.368)
Private Employees	1.020 (0.545)	2.771 (1.510)	0.297 (0.582)	1.345 (0.782)
Other Professions	-0.1 (0.590)	0.8 (0.486)	-1.210 (0.667)	0.298 (0.198)
<i>Geographical zone of election (Reference category: North)</i>				
Red Belt	-0.317 (0.369)	0.728 (0.269)	-0.0572 (0.399)	0.944 (0.376)
South	-0.839*** (0.278)	0.432 (0.120)	-0.783* (0.309)	0.456 (0.323)
Constant	1.134 (0.745)	3.106 (2.313)	0.995 (0.846)	2.075 (2.228)
N	516		516	
Pseudo R2	0.104		0.104	

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001\*\*\*.

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

an exploratory analysis on those factors that can influence their career model.

The results of the research have a double relevance, both on empirical and theoretical grounds.

From a theoretical point of view, the research proved that personal and organisational factors such as gender and the nature of the party to which MPs belong, influence their career models.

Indeed, the analysis has highlighted how, at least in the Italian context, women are not only fewer in number than men, but also have less structured and concentrated career models.

In other words, our findings show that, despite the amount of time women invest in politics, their career model often diverges from that of men. Specifically, our data indicates that women face challenges in fully lever-

aging the range of political positions available in a multi-level democracy when compared to men. This observation remains consistent regardless of the level of institutionalization within their respective parties.

Moreover, the research has emphasized the impact of the organizational dimension of a party on the development of specific career patterns. It has been observed that highly organized parties are more effective in leveraging the opportunities presented by the multilevel institutional system. These parties are better equipped to plan career trajectories, resulting in a higher likelihood of unidirectional or integrated career models.

Consequently, our research has made a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on gender disparities in politics. It has shed light on the predominant career models among women and has explored party structure as a key driver of these models, thereby addressing intra-organizational approaches. In doing so, our study has partially bridged the gap in the existing literature by examining the influence of party institutionalization on career models.

From an empirical point of view, the analysis underlined that socio-demographic characteristics do not differ particularly from those found for MPs elected in previous electoral rounds. Parliamentarians are in fact generally men, with a high level of education, performing highly qualified professions and with previous political experience at the local level. Specifically, by looking at the gender dimension, the Parliament elected in 2022 has a lower number of women than in 2018, halting the path towards an increase of gender balance that seemed to have started in the two previous legislatures.

Giorgia Meloni's party, the actual winner of the 2022 elections, being a "novelty" within the Italian political system, may have exhibited certain peculiarities in terms of its parliamentary class recruitment patterns. However, the data indicate that the party largely follows the recruitment methods of traditional parties. Despite having the first female party leader who became the Prime Minister, this novelty did not have a significant impact on the party's recruitment of political personnel. The parliamentary class primarily consists of male politicians who were already active in politics during the so-called Second Republic (and in some cases, even during the First Republic). Moreover, when women are present, they tend to be newcomers or exhibit less structured career models. Therefore, Meloni's leadership not only failed to affect the political agenda in terms of increasing gender-related issues (De Giorgi *et al.*, 2023), but it also did not result in a gender-balanced recruitment of political personnel, at least until now.

In contrast, the M5S seems to maintain its distinctiveness. Contrary to common expectations, there was

no normalization of the party, which continues to primarily recruit political outsiders. The new leadership under former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who benefited from the departure of numerous historical figures (including former Minister Luigi Di Maio), managed to maintain this distinctive trait of the M5S. It remains to be seen in the future whether the M5S can sustain this specificity and deviate from traditional political and institutional socialization patterns.

Our findings suggest interesting avenues for future research, particularly by expanding the analysis through longitudinal and comparative perspectives or by adopting a more comprehensive and multidimensional operationalization of the party organizational dimension.

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