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Civil Society Elites in the Italian Third Sector

A Comparative Perspective

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Civil Society Elites in the Italian Third Sector

A Comparative Perspective

Cecilia Santilli · Roberto Scaramuzzino

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Cecilia Santilli • Roberto Scaramuzzino

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This introductory chapter explores the development of the civil society sector in Europe, emphasising the processes of professionalisation and NGOisation that result in the concentration of power and resources among a few key actors. By integrating insights from civil society studies and elite studies, the book addresses a significant research gap concerning power stratification within civil society. The concept of a “civil society elite” is central, focusing on individuals in leading positions within major organisations. The Italian context is highlighted, underscoring the third sector’s dual role in providing social services and advocacy. Key terms like “Third Sector” and “Ruling Class” are introduced, with the term “elite” being justified with reference to C. Wright Mills’ perspective on power elites. This chapter outlines the book’s structure, which includes an in-depth analysis of the Italian context, the organisational landscape, and leader composition, comparisons with professionalisation processes within the UK, career trajectories at the EU level, and subjective perspectives on elites in Sweden. This comprehensive framework sets the stage for a detailed examination of power dynamics and elitisation within the civil society sector in Italy, offering comparative insights from other European contexts and discussing the implications for civil society’s role in democracy.

Keywords Civil society • Elite studies • Italian third sector • Power dynamics • Resource stratification • Ruling class • Leadership

CIVIL SOCIETY AND POWER

Civil society, like other societal fields, has always been filled with power relations and competition between actors. Competition over resources, which are often limited, is a natural part of the field, whether in relation to public funding, members, volunteers, donors, public attention, or access to policymaking. Competition over these resources perpetuates a dynamic of winners and losers among the involved actors, leading to an unequal distribution of power within the field. At times, however, this aspect of internal competition has been overshadowed by a dominant view of civil society as a social space for nurturing social trust and expressing solidarity, with an emphasis on collaboration rather than competition. It is nevertheless clear that civil society organisations (hereafter abbreviated as CSOs), interest groups, and social movements not only tend to compete with each other, but at times might also become engaged in challenging each other and counteracting each other's actions over ideological cleavages.

Increased inequalities in society have been acknowledged in recent years (Piketty, 2014; Chancel et al., 2022), a trend that does not seem to have missed the civil society sector. There are in fact signs of the sector becoming increasingly stratified and marked by oligarchic tendencies. With the professionalisation, bureaucratisation, and institutionalisation of many social movements, a process often referred to as “NGOisation”, alongside a trend towards civil society actors increasingly becoming engaged in assisting the public sector to solve societal challenges (della Porta, 2020), we are witnessing a growing concentration of political and economic resources in the hands of small groups of major and structured organisations and their leaders within European civil societies (Scaramuzzino & Lee, 2024). In many countries, large and international organisations have become recognised brands with significant memberships, generous donors, and extensive turnover, which have gained significant access to the corridors of power. Their central position and access to resources allows them to engage in shaping decisions that affect not only their own members and beneficiaries but also society more generally (Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino, 2017; Guo & Saxton, 2020). This phenomenon also has an impact on the individuals engaged in civil society. As organisations construct hierarchies, civil society leaders become

progressively more disconnected from their members and constituencies. They become socialised within powerful institutions that encourage interactions and integration with political and business elites (Mills, 1956; Michels, 2001). We might even speak of a particular elite group that we could call a civil society elite (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020; Scaramuzzino, 2020).

The increased elitisation of civil society, in the sense of an increased concentration of resources and power in the hands of a few, can become a problem for organisations as they seek to fulfil their societal function, as already pointed out by Robert Michels in the early twentieth century (Michels, 2001). It can be argued that, for a sector that is often ascribed the role of being a counterweight to the state and the market in liberal democracy (Tocqueville, 2003), it is problematic if the leadership tends to reproduce the same inequality structures for which the sector is supposed to be compensating. In fact, we could expect that the more resources and power become concentrated at the top of the hierarchy in civil society, the more will those positions be occupied by representatives of privileged groups (Putnam, 1976). Issues of solidarity and the emancipation of disempowered societal groups have often been the hallmark of civil society, but how can they be pursued by organisations if their leadership lacks representation in those specific groups, and if the civil society elite begins to more and more closely resemble the general elite?

If these tendencies towards NGOisation seem to characterise many civil society contexts, their development and consequences are shaped by the specificities of the societal and political contexts in which CSOs operate. In contexts in which women's emancipation has been more successful, we would expect to find a larger proportion of female leaders in the civil society elite than in a context in which patriarchal structures are more dominant (Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2023). Among these contextual factors, besides the more general elite structure of society, we also find the historical development of the sector, its characteristics and composition, its main functions in society, as well as its relations with the state and with other powerful actors (Scaramuzzino, 2012). In fact, these factors tend to shape both the types of resources available to CSOs and the resources that the organisations need to maintain their societal function. The status of the sector in a given context will also define the amount of power and resources that the sector wields, and hence its preconditions for resource accumulation and elitisation.

This volume addresses many of these debates by providing an original investigation into the Italian third sector's elite and analysing it in comparison with other European civil societies, as well as in relation to the development of the Italian third sector and political system. Already the Italian concepts of third sector (*Terzo Settore*) and elite (*Classe dirigente*) are setting the scene for a specific understanding of civil society and elites, and we will come back to this.

THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ITALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ELITE

Italian civil society, which is characterised by a myriad of actors operating at local, regional, and national levels, is divided among cultural and ideological pillars. It navigates through corporatist logics, professionalisation tendencies, and challenges posed by populist political and public actors (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022). Italy being marked by a residual public welfare system, its civil society has historically performed an ambiguous or hybrid role, blending robust social service provision with advocacy endeavours (Ranci et al., 2009; Borzaga & Fazzi, 2011; Busso, 2018). As in other countries, in Italy too we are witnessing an increased shifting of public responsibilities towards the civil society sector in many societal areas, such as poverty, integration, and the reception of migrants. Amidst this evolution, numerous CSOs have emerged as pivotal players in welfare provision, contributing to a parallel system often termed the “second welfare state” in the Italian context (Cataldi & Cappellato, 2020).

This role has become recognised to such an extent that it became regulated by law in 2017 (Balli et al., 2017). Through this law, the state acknowledged the third sector—comprising the more formally organised segments of civil society—as an independent sector of public utility. It introduced mechanisms for the sector's representation and participation in decision-making processes, alongside other social components. The arenas for consultation with the third sector are only open to a selection of the “most representative” networks or meta-organisations. The principal civil society actor recognised by the state as being representative of the third sector is Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore, which has a permanent seat on the Council for the Third Sector (Consiglio Nazionale del Terzo Settore) and the power to appoint other civil society members to this state–civil society consultation body. The rise of the Forum as an instance

of coordination and representation of the sector can be understood as part of the hierarchisation of the sector which, however, is not limited to this institutional arena or to the general sector. Other umbrella organisations, having as their members lower-level networks of organisations, have developed and gained power to represent civil society actors active in specific subfields: for instance, cooperatives (*Alleanza delle Cooperative Italiane*) or international aid (*Associazione delle Ong Italiane*).

This change, which has occurred after a long history of complex relations with the state, has led the sector to become not only institutionalised but also increasingly centralised, with the establishment of one meta-organisation at the top of the hierarchy representing the whole sector in decision-making processes, as well as meta-organisations specific to certain policy areas (cf. Ranci et al., 2009). Hence, the Italian third sector appears to be divided into subfields and to have a pyramidal structure that moves upwards from individual organisations across four levels of networks. Within such a hierarchical structure, it becomes interesting to observe the underlying logics to the unequal distribution of power and resources not only among civil society actors but also among the individuals holding strategic positions within the sector. These individual leaders, as the elite of the third sector, are also affected by and involved in these processes and, we believe, play a crucial role in shaping them.

The relations between the elite of the third sector and other elite groups, more specifically the political ones, have changed since the 1990s and are now more complex than in the past. The traditional ties between important sections of the Catholic movement and the Communist movement and the political parties have become looser, while new, more independent, actors have entered the field (Biorcio & Vitale, 2016; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). New political actors have started to challenge civil society actors based on a populist agenda. Thus, civil society leaders find themselves trying to defend their role and position against the claims of political actors that they are no longer representative of the people (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022). However, we are also witnessing powerful third-sector leaders entering the public sector and taking up top governmental positions, such as the national president of the Red Cross (*Croce Rossa Italiana*), who became regional president of the region Latium at the last elections. This is occurring while the large majority of Italian third-sector organisations remain local associations with few members and mostly relying on volunteers to run their activities.

While the civil society sector deals with the dual function of supplier of services for the state and acting as challenger of the state on behalf of its constituencies, the ruling class within the Italian third sector faces similar challenges to those of the civil society elites of many other European countries. They are also increasingly challenged by populist parties, which argue for a direct relationship with the people and seek to reduce the margins of manoeuvre for all intermediary bodies, including civil society actors (Ruzza, 2020).

Exploring the elite of the Italian third sector in relation to the specific national context, as well as in comparison with other civil society elites, allows us to shed light on an understudied part of civil society, which can nevertheless function as a litmus paper for the challenges facing the sector in the coming years. While Italy offers important insights into the elitisation of civil society within a liberal democracy, this volume adopts a cross-national comparative approach, encompassing other national contexts that are often associated with distinct welfare and civil society regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Salamon et al., 2004). Our comparisons include the UK, which represents a liberal civil society regime, and Sweden, which embodies a social democratic regime. We also develop a comparison with civil society at the EU level to add a supra-national dimension to the analysis of civil society elites. In doing so, the volume seeks to describe the key characteristics of the third-sector elite, while also comparing it with those of political and economic elites in some chapters. Furthermore, the volume provides a theoretical and conceptual development that draws upon both civil society studies and elite studies, two strands of research that have often been kept apart.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND ELITES

Studies of CSOs, interest groups, and social movements have a long tradition, especially in the social sciences. A considerable amount of work has been done on the issues of civil society actors' and movements' successes and failures, resource mobilisation, and influence. Many of these issues and research problems have been addressed by research on different types of civil society actors, such as third-sector organisations (Casey, 2004), social movements (Giugni, 1998), non-profit organisations (Neumayr et al., 2015), and interest groups (Dür, 2008). Depending on the types of organisations and their goals, different kinds of resources and influence have been considered relevant. For instance, while social movement studies has focused on the mobilisation of constituencies and adherents for the

purpose of achieving societal influence, interest group studies has focused on access to policymakers and political influence (Johansson et al., 2019).

While individual leaders are frequently acknowledged as pivotal in determining the success or failure of social movements and interest groups in achieving their objectives (Giugni, 1998; De Cesare, 2013), there remains a dearth of understanding or theorisation regarding the attributes of individuals occupying the top positions in civil society. Little attention has been devoted to exploring the dynamics propelling certain individuals to attain influential positions within civil society or to the societal structures influencing access to such positions.

Research on elites has traditionally addressed subjects such as the access of top leaders to power, their backgrounds, their interactions with other influential groups, and their attitudes and values (Ellersgaard et al., 2013; Best & Higley, 2018). This body of research encompasses studies on business and political elites, at both national and local levels (Edling et al., 2014; Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). It includes studies of both business and political elites (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018), at both national and local levels (Edling et al., 2014). This tradition of studies has also encompassed Italy, albeit with varied mappings of the ruling class (Carboni, 2016). However, civil society has rarely been included as a sector considered capable of producing elites in these studies (for exceptions, see Göransson, 2007, Ruostetsaari, 2015). The sector has often been considered not powerful or independent enough (Hartmann, 2015). We could say that such organisations control too few resources to be able to spawn an elite. In elite studies where civil society leaders are incorporated, they are frequently categorised alongside the political elite, such as religious leaders or trade union representatives (Best & Higley, 2018). Moreover, previous studies that have considered civil society elites as a distinct group have often concluded that they constitute a lower-tier elite, less exclusive than political or business elites (Göransson, 2007; Carboni, 2016).

This volume originates from a comparative research programme led by Professor Håkan Johansson at the School of Social Work, Lund University (Sweden). Entitled “Civil Society Elites? Comparing Elite Composition, Reproduction, Integration, and Contestation in European Civil Societies”, the project was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond for the period 2018–2023. Bridging civil society studies and elite studies, the programme aimed to fill this gap, opening up a new research agenda around the concept of “civil society elites” (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020; Scaramuzzino & Lee, 2024).

This volume aims to contribute to this research agenda by drawing upon elite studies in its methodological and theoretical approach to the leaders of resource-rich organisations in civil society. However, in order to understand processes of elitisation, it also draws upon civil society studies and some of the most salient theoretical debates related to this particular sphere of society. This recent strand of research has shown that civil society, like other sectors, is marked by competition between actors with different interests in gaining and controlling “valuable resources, such as money, information, expertise, and knowledge or ability to mobilise extensive numbers of people to push for policy change” (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020, p. 83). A growing literature linked to the programme has identified the characteristics of civil society leaders, their pathways to top positions, how they interact with other elites, and the actors who challenge them (Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021; Meeuwisse & Kalm, 2023), and has shed light on the power relations within civil societies stemming from resource stratification and hierarchisation (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020; Scaramuzzino, 2020).

Building upon this research strand, this volume offers the first comprehensive investigation into the elite of the Italian third sector. It analyses this elite in relation to the power stratification structure that has emerged within this field in recent years. Based on unique empirical data stemming from a recent civil society elite survey study carried out in Italy, the UK, Sweden, and at the EU level, we address this gap by engaging in an in-depth analysis of the power structure of the Italian third sector, starting from the notion of a third-sector elite. We engage with the resource distribution among third-sector organisations and the characteristics of the sector’s elite in relation to the general population, the grassroots, the economic and political elites, and in comparison with other European contexts. In doing so, the volume provides new and original insights into a field rarely considered to be marked by power dynamics or relations and into a context that, due to its complex governance, risks being difficult to access for an international public.

THE CONCEPTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS ELITE APPLIED TO THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

Building upon studies of civil society elites, within this volume we utilise the concepts of a third-sector elite and civil society elite interchangeably. In civil society studies, the notions of civil society and the third sector are often used interchangeably. In many national contexts, both concepts

indicate a structured and autonomous sector situated between the state and the market, consisting of citizen participation, expressions of interest, and formal mobilisation occurring outside of and often in opposition to the public and business sectors. Recent research has revealed processes of hybridisation of different civil society actors with, on one hand, the trend towards an NGOisation of many social movements. Particularly during the 1990s, these movements became more structured and gained access to decision-making arenas. On the other hand, we are also witnessing the more recent hybridisation of more established CSOs into social movement organisations (della Porta, 2020). Since 2000, in fact, as a consequence of austerity, xenophobic policies, and the humanitarian crisis, many established organisations in Western countries have acquired some characteristics usually considered typical of social movements, such as the use of direct action, networks, and politicised discourses (Ibid.).

Such apparently contradictory processes of NGOisation and hybridisation tend to produce a growing complexity within civil society actors and have opened up a debate in civil society studies and social movement studies about the conceptualisation of the field. Without entering this theoretical debate, but taking into account the complexity of the field, we believe that the notion of the third sector best represents the subject of our analysis and the Italian context. Our focus here, in fact, is on individuals who control significant resources and exercise considerable influence, both inside and outside the field, by holding top positions in major established organisations that are active at a national level.

As discussed in this book, this decision entails excluding from the analysis certain segments of Italian civil society, such as smaller, informal, or poorly structured groups, social movements, or organisations operating solely at the local or regional levels. Therefore, based on a broad conception of civil society that encompasses heterogeneous actors—both formal and informal—the term “third sector” has proved more suitable for our examination of the civil society elite. This conceptual decision entails methodological implications, particularly in terms of prioritising economic resources (staff and funding) and political resources (access to decision-making) over media-related resources (access to the media) (see also Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2024). These methodological considerations are further elucidated in Chap. 3. However, for pragmatic and stylistic reasons, this book seamlessly integrates both concepts—civil society elite and third-sector elite—as well as the designations of third-sector organisations and civil society organisations. Moreover, the notion of civil society is more representative in other contexts, facilitating comparisons between

the Italian context and that of countries such as Sweden and the UK, where the notion of the third sector is less prevalent than in Italy, as well as within the EU. However, it is important to emphasise that this study is limited to the Italian third sector and does not fully represent all facets of Italian civil society.

In this book, we also adopt the notion of an “elite” as a concept to describe the group of people who are part of the third sector, occupy central positions, and have access to powerful resources, whether economic, political, or in terms of visibility. Considering the specificities and sensitivities of the Italian context, we could have used the concept of a “ruling class” (*classe dirigente*), which would better reflect how Italian third-sector leaders would describe themselves. In fact, the concept of an “elite” in Italy has become highly contentious and sensitive in recent years. With the growth of populist parties over the past decade, and despite the differences between them in Italy, their common anti-elitism (Brubaker, 2017) has also impacted upon civil society, which is often accused of not representing the people and being governed by elites, linked to political and economic elites (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). However, while the concept of a “ruling class” traces its roots back to early Italian scholars such as Mosca and Pareto, and its usage within the Italian context remains notably broader and more flexible than among its international counterparts (Newell, 2016, p. 4), within the realm of international elite research, the term “elite” predominates. Moreover, nowadays using the concept of class, with its Marxist connotations, raises the question of the elite’s class consciousness, which is not addressed in this book.

Hence, we have chosen to adopt C. Wright Mills’ perspective on the power elite, as it allows us to better capture the complexity of power structures within modern societies. As Mills (1956) argued, the elite are not a monolithic group, but rather a network of individuals and institutions that wield significant influence over the direction of society. While a ruling class is primarily defined by its relationship to the means of production, an elite can be composed of individuals from various backgrounds, including business, politics, the media, and academia. This enables a more nuanced understanding of power structures in contemporary social and political contexts.

Therefore, although our study focuses on the formal leaders of the most resource-rich organisations in the Italian third sector, individuals who formally govern these entities, thus potentially excluding more charismatic leaders whose influence may lie in media exposure (e.g.,

influencers), we employ the notion of an elite. Our choice is purely scientific, and it is not the normative intent of the book to pass judgement on civil society elites.

Furthermore, in this book, we interchangeably use the notions of “elite”, “elites”, and “elite groups” for stylistic reasons and depending on the context. In the title, we opted for “elite” in the singular form to emphasise the specificities of elites within Italian civil society, although we acknowledge that it is not a homogeneous group in terms of its members’ social, political, or economic backgrounds (Santilli, 2024). Where possible, we refer to these members of civil society elite(s) as “leaders” to emphasise their position within CSOs. This represents a new and exciting field of research that requires bridging civil society studies and elite studies.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into three main parts. Part I introduces the volume in three chapters. After this introduction, Chap. 2 aims to present the Italian context and to propose a context-based framework for understanding the third-sector elite. It focuses on the historical development of the Italian third sector and its relations with the state, as well as on how political power and influence are exercised by civil society actors in the Italian context and the elite structure of Italian society. Finally, Chap. 2 deals with more current developments and challenges facing the sector. Chapter 3 covers the methodologies used in the study and the data upon which the analyses are based.

Part II of the volume includes two chapters presenting a mapping of the field of Italian elite organisations and their leaders. Chapter 4 explores the organisational landscape of the elite in the Italian third sector. It is based on a mapping of elite organisations in Italy at the national level. Chapter 5 deals with the composition of the Italian third-sector elite. The sociodemographic composition of Italian civil society’s elite is presented and discussed, and compared with that of other elites by looking at previous studies. We also compare the profile of these leaders with that of the general population and grassroots/activists through the European Social Survey (ESS). Thus, the chapter also addresses the distance or gap between the elite and the “masses”, a classical theme in elite studies (Dellmuth et al., 2022).

Part III is composed of three chapters focusing on specific aspects of elites and elitisation, and also involves comparison with other contexts.

Chapter 6 deals with the topic of professionalisation, understood as a shift in the human resources of CSOs from unpaid volunteering to paid employment (Hwang & Powell, 2009). We compare the level of professionalisation of the Italian third sector's ruling class with that of British civil society's elite. British civil society has often been described as entrepreneurial and very much involved in providing services on behalf of public agencies. The analysis is based on an expectation that the British civil society elite will be professionalised to a larger extent than the Italian one. Chapter 7 deals with the career trajectories (Norris-Tirrell et al., 2018; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021) of the Italian third-sector elite compared to EU-level leaders. EU-level civil society is a more recent phenomenon compared to Italian civil society, and follows the increasing interest of EU institutions in issues such as employment, social exclusion, discrimination, and human rights. Many CSOs at the EU level are umbrella organisations encompassing member organisations in various European countries, including Italy. Hence, it is interesting to explore the extent to which the career paths of Italian leaders differ from those of EU leaders. Chapter 8 explores the Italian third-sector elite's subjective views and perceptions of the general elite and of the civil society elite, and we compare their perspectives with those of their Swedish colleagues. The point of departure here is the challenge in defining a civil society elite due to the inherent tension existing between the normatively ascribed function of civil society in liberal democracies and the very concept of an elite, entailing as it does an unequal concentration of power in the hands of a few (Etzioni-Halevy, 2001). These two contexts are interesting to compare on this matter because they entail quite different general attitudes towards power and elites. While Sweden is characterised by high levels of trust and a structural understanding of poverty and inequality, Italy is characterised by low levels of trust and an individualistic understanding of poverty.

Chapter 9 concludes the volume by summarising its results and discussing them in relation to the roles and functions ascribed to civil society in Western democracies.

In conclusion, this book provides a comprehensive exploration of the Italian third-sector elite, dissecting its historical development, sociodemographic composition, professionalisation, career trajectories, and subjective perspectives. The three distinct parts of the volume allow us to delve deeply into this elite group within Italian civil society and to make a significant contribution to our understanding of civil society dynamics. We emphasise the importance of continued research and critical analysis in shaping the future of civil society and its role in democratic societies.

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CHAPTER 2

Civil Society and Elites in Italy

Abstract This chapter examines the elite structure of Italian civil society, tracing its historical roots in the Catholic Church and socialist movements, and how it mirrors broader national elite patterns and societal inequalities. It tracks the third sector’s development from its political party origins to its expansion and institutionalisation in the 1990s, following the collapse of the post-war system. The analysis covers the sector’s evolving relationship with the state, from fragmented pluralism to a “golden age” of institutionalisation, followed by de-institutionalisation and then the recent re-institutionalisation marked by the 2017 reform. Current challenges include public mistrust, the rise of new conservative actors, and conflicts with populist governments over shrinking civic space. Insights are provided into the formation of the third-sector elite, its characteristics, and the societal forces shaping its role. The chapter explores how political developments, especially the rise of populist actors, have impacted upon state–civil society relations and the third-sector elite, and how this has led to de-legitimation processes and power shifts within the civic sphere. It underscores the interdependence between civil society’s leadership and the broader Italian elite, reflecting broader societal dynamics and shifts.

Keywords Italian civil society • Historical development • Elite structure • Welfare system • State–civil society relations • Populist parties • Institutionalisation

INTRODUCTION

The third sector or civil society elite, as defined in this book, includes individuals who, by holding top positions in major established organisations, control significant political and economic resources, and exercise considerable influence both inside and outside the field of civil society. For this reason, such a social group is to some extent part of both the general national elite, the so-called *classe dirigente*, and a specific context or field, that of civil society, which follows its own specific logics and dynamics.

In Italy, the relation between the general elite, more specifically the political elite, and the third sector's elite is even stronger than in other contexts due to the history and political evolution of the sector. From the end of World War II until the corruption scandals of the 1990s, which led to the dismantling of traditional governmental parties, civil society was strongly influenced by the political sector's structure (Biorcio & Vitale, 2016; Verzichelli, 2016). Both civil society's structure and its elite were used to mirror the national political division into two large cultural and political groups, which followed the two dominant political parties, the Christian Democratic Party and the Italian Communist Party. For many years, the leadership of the sector was directly influenced by and interrelated with this political system (Ibid.). After the political shocks of the 1990s and the proliferation of political parties, the third sector started to become increasingly independent of the political system. The number of organisations has since increased, as have their typologies, missions, and functions.

The third sector, as it appears today, traces its roots to the societal development of the end of the 1970s connected with the experiences of political social movements. It is now an institutionalised sector independent of political parties and increasingly engaged in service provision. As in many other European countries, since the economic crisis of 2008, the Italian state has progressively reduced direct public expenditure in the areas of welfare and social services and transferred service provision to local authorities and third-sector actors (Busso, 2018). This tendency has led to growing competition between organisations and to a process of institutionalisation and professionalisation within the sector. Thus, many organisations are now engaged in what we can call the co-production of services, collaborating with public authorities and private actors, mainly at the local level (Polizzi & Vitale, 2010). Although the sector has never

abandoned its political mission, it is increasingly interrelated with daily service provision activities (Bosi & Zamponi, 2019, 2022), as well as having undergone a process of institutionalisation that has changed its functions and features. Recognised as an independent and essential partner of the state, the third-sector elite has progressively gained its own space in decision-making arenas.

Such structural changes suggest a shift in the elite of the sector as well, which we can expect to be more professionalised and independent of political parties than in the past. However, the logics that have dominated a large part of Italian civil society's history, and its division into two major cultural groups linked to political ideologies, still influence the elite of the sector (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). Just as with the general Italian elite, and especially the political elite (Verzichelli, 2016), in the third sector too we are witnessing a "missing renewal of the ruling class".

Over the last few years, the third sector has entered a new phase, marked by a reduction and shift in its margins for manoeuvre. The recent wave of populist political actors coming to power has given rise to political conflicts between many third-sector organisations and the state at national level (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022). As we discuss in more detail below, the whole sector is facing a crisis of legitimacy and is accused of no longer representing the will of the people, of being partisan political actors disguised as civic actors, or of promoting foreign rather than national or local agendas. This new political context, added to the evolution of the sector over the last 30 years, may lead to structural changes in its leadership.

This chapter starts with a description of the elite structure of Italian society and patterns of inequality. As part of the general Italian elite, the elite of the third sector could be expected to partly mirror the patterns of inequality across society in general. At the same time, being a specific field, linked to the political and economic sectors but independent from them, the characteristics of the third sector's elite must be sought in the sector's specific features and history. Thus, in this chapter, we also dig into the Italian third sector's development and profile, the evolution of its relations with the state, the patterns and conditions of its participation in decision-making processes, and the challenges that it is currently facing. The structure of the sector becomes relevant here since we expect the elite of the third sector to be shaped by the types of resources (e.g., economic and political) that the sector has at its disposal. Moreover, the elite has been formed over time, and many of its leaders are of older age (Santilli &

Scaramuzzino, 2021); hence, their trajectory also reflects the historical development of the sector. The history and evolution of the third sector thus become important elements for understanding the development of its elite, as well as its characteristics and profile. Lastly, the current challenges experienced by the sector can say something about the challenges that the third-sector elite is currently facing and the possible evolution of its structure.

THE ITALIAN *CLASSE DIRIGENTE* AND PATTERNS OF INEQUALITY

The social structure of Italian society presents high levels of inequality from a European perspective. Following the economic crisis of 2008, these levels of inequality have increased significantly. Despite a small decrease in inequality between 2015 and 2016, the level is still higher than before the crisis (ISTAT, 2018). In terms of differences in income, Italy ranks in 19th place among European countries (excluding the UK and Ireland), with a Gini coefficient of 0.327, while the European average is 0.303. Income inequalities are also much more apparent in the Southern regions (including the islands of Sicily and Sardinia) (0.334) than in the Centre (0.318), the North-West (0.311), or the North-East (0.279) (Ibid.). From a comparative perspective, the Southern regions have a level of inequality of income comparable to Greece, while the regions of the North-East resemble Austria.

Despite repeated economic and political crises, the structure of the Italian elite, or ruling class, has been quite stable (Carboni, 2016; Newell, 2016). Carlo Carboni's studies, based on surveys and studies of curricula, show that "60% of the powerful and renown figures noted in the course of the 2011 had also been observed in 1998" (Carboni, 2016, p. 176). The author also demonstrates an elite structure based on three concentric circles of leaders:

1. The inner circle including only the "top leaders" with charisma, fame, and decision-making power;
2. The intermediate circle, which also includes the "pulling elites" who participate in decision-making processes thanks to their organisational weight;

3. The enlarged circle, which also includes the “policy elites” who use positional advantages within their organisation, handling the negotiation of functional and corporate interests.

The largest elite group when considering the enlarged circle is the political elite, which makes up almost half of the group (49.9%), followed by the associational elite (24.4%), and the business elite (13.7%). It is interesting to note, however, that the business elite is overrepresented among the inner circle of top leaders, a group in which they are more numerous than the political elite. Among this inner circle, the associational elite is instead a small minority (12.6%). These studies show that the leadership of the third sector is mostly part of an enlarged circle of elites and make up only a small proportion of the inner circle.

In terms of social background, in Carboni’s (2016) studies, the Italian elite turns out to be male-dominated, with 8 out of 10 members being men, “gerontocratic” with an increasing average age (in 2010 it was 62.3 years of age), “provincial” with only 1 in 3 individuals having studied or worked abroad, predominantly coming from the centre-north of Italy and metropolitan areas, and, finally, more highly educated than the general population (see also Carboni & Pavolini, 2007; Newell, 2016).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITALIAN ELITES

Scholarly discussions on the development of Italian elites have stressed the different patterns of development. The end of World War II and the fall of the fascist regime led to a pivotal role being taken by political parties, characterised by an imperfect two-party system, with the Christian Democrats permanently in power as the “government elite” and the Communists permanently in opposition as the “constitutional opposition” (Verzichelli, 2016).

The only authority available for Italians to turn to was the Church or the Resistance movement, which was dominated by the political parties. Central, therefore, to the reconstruction of social organizations and interest groups, the parties were able—as “the principal channels of access to the bureaucracy and the principal transmission belts in the allocation of resources from centre to periphery”—to penetrate the interstices of civil society and the state. (Newell, 2016, p. 9)

Accordingly, these two parties supported, and were supported by, specific civil society areas, specifically Catholic and socialist organisations (La Valle, 2006; Biorcio & Vitale, 2016). These relations were so strong that they influenced the construction of the elites of the two parties and the elites of their respective civil society areas. Biorcio and Vitale (2016) show that these parties had different ways of producing their leaders. The Communist Party trained its members internally, producing the leaders of the civil society actors, whereas for the Christian Democratic Party the opposite was the case. During the first years after World War II, it was Catholic civil society that trained its members and provided the political party with some of its best leaders (Ibid., p. 22). From the 1970s onwards, these tight relationships between parties and civil society actors changed, and the latter and their leaders became increasingly independent of their political counterparts.

The development of the Italian elite is often related to the lack of trust they engender among the population and the “improper relations” (collusion) between economic and political elites. While economic elites provided political elites with financial support for the rising costs of politics, political elites provided business elites with patronage relating to routine business matters (Newell, 2016).

The corruption scandals that surfaced between 1992 and 1994, however, shook the system and “dismantled the whole ruling elite of the classic governmental parties” (Verzichelli, 2016, p. 184). Unstable centre-left and centre-right governments were at times dominated by non-partisan ministers, but during periods of crisis were also replaced by entire technocratic governments. During this time, we also see an increase in the size of the elite as the number of people living off politics increased, in terms of both elected positions and policy professionals.

While there are signs of continuity in the permanent condition of crisis experienced by the Italian political system (Kaiser & Edelman, 2016), there are also traces of the rise of a new system of reproduction of elites based on different party structures: specifically, the minimal party model exemplified by Forza Italia, the centre-right party of Silvio Berlusconi, the post-bureaucratic party model exemplified by the centre-left Democratic Party, and the anti-system parties exemplified by the Five Star Movement. Each of these party models seems to provide different forms of reproduction of political elites involving different types of leaders (Verzichelli, 2016, p. 197):

The 2013 elections mark not only a new revolution in the formation of the political elite, but also clearly signifies a discontinuity with recent “revolutionary” turning points: indeed, the mean age of the newcomer MPs has significantly decreased (even compared to the mid-nineties), the rate of female representatives is now the highest in Italian history, and, above all, at least three alternative patterns of parliamentary selection are distinguishable.

The rise of populist political actors and the rise to power of new government coalitions that include right-wing populist parties, which are part of the changes highlighted by Verzichelli, and which mark a clear criticism of the established Italian political elite from public opinion, do not however seem to represent a change in either its structure or its functioning. This is also true of the leaders of the most resourceful civil society organisations (CSOs), whose career trajectories are often very long and internal to the same organisation or movement (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021), which often date back to the first decades of the twentieth century.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ITALIAN THIRD SECTOR AND ITS ROLE IN THE WELFARE SYSTEM

Modern civil society in Italy has its roots in the nineteenth century, during the formation of the modern Italian state, but the first civil society institutions, mainly charitable foundations, already existed during the Roman period and operated until the seventeenth century. Moreover, before the formation of the Italian State, in 1861, there were city corporations and Catholic networks of charitable organisations, including hospices for ill people, shelters for orphans, and associations supporting the poor. According to most scholars (e.g., Barbetta & Maggio, 2008), the origins of modern Italian civil society are strongly linked to the Catholic Church, which has been the strongest counterweight to the state since the distinction was first made between spiritual and temporal power. The Catholic institutions were service-oriented actors able to compensate for the absence of public welfare services. In fact, although the new Italian state moved to reduce the influence of the Church in society, incorporating its solidarity actors into the new welfare system, Catholic organisations and their representatives maintained their power and influence. For most of the twentieth century, Italian civil society was dominated by the Catholic Church but also by cooperatives, trade unions, and mutual benefit

societies linked to the socialist movement, which emerged mainly in the north of the country at the beginning of the century (Cartocci & Maconi, 2006; Barbetta & Maggio, 2008).

Although, during fascism, most of the non-Catholic associations were formally suppressed, at the end of World War II they were recreated and assumed an important role within the Italian political context. During that period, we see the development of the interrelations between civil society and the two main Italian political parties described earlier: the Christian Democratic Party and Italian Communist Party. These two political parties had different relations with civil society and its organisations. The main objective of organisations linked to the socialist tradition (associations, but also trade unions) was to extend the political influence of the Communist Party through the work of mobilising the population. On the other hand, the Christian Democratic Party became the political representation in government of the interests of the Catholic organisations (parishes, charitable associations) and its actions were more focused on the work of mediation between Catholic civil society, directly linked to the Catholic Church, and the government (Biorcio & Vitale, 2016; De Nardis, 2000).

The earliest research focusing on Italian civil society was conducted at the end of the 1950s (Almond & Verba, 1963; Galli, 1966) and showed that, while the number of Italians engaging in civil society groups was lower than in other European countries, the number of people who were members of Catholic groups or political parties was higher (Galli, 1966; La Valle, 2006). The development of the “new” Italian civil society and the third sector began between the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s. The cultural, social, and political mobilisations of the 1960s and 1970s brought to light new social issues, such as the rights of the most vulnerable groups. In 1971, the Italian Caritas—one of the biggest Catholic solidarity organisations—was created, and with its first director Monsignor Giovanni Nervo the notion of the “rights of the poor” became central to the actions of and debates on civil society. During that period, due to the economic and fiscal crisis, public expenditure had been reorganised and the Italian welfare state became unable to meet the growing needs of the population (Fazzi, 2013). In this context, as in many other European countries, service production was transferred to different kinds of solidarity organisations within civil society: the third sector.

Italy has opted for strong institutionalisation at the local level of cooperation between the public sector and solidarity actors (Scaramuzzino,

2012). During the formation of the Italian third sector, charitable organisations developed linkages with other organisations, including new associations, by organising themselves into consortia. In fact, this period was characterised by the emergence of many new and diversified associations, mainly voluntary organisations, but also social cooperatives. The areas in which these new actors mostly increased their presence were welfare services, particularly healthcare, social services, and assistance to disadvantaged individuals (Borzaga & Fazzi, 2014). These actors had a high degree of autonomy in their choices and were supported by public funding, both national and local.

The combination of political and cultural movements and the emergence of new needs created widespread cultural support for the expansion of public expenditure on social groups previously considered residual or devoid of social rights. This social consensus on initiatives intended to extend the sphere of social citizenship was a further factor which stimulated political decisions to support the growth of TSOs [Third Sector Organisations]. (Borzaga & Fazzi, 2014, p. 415)

With the collapse of the Italian post-war party system and of the whole so-called First Republic in the early 1990s, new CSOs, more institutionalised than the previous ones, became more prominent. The birth of the so-called Second Republic is considered a turning point for Italian civil society. In fact, the 1990s was a period during which the pioneering phase gave way to that of the expansion and recognition of Italian civil society (Borzaga & Fazzi, 2011). It was characterised by a general and marked societal loss of trust in political parties. This is confirmed by the increase in numbers of people who participated in civil society actions and the reduction in numbers of people who were members of political parties (Biorcio & Vitale, 2016). As shown by Biorcio and Vitale (2016), the number of members of political parties decreased from four million in 1963 to one and a half million in 2006. Over the same period, the proportion of people engaged in certain solidarity activities increased more than five times (Ibid.; ISTAT, 2013). In addition, the number of organisations and their diversification increased due to the low coverage of public social services. According to the first census on non-profit organisations, conducted in 1999, 55.2% of existing organisations were founded during the 1990s (ISTAT, 2001). While the historical organisations linked to the Catholic Church and to the workers' movements had a privileged

relationship with public authorities, during the 1990s other actors such as sports clubs, trade unions, volunteer organisations, and advocacy groups became increasingly prominent and gained the ability to “orient political choices, to shape agenda setting in the public sphere and to filter media communication” (Ruzza, 2010, p. 263). Due to the increase in the number of people seeking support and the number of organisations interested in accessing public funding, the authorities applied more competitive procedures in the allocation of public resources. However, the competitive situation that was established did not curb the progressive expansion of the third sector within the field of welfare services provision (Ranci, 1999; Borzaga & Fazzi, 2011).

From the year 2000, the structure of civil society changed further. This most recent period is characterised by the marked dependence of the third sector on public authorities and by a process of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of the whole sector, and in particular of the social cooperatives, the main local actors of the third sector (Ascoli et al., 2003; Fazzi, 2013). The contemporary Italian third sector includes different typologies of CSOs (N = 363,499 in 2020) with different juridical status and missions (ISTAT, 2021). Of these organisations, in 2020, the vast majority (85.2%) were associations, while the rest were cooperatives, foundations, Catholic organisations, mutual aid organisations, informal groups, and trade unions. Mainly located in the northern regions of Italy and in the large cities, the geographical areas with long-term traditions of associative actions, most of them were small (less than 30 members) and worked at a local level—with only 6% engaging at the national level (Barbetta et al., 2016). Reflecting the historical evolution of Italian civil society, the majority of them were engaged in service activities such as education, sports, health services, and social welfare. This orientation towards social welfare needs and services and the strong dependence on public resources and logics seems to have caused a fracture in the relationships between the third sector and grassroots and social movements during the last ten years (Ibid.). In addition, although established national organisations are increasingly engaged in political issues and are often in conflict with the state (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022), their institutionalisation places them in a complex situation of distance from both social movements and citizens.

THE THIRD SECTOR'S RELATIONS WITH THE STATE

Before the 1990s, Italian law did not regulate the third sector, associative actions, or organisations. In their periodisation of these relations, Ranci et al. (2009, p. 101) identify three periods relating to the development of an “Italian third sector policy community”.

The first period (1980s to mid-1990s) is associated with the “absence” of a policy community and hence civil society actors resorting to “fragmented pressure pluralism”. There were a handful of peak organisations that were trying to influence third-sector policy in their own ways without any stable collective action at the sector’s level (Ranci et al., 2009).

The second period (mid-1990s to 2001) is described as the third sector’s “golden age” and is characterised by a phase of increasing institutionalisation. This period revolves around two separate but related events: firstly, the creation of a permanent third-sector platform representing the whole sector at the national level, namely the Forum (Ranci et al., 2009). This is a so-called network of the fourth level, which includes “networks of the second and third levels” and is hence at the top of the hierarchy of networks of networks. Secondly, we have the formalisation of third sector–state relations through specific policy processes, involving the Forum as interlocutor (Ranci et al., 2009). This implied state recognition of the role of the Forum through a specific compact (“agreement”) between the Italian centre-left government and the third sector in 1999. Through this agreement, the Forum has gained the status of a social partner and hence has the right to be consulted when public decisions are made on all themes and issues in the “social field” (see also Antonucci, 2014).

This process was marked by three laws enacted between 1990 and 1991. The first allowed local authorities to subcontract the delivery of services to organisations regulating and facilitating the procedures. The two laws enacted in 1991—law 381/91 and law 266/91 concerning social cooperatives and voluntary associations—recognised the social and public function of private not-for-profit organisations engaged in the provision of welfare services and the integration of disadvantaged people into the workplace (Borzaga & Fazzi, 2011). As a consequence, from 1991 onwards, public expenditure on social services increased substantially, as did the number of cooperatives. These laws can be said to have sanctioned the formal creation of the Italian third sector.

The third period (from 2002 onwards) is described as the “submergence”, with decreasing levels of institutionalisation of the national representation of the third sector and an apparent loss of the gains made during the previous period. This period is marked by a downgrading of the Forum, a loss of political cohesion within its ranks, and a choice by the new centre-right government to “lapse into essentially ad hoc and individualistic relationships with particular parts of the non-profit world” (Ranci et al., 2009, p. 105).

However, this phase can also be traced back to the year 2000 with a new national law on social services (L. 328/00), approved by a centre-left government, which initiated a new chapter in the relationship between public authorities and the third sector. This law recognised the third sector as a “legitimate participant in the planning and management of social services, but within a new model which defined an integrated system of services under the aegis of the public authority” (Borzaga & Fazzi, 2014, p. 417). Local public authorities assumed a central role in local social planning and in the spending of financial resources (Bifulco & Cementeri, 2008) during a period marked by national budget constraints. The result was the growth of competition between non-governmental institutions in order to obtain resources, as described earlier. Moreover, since 2006, most regional authorities have introduced new regulatory instruments prescribing that organisations providing specific services must conform to professional standards. To sum up, this third period is characterised by a de-institutionalisation of the third sector in terms of national representation and an institutionalisation of its organisations at sub-national level as service-providers.

The beginning of a new, fourth period, which we could describe as “re-institutionalisation”, might be marked by the recent reform of the law on the third sector (decreto legislativo n. 117 del 2017), introduced in 2017 by the centre-left government. This reform introduced many provisions many of which are still awaiting implementation, not least due to the results of the 2018 elections, which brought to power a coalition of right- and left-oriented populist parties (League and 5 Stars Movement). Among other things, this law introduced a new arena for state-civil society dialogue, the National Council for the Third Sector (Consiglio Nazionale del Terzo Settore). Participants from third-sector organisations on the Council are by law chosen by the Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore and by the Minister of Work and Social Policies. The Forum has a strong presence on

the Council, and only a few representatives on the Council represent organisations that are not directly members of the Forum.

It seems clear that the representation of civil society vis-à-vis the state has been influenced by political developments at the national level. A “cultural ideological” affinity between the centre-left governments and the third sector is particularly evident, while the opposite goes for its relationship with the centre-right governments led by Silvio Berlusconi. The latter governments have taken a more confrontational approach than collaborative when it comes to both industrial relations with the trade unions and relations with the third sector in the area of social welfare (Ranci et al., 2009). The representation of civil society in specific policy areas has also been shaped by the recent trends towards subsidiarisation of social policies, both vertically, with devolution of powers and responsibilities to the sub-national level, and horizontally, with an increased role played by third-sector organisations in providing welfare services with or without the support of public authorities (Kazepov, 2012). This fragmentation of the system of decision-making has produced a complex web of relations at different administrative levels for the policy processes and in the chain of decision-making and provision of welfare services (Ranci et al., 2009; Antonucci, 2014). Following the evolution of the sector in its relationship with the state, the Italian third-sector elite has become a key actor in society with which governments have increasingly interacted in their quest to solve societal issues.

THE POPULIST TURN OF ITALIAN POLITICS

The recent rise to power of populist actors in Italy represents a new period for the third sector and its relationship with the state. This fifth period is a phase of more direct conflict between the third sector and public authorities and should be considered in relation to recent political developments, both internationally and in the European context. The recent social and political transformations of European welfare states, which began with the New Public Management reforms in the 1980s, and more recently have been accelerated by the financial crisis and global geopolitical instability, have affected civil societies in many countries. In general, the sector is marked by important changes in both its structure and its democratic functions. On the one hand, the reductions in public and private funding and the delegation of service provision from the state to civil society actors have increased the competition between the latter and initiated a process

of marketisation and professionalisation of the sector. On the other hand, following the wave of populist actors in the last few years, civil society has been hit by increased ideological resistance from outside and, in a number of countries, CSOs are facing a reduction in their margin for manoeuvre (Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2018; Ploszka, 2020) due to shrinking civic spaces.

The Italian case is no exception. Research on both civil society and political elites over the last few years has focused on the impact of the financial crisis on Italian society, its elites, and civil society. Italy has been one of the European countries most badly affected by the economic crisis since 2008. This situation has had negative consequences in terms of cuts to the welfare state and increasing inequality (Kousis et al., 2018). Given that Italian civil society has been structurally and historically dependent on public policies and funding, austerity policies have influenced the relationship between the state and solidarity actors. As in other European countries, the persistent crisis has favoured the rapid development of populist and neo-nationalist socio-political forces. Traditionally, there has been a strong consensus that Europeanisation was the solution to the problems caused by clientism and corruption at the domestic level. While the crisis does not seem to have had any impact on the political elites' pro-European stance, it has widened the gap with the increasingly Euro-sceptical masses (Conti et al., 2016). This phenomenon has also been facilitated by the so-called refugee crisis, sparked off in Italy during the summer of 2015, as shown in the results of the national elections in 2018, and then confirmed in 2022.

In 2018, Italy witnessed a short period of a government led entirely by two populist parties (The Five Stars Movement and The League). This one-year period was marked by strong conflicts between the government and civil society actors, especially those involved in migration and refugees' rights (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022). The most recent elections in 2022 have brought to power a coalition dominated by populist parties, but with a clearer nationalist-conservative profile, with the nationalist party Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia), together with The League and Forza Italia. This government is also in open conflict with a large part of Italian civil society and is adopting similar strategies as in 2018. Both governments have been engaged in the de-legitimation of many organisations and leaders. Such processes started in the migration policy field, with the abolition of key forms of protection for migrants, blocking the entry of CSO rescue ships into Italian ports and dismantling reception centres for

asylum seekers managed by social cooperatives, and has been justified by a process of de-legitimation of CSOs. CSOs have been defined as actors that support criminals and are accused of no longer representing the will of the people, of being partisan political actors disguised as civic actors, or of promoting foreign rather than national or local agendas (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022).

This negative development in state–civil society relations has rapidly involved the whole sector, to the point where one of the most influential Catholic representatives and an expert in the sector, Zamagni, president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and of the Agency for the third sector, stated in an interview in 2019 that the third sector was “under attack” (Avvenire, 2019). Not only is the rise to power of populist political actors leading to shrinking civic space for civil society, but it is also changing the boundaries and power relations within the sector (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022). In reality, the process of de-legitimation does not affect all actors to the same extent or in the same way. Some scholars now talk about a “shifting” or “changing” space for civil society actors, rather than just a shrinking space (Anheier et al., 2019; Toepler et al., 2020). Space is shrinking for the part of civil society that advocates for human rights and social justice, but it may well expand for other actors, such as the more apolitical parts of the sector, in efforts to increase their delivery of welfare services or organisations that are ideologically close to the parties in power and promote a national-conservative agenda (Bill, 2022).

Some authors have stressed the importance of how the Italian nationalist-conservative parties have utilised civil society over the last few decades as an idealised instrument to oppose the old political elites, to protect and represent the people’s voice (Ruzza, 2010; Ruzza & Fella, 2011). For The League, which was in power within the centre-right coalition headed by Berlusconi from 1994 to 2011, civil society consisted of: “the morally healthy public sphere of North Italy’s population of artisans and shopkeepers inspired by the values of hard work and traditional morality and respect for local community” (Ruzza, 2010, p. 268). Both The League and Brothers of Italy are linked to CSOs with a conservative ideology, which have never had so much visibility and resources as in the last few years. For instance, we are witnessing an increased presence in public debates of conservative Catholic and pro-life organisations promoting the idea of the “natural family”, which are increasingly tied to the new government. Such organisations represent a challenge to the established third sector since they are competing for the first time with historically

dominant actors for both public funding and political resources (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2020).

When it comes to the Five Stars Movement, defined by its members as a post-ideological (neither right nor left), anti-party, bottom-up movement, the connection with civil society is more ambiguous. At the beginning of its history, the movement considered civil society to be the highest instrument of representation of the “Italian people”. At that point, the movement’s members proposed Gino Strada, founder of the international medical charity association Emergency and an activist in the pro-migrant cause, as a candidate in the election of the President of the Republic in 2013. But, during the last few years, mostly since the Five Stars Movement came to power, the relationship between the party and the associative world has changed. The Five Stars Movement took part in the delegitimation of the sector together with The League. In 2019, the party promoted a new law, called “*spazzacorrotti*”, literally translated as “sweep away corrupt people”, which aims to reduce the linkages between civil society and politics for the purpose of fighting corruption.

In summary, with the rise to power of populist political parties, the third sector and its elite are facing multiple challenges. This new period is marked by growing public mistrust of its activities and leaders, who appear increasingly distant from the people and linked to the general national elites, by the rise of new actors distant from the traditional ideological roots of the sector, and by a conflictual relationship with the state.

CONCLUSIONS

Modern Italian civil society has a long history, and its origins are linked to the Catholic Church and socialist movements. The development of the contemporary third sector, which began at the end of the 1970s in connection with the experiences of social and political mobilisations, is characterised by a strong dependence on developments in the national political sector and on its complex relations with the state. Its role vis-à-vis the state has always been that of both service provider and interest representation, and its evolution, into becoming what it is today, is related to the political history of the country.

Originally fragmented, marked by the absence of a national policy community and closely linked to the post-war political parties, during the 1990s the sector became a key actor in the public management of political and societal issues. With the collapse of the post-war parties and of the whole First Republic, new and more institutionalised organisations became

increasingly prominent, and the sector underwent a phase of expansion and public recognition. This period of dependence on public authorities, and vice versa, was followed by an apparent loss of the gains made during the previous period in terms of national representation. During the first decade of the 2000s, the low level of collaboration between civil society actors and the government, the financial crisis of 2008, and the resulting reduction in public funding led to growing competition between organisations and a consequent process of professionalisation of the organisations involved in service delivery. Recognised by law as an independent sector of public interest and utility, it appears today as a stable, structured, and institutionalised sector, deeply embedded in the political sector and a key actor that is taken into account by the public authorities for dealing with societal problems.

This status, gained throughout its history, has implied a growing interdependence between the civil society elite and the general elite in Italy. Although independent of other sectors, the civil society elite mirrors and interacts with the national elites. This social group has a place in decision-making arenas and experiences the same challenges as other elite groups, but possibly without the same independent power base. The public mistrust of the general elite—*classe dirigente*—and the wave of populist actors and governments are having an impact on the third sector and its leaders, who today are facing new challenges, in Italy as in other European countries.

Our exploration does not conclude here; it extends further into the complex world of the Italian civil society elite. Who are these key players within the civil society elite, and how do they navigate their roles amidst the broader landscape of Italian society? Moreover, how do their interactions with other elite groups shape the trajectory of civil society and influence decision-making processes at both national and local levels? As we embark upon a comparative analysis of civil society elites in other countries, let us unravel the intricacies of Italian civil society, its elite, and the broader societal forces at play.

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CHAPTER 3

A Study of Civil Society Elites in Europe

Abstract This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the methodologies and data utilised in our comparative study of civil society elites across Europe, with a particular emphasis on Italy. The study incorporates data from 133 respondents in Italy, supplemented by comparative data from Sweden (308 respondents), the UK (123 respondents), and the EU level (158 respondents) to offer a broader context. It begins by mapping elite organisations and their leaders, identifying and categorising resource-rich civil society organisations and their leaders. Following this, it details an online survey conducted in the spring of 2021, which captures various aspects of the composition, reproduction, integration, and contestation of civil society elites. The analysis and discussion of the survey data highlight significant findings and trends that shed light on the dynamics of civil society elites across different European contexts. Additionally, supplementary interview data from Italian civil society leaders illustrates specific phenomena such as career paths, professionalisation, and the unique challenges they face. With these methodological approaches and empirical findings, the chapter contributes to a comprehensive understanding of civil society elites in Europe and offers valuable insights into their roles, influence, and the broader socio-political landscape within which they operate.

Keywords Comparative study • Resource-rich organisations • Survey study • Qualitative interviews • Elite identification

INTRODUCTION

This book revolves around civil society or, more precisely, the Italian third sector. As previously discussed in the introduction, the terms “elite” and “civil society” are almost oxymoronic. Civil society, independent of both the state and the market, has always been conceptualised in the literature, dating back to Tocqueville (2003), as a reservoir of democratic practices and knowledge. It is often perceived as devoid of power dynamics and antithetical to the normative imagery associated with elites. In fact, this sector has seldom been part of classical studies on elites, known as elite studies. Political and economic elites, for instance, are typically defined as small groups exerting “disproportionate power to affect national and supranational political outcomes on a continuing basis” (Best & Higley, 2018, p. 3). Civil society is a topic that has received little attention in classical elite research. The scarcity of studies in this field may be due to a normative view of civil society, considering it as irreducible to official political and economic institutions and representing a community of equals external to the elites (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020). Additionally, it might be attributed to the traditional focus of elite studies on formal power and access to resources, rather than on what Cohen and Arato (1992) term influence, or the “politics of influence”, which encompasses alternative and indirect strategies through which civil society organisations (CSOs) engage with governments and influence decision-making processes (Cohen & Arato, 1992).

The uniqueness of the sector, coupled with the paucity of studies on the topic (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020), poses a challenge: it is a novelty in the fields of both civil society studies and elite studies, as well as a methodological challenge, to explore civil society elites. Considering, as we do in this study, that civil society is a Bourdieusian, relational field, in which actors do not just relate but engage in power relations and position themselves hierarchically, and that the actors at the top of the hierarchy wield various forms of power, the first methodological question is: how do we identify these elites within civil society?

In classical studies, elites are generally defined in terms of power and influence, and are traditionally associated with command and stable positions (Khan, 2012; Schjif, 2013; Wedel, 2017). For example, Michels (2001) interprets power as a consequence of occupying specific positions in apical organisations. However, influence can also be informal and linked to the alternative and indirect strategies through which actors engage with governments and influence decision-making processes, rather than formal positions and organisations or institutions (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Santilli, 2024).

Mindful of this methodological challenge, which is inherent to the topic, this study employs various methods that have allowed us to identify a group of individuals who exert significant influence in the third sector. Specifically, this book draws upon a large dataset developed in the research programme “Civil Society Elites? Comparing Elite Composition, Reproduction, Integration and Contestation in European Civil Societies”. The data includes both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative data is based on a dataset constructed to identify the most resource-rich organisations active at the national level and their leaders, as well as a comparative online survey study of civil society elites, the “Civil society elite survey study”, conducted in the spring of 2021 with leaders. In this volume, we primarily utilise data from Italy, although some chapters provide comparisons with civil society elites in other contexts, including Sweden, the UK, and at the EU level. The qualitative data is based on 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with leaders, directors, and presidents of organisations identified within the dataset of Italian organisations.

The rationale behind the study is presented and discussed in the article “Mapping Civil Society Elites: Multi-dimensional Measure of Resource Stratification in Civil Society (MMRSC)” published in the journal *Interest Groups & Advocacy* (Scaramuzzino & Lee, 2024). A more comparative presentation of The Civil Society Elite Survey Study can be found in the Appendix to the volume *Civil Society Elites: Exploring the Composition, Reproduction, Integration, and Contestation of Civil Society Actors at the Top* (Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024).

In this chapter, we delve into some of the methodological strategies and choices that we made. We present the step-by-step process of constructing the comparative dataset and the adaptations we made for the Italian context. We also address the challenges posed by this process and the limitations of the study. We believe that clarity in methodological

choices is essential for both understanding our analysis and contributing theoretically to this recent strand of research.

The empirical data has been produced following three stages in all contexts. We first identified and mapped the resource-rich CSOs that are active at national level. Second, we identified the leaders of these organisations and carried out a survey of civil society elites' composition, reproduction, integration, and contestation (Scaramuzzino & Lee, 2024). Third, in each country and context we conducted interviews, in Italy with both experts and leaders.

MAPPING RESOURCE-RICH CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Following the positional method in elite research (Hoffmann-Lange Hoffmann-Lange, 2018)—that is, the assumption that formal leadership positions, or “command posts”, as they are termed by Mills (1956), are a relevant element in the identification of elites—the first step was to identify resource-rich CSOs at the national level in each national context and at the EU level. The unit of analysis in this first phase was the organisation and not the individual.

The mapping of CSOs was guided by specific criteria:

- The CSOs should be non-profit organisations. Political parties, organisations representing business interests (e.g., employers' associations), public authorities (e.g., associations of municipalities or regions), and trade unions were excluded.
- The organisations should be primarily organised and active at the national level (in each national context), or at the EU level for the EU.
- The organisations should be involved in one of the following policy areas—Age, Culture, Disability, Environment, Gender Equality, Human Rights and Democracy, Migration and Ethnic Groups, Religion, Solidarity, or Sports and Leisure—and should be organisations representing the non-profit sector's interests.

In order to identify the resource-rich CSOs in each context, we used a set of five indicators of resources that allowed us to develop a broad and complex interpretation of status and recognition in civil society following the Multi-dimensional Measure of Resource Stratification in Civil Society (MMRSC). These indicators enabled us to capture different dimensions of resources, influence, and status in civil society and exclude organisations

that met the above-mentioned criteria but could not be considered “resource-rich”. The indicators were operationalised differently in each context.

The first three indicators that we used measured different forms of resources, both economic and political, internal to civil society. More specifically, we considered resources that can be used by the organisations to achieve their goals (e.g., budget, staff, or members), and resources that allow organisations to exercise influence within the civil society sector.

In Italy, we used only two indicators of political resources due to a lack of available information concerning economic resources: (1) organisations that held posts on decision-making bodies within umbrella organisations in specific policy areas (so-called third-level networks) and (2) organisations that were members of umbrella organisations representing the civil society sector (so-called fourth-level networks).

The last three indicators measured economic and political resources available to the organisations but connected to recognition external to civil society. We considered access to public funding, as well as posts on public committees and public consultations, which give the organisations access to and possible influence over decision-making in policy processes. More specifically, the indicators in Italy were: (3) organisations that were included in the tax deduction scheme for private donations called “5 × 1000” of the Italian tax agency, a scheme that gives the Italian people the opportunity of devolving 0.5% of their taxes to organisations of their choice; (4) organisations that were included in specific ministries’ registries for consultations (within specific policy areas); and (5) organisations that held posts in the Council for the Third Sector, which is the consultation body between the state and the civil society sector.

The criterion to be included in our mapping of resource-rich CSOs was to fulfil at least one of the conditions set up by our indicators (five in Italy). This mapping resulted in a large dataset of “elite CSOs”, including between 293 and 434 organisations in each context—293 for Italy.

Moreover, our method allows for a more exclusive approach to elite identification. As the conditions are the operationalisation of the indicators of resources, then resource accumulation could be measured by how many conditions the CSOs fulfil. The accumulation of these indicators is thus interpreted as an “elite score” for an organisation. The organisations with elite scores of 4 or 5 ($N = 15$) would be at the top of the pyramid, those with an elite score of 3 ($N = 35$) would be in the middle, and those with scores of 1 or 2 would be at the base ($N = 243$). Using this elite

score, it is possible to draw vertical boundaries in a way that enables the identification of a smaller group of high-scoring organisations and thus a smaller group of leaders comprising the “inner core” of the civil society elite.

FROM THE ORGANISATIONAL TO THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Moving from the organisational to the individual level of analysis then implied identifying the leaders of the elite organisations mapped through the MMRSC. We chose to include the two main leadership positions in CSOs, namely, the representative leader or “chairperson” (*presidente* in Italy) and the executive leader, or “secretary general/director/CEO” (*direttore* in Italy) and their deputies. Although we were not able to retrieve the names of the leaders of all organisations, we still ended up with a population of between 680 and 1005 leaders (680 in Italy).

The Civil Society Elite Survey Study

For the survey study, we chose the inclusive approach of sending out the survey to all leaders. The survey was carried out between January 2020 and June 2021 (January–March 2021 in Italy) and was answered by 123–308 leaders (133 leaders in Italy), giving a response rate of 12–37% (19% in Italy). Due to the high level of anonymity of the survey, we were not able to connect the respondents to their organisational affiliations. Hence, the survey does not allow us to explore the importance of organisational factors for civil society elites’ composition, reproduction, integration, or contestation.

We were able, however, to determine if each respondent was selected from an elite score 1, elite score 2, or elite score 3 organisation. The results of the survey clearly show that the elite score matters for some status-related variables. For instance, Italian leaders of organisations with higher scores have higher incomes on average than leaders of organisations with lower scores. They also tend to have networks of collaboration that span multiple organisations. These results, although only based on bivariate analyses, suggest that the elite score of the organisation, which measures organisational resource accumulation, does indeed reflect the amount of resources that the leaders control.

For the whole population of leaders, we had information about their organisational position (representative vs. executive), their gender, and

their organisational elite score. Due to the relatively low response rate, we performed a non-response bias analysis based on these three variables and found very small differences, mostly concerning organisational position (see Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024).

Qualitative Interviews

The utilisation of quantitative data and methodologies in this research endeavour has facilitated the identification of national organisations endowed with substantial resources and their leaders. According to the positional approach adopted here, these leaders are categorised as elites owing to their pivotal formal roles within the expansive landscape of the Italian third sector. Nevertheless, recognising the inherent limitations of quantitative methodologies in capturing nuanced insights into power dynamics and forms of influence, complementary measures were employed. These measures included conducting interviews with leaders to unearth concealed power dynamics and networks of influence.

Our research sample comprises a corpus of 40 semi-structured interviews conducted with leaders, including presidents and directors, representing prominent Italian third-sector entities (see Table 3.1). The interviews were carried out between January 2020 and June 2022.

While the initial selection of interviewees was drawn from the sample derived from the positional method, this approach was augmented by the

Table 3.1 Interviewees' positions and issue areas of CSOs

<i>Number of interviews by position</i>		<i>Issue areas of CSOs</i>
<i>President</i>	<i>Director</i>	
5	2	Solidarity and volunteering
4	2	International aid and politics
2		Cooperative movement
4	1	Culture, sports, and hobbies
1	1	Sector
2		Disability and health
5	1	Human and group rights
1	1	Christian organisations
3		Other religious organisations
2	1	Workers' rights
2		Environment

integration of two additional methodologies commonly embraced within elite studies: the reputational method and snowball sampling. Mainly associated with Floyd Hunter's (1953) works, the reputational approach relies on experts for defining elites. Some scholars have criticised this method (Dahl, 1961; Scott, 2004) because it only seems applicable to relatively small communities where everyone knows each other—an organisation or a specific policy field. However, while this method leverages expert insights to delineate elite cohorts, its synergy with snowball sampling, which focuses on a select cadre of individuals and their perceptions of power, strengthens the investigative prowess.

Combining these methodological paradigms proved instrumental in establishing connections with leaders and pivotal figures entrenched within the fabric of the Italian third sector. Given the inherent challenges associated with accessing leaders of preeminent organisations, particularly in the absence of personal contact details or extensive biographical information, snowball sampling emerged as indispensable. Additionally, informal engagements reminiscent of ethnographic inquiry served as conduits for rapport-building and facilitating access (Santilli, 2024).

Operationally, we began by obtaining the personal email addresses of the leaders (presidents and directors) identified through our extensive sample of leaders. Through this process, we managed to establish contact with 20 leaders with whom we conducted interviews. However, in order to add more qualitative depth and develop an approach that extended beyond the positional method to also consider more informal forms of power, and to investigate the actual representations of the leaders themselves, during the interviews I asked them which individual actors were particularly influential at the national level in the policy with which they were personally involved or, if possible, in the entire Italian third sector. I then asked for their contact details. Through this process of snowballing, we reached another 20 individuals. Only a small proportion of these (4 out of 20) were not leaders of the organisations previously selected.

In addition to the question of which actors in civil society are more influential, and why, the topic guide used in the interviews included questions about the leaders' biographies (their family background, the moment they began to engage in civil society and the reasons that prompted them to do so, and their previous professional experiences of the leaders), the structure of the Italian third sector, election processes and upward mobility, the complex topography and tribulations of the Italian third sector, as well as their interface with political and economic echelons. In order to

safeguard confidentiality, all identities were anonymised, and identifying particulars removed.

The qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted with meticulous attention to detail, supported by a rigorous coding process. This process utilised an open coding framework, allowing for the exploration of data without predetermined categories. Subsequently, a thematic analysis was carried out, during which the codes were organised into overarching categories that naturally emerged from the data. This method aligns with the grounded theory approach proposed by Glaser and Strauss (2012), emphasising the importance of deriving theories from empirical evidence. Throughout this process, representative excerpts from the interviews were carefully selected and translated in English to enrich the description and analysis of the findings.

CONCLUSIONS

Approaching a new field such as civil society elites has required us to address some methodological challenges. Our methodology has mostly been inspired by elite research and the positional method (Mills, 1956; Khan, 2012; Schjif, 2013; Wedel, 2017; Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). We have, however, adapted our method to civil society based on our theoretical understanding of the sector's structure and resources (Cohen & Arato, 1992). Focusing on resource-rich organisations has been a natural consequence of civil society being generally defined as informed by collective action and populated by collective actors.

Our approach has some limitations. For instance, we excluded trade unions and business organisations, although they are usually included in interest group studies, but less often in civil society studies. These groups are, however, often included in classical elite studies as part of the political or economic elite. We have also excluded visibility as a resource in terms of the public exposure of CSOs and their leaders through traditional media and social media. In a strongly digitalised and mediatised society, the extent to which leaders and their organisations have access to and are visible in the media is an important resource and can lead to significant influence (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2024a, 2024b). Additionally, employing the reputational method of elite identification (Hunter, 1953; Dahl, 1961) would have led to a different perspective on who the elites are.

While our method could arguably have a bias towards an organisational elite, rather than a reputational or visible elite (Santilli & Scaramuzzino,

2024a, 2024b), it does allow us to identify the Italian third-sector elite as an elite whose status depends on its members' position as leaders of the most resource-rich CSOs at national level. As we systematically apply the same method in other national contexts and at the EU level, it also allows us to compare the Italian civil society elite with those in Sweden, the UK, and at the EU level.

In conclusion, while our methodology is not without its limitations, it represents a pioneering effort to explore the hitherto understudied realm of civil society elites (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020). By adopting a tailored approach that combines elements of elite research and an appreciation of the unique characteristics of civil society, we have laid the foundations for future inquiries into this nascent field of study.

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The Organisational Landscape

Abstract This chapter examines the organisational landscape of elite civil society organisations in Italy at the national level, revealing a clear hierarchical structure dominated by a few top-tier organisations. These elite CSOs control the majority of resources and are primarily engaged in service provision, solidarity efforts, volunteering, and international aid, reflecting the broader orientation of the civil society sector. Two long-standing, broad-spectrum organisations stand out due to their historical significance, ideological roots, decision-making roles, public funding, and involvement in policy consultation. The next tier down includes influential networks representing the sector, major associations with national reach, Catholic service-oriented groups, and international organisations. A larger and more diverse group of CSOs focuses on narrower policy areas such as human rights, disability, international aid, solidarity/volunteering, and Catholic values, combining both service and advocacy roles. The ideological divide between Catholic and secular leftist groups remains prominent, echoing historical societal divisions. Elite organisations engage with various policy domains, integrating service provision with efforts towards systemic change. Their accumulation of economic and political resources creates a stratified organisational landscape, characterised by a distinct hierarchy.

Keywords Elite organisations • Hierarchical structure • Resource accumulation • Pillars • Elite stratification

INTRODUCTION

The Italian third sector presents a vibrant landscape characterised by a multitude of organisations operating at national, regional, and local levels. According to the latest available data, from 2020, an impressive total of 363,449 active organisations contribute to this diverse ecosystem nationwide. Remarkably, 85.7% of these civil society organisations (CSOs) operate without paid staff, relying instead on volunteers.

The predominant legal form of these institutions is the association, comprising 85.2% of the total, followed by other legal forms (8.4%), social cooperatives (4.1%), and foundations (2.3%). Notably, social cooperatives emerge as the primary drivers of paid staff employment, providing jobs for 52.9% of the total employees (N = 870,183). In terms of non-profit institutions, 10.6% are represented by volunteer organisations, 5.8% by social promotion associations, 4.4% by social enterprises, and 3.7% by non-profit organisations.

Geographically, these entities are not evenly distributed, with a significant concentration observed in the North, where over 50% of organisations are active. The Central region follows with 22.2%, while the South and Islands collectively host 18.2% and 9.4% of these organisations, respectively, as reported by ISTAT in 2023.

Examining their areas of focus, we see that the Italian third sector thrives in diverse domains, with culture, recreation, and social activities emerging as the frontrunners. The sports sector commands a substantial presence, accounting for 32.9% of organisations, closely followed by cultural and artistic activities at 15.9%, and recreational and socialisation activities at 14.3%. Additionally, CSOs engaged solely in service assistance constitute 9.9% of the sector's endeavours.

Reflecting the historical evolution of Italian civil society, a majority of organisations (63.3%) engage in service activities such as education, health services, and social welfare, alongside other advocacy activities. Notably, volunteer organisations predominantly focus on traditional intervention sectors, such as social assistance and civil protection (40.6%) and healthcare (24.3%).

It is worth highlighting that data published by ISTAT provides insights into the distribution of funding received by various types of CSOs from citizens (the 5 × 1000 system). This data is instrumental in understanding the relationship between CSO types and their hierarchical distribution. According to the data, sectors like education and research, healthcare, and international cooperation and solidarity receive greater citizen support than their relative organisational presence, while sectors like sports, cultural and artistic activities, and recreational and socialisation activities receive less citizen support than their organisational presence (ISTAT, 2022).

A defining feature of the Italian civil society landscape is the predominance of local-level organisations. These entities form the backbone of the sector, showcasing a rich tapestry of initiatives and actors at the grassroots level. While some organisations are autonomous entities rooted in their local communities, others operate as branches of national bodies, extending their reach across the country through a pyramidal structure.

At the national level, the sector exhibits a hierarchical framework, with organisations positioned across various tiers. At the pinnacle of this structure, we find networks referred to as third and fourth levels, serving as umbrella organisations that oversee lower-tier networks. Second-level networks encompass individual membership-based organisations, while the foundational tier comprises standalone entities.

Moreover, as discussed in Chap. 1, it is important to note that, at the national level, the Italian third sector appears to be polarised into two main pillars, each consisting of a collection of organisations, institutions, and movements linked to the same cultural and ideological framework (van Hooren & Becker, 2012): the Catholic group and the secular leftist group (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). Amidst these two groups, which encompass a wide array of associative realities, we find the “new” organisations—meaning those that are not part of the historical trajectory of the Italian third sector. These are international organisations, which, while not adhering to the historical polarisation of the sector, wield considerable influence within the national landscape.

Our research zooms in on the apex of this pyramid, focusing on organisations operating at the national level and positioned within the higher echelons of networks. These entities wield significant influence, navigating arenas and decision-making processes within both economic and political spheres. Specifically, we explore elite CSOs, a minority subset that holds sway over key interactions with economic and political elites.

As outlined in Chap. 3, our analysis hinges on a specific measure of resource accumulation encompassing economic and political dimensions. This approach has identified 293 elite organisations, classified based on their elite score, which reflects the magnitude of the economic and political resources at their disposal and ranges from 1 to 5.

In this chapter, we embark upon an exploration of Italian CSOs, unravelling their structural nuances, policy domains, and cultural and political affiliations. We ask the following research questions:

1. What are the key characteristics of the organisational landscape comprising the Italian civil society elite?
2. How does the stratification of elite organisations within the Italian third sector manifest, and which types of organisations tend to accumulate the most resources?
3. What are the dominant policy areas of activity among elite organisations in the Italian third sector, and how do these areas reflect broader societal interests, concerns, and ideological divisions?

CATEGORISATION OF THE SAMPLE

In order to conduct a quantitative analysis of the 293 organisations in our sample, we categorised them into policy areas by first creating subcategories based on their primary actions and then grouping these subcategories into larger categories. This approach enabled us to identify a limited number of major activity areas for description and analysis, while still considering the specific characteristics of the organisations and their actions.

We began by identifying 11 major categories, each with specific subcategories and descriptions of their key activities:

1. **Solidarity and Volunteering:** Organisations primarily engaged in solidarity work within Italy, often relying on volunteering. Subcategories include social development, social promotion, civil service, anti-crime initiatives, solidarity efforts, and support for the elderly.
2. **International Aid and Politics:** Organisations within international aid, peacebuilding, and political engagement on a global scale. Subcategories include international aid, international politics, and peace initiatives.

3. Cooperative Movement: Organisations involved in the cooperative movement, including capacity-building and education initiatives. Subcategories include cooperatives and educational efforts.
4. Culture, Sports, and Hobbies: Organisations addressing leisure activities, often combining culture, sports, and hobbies. Subcategories include culture, hobbies, sports, and cultural and sports initiatives.
5. Sector: Organisations advocating for representation within specific sectors or support sector infrastructure. Subcategories include youth-focused initiatives.
6. Disability and Health: Organisations within the disability and patient advocacy movements, as well as those focused on health issues and mutual support. Subcategories include disability advocacy, health initiatives, and mutual aid efforts.
7. Human and Group Rights: Organisations working on human rights and the rights of specific groups, such as children, consumers, or migrants. Subcategories include children's rights, human rights advocacy, consumer rights, and initiatives promoting peace and democracy.
8. Christian Organisations: Organisations affiliated with the Christian/Catholic movement, with actions focused on religious outreach or conservative causes. Subcategories include family-focused initiatives and religious outreach.
9. Other Religious Organisations: Organisations affiliated with other religions, with actions focused on religious outreach or conservative causes.
10. Workers' Rights: Organisations connected to the labour movement and advocates for workers' rights. Subcategories include initiatives focused on immigrants and pensioners.
11. Environment: Organisations working on environmental issues.

This division into categories was created with the purpose of maintaining attention on the specificities of the Italian context. For example, as discussed in the introduction, the cooperative movement is a pivotal axis of the third sector in Italy and constitutes a separate world from that of international cooperation. Additionally, it enables comparison with other national contexts. In addition to this categorisation based on policy areas, we also included a more qualitative study on the various organisations' affiliation with specific pillars: the secularist and the Catholic. This was

undertaken to determine how this affiliation influences the hierarchy of CSOs. This latter data is based on observations of how organisations present themselves on their websites.

AT THE APEX OF THE HIERARCHY

Based on our elite ranking, our analysis reveals a distinct hierarchical structure within which a select few organisations wield significant influence by controlling multiple types of resources. Among the organisations with a score of 4 or 5, we identified 14 top-tier entities. Notably, these elite organisations predominantly comprise CSOs that are actively engaged in service functions and cultural activities, thus aligning with the broader orientation of the civil society sector.

Within this elite group, eight organisations are dedicated to various forms of solidarity, volunteering, or international aid initiatives. For instance, they champion causes such as children's rights, promote civil service volunteering, and participate in the international cooperation movement. Additionally, we observe representation from interest groups such as the disability movement, environmental organisations, and sports organisations.

Delving deeper, we find that only three organisations attain the highest elite score of 5. These organisations share several commonalities in structure, historical significance, and ideological roots. Notably, they hold positions on decision-making bodies, belong to umbrella organisations representing the civil society sector, receive core funding from public sources, and are actively involved in public consultations and committees.

Among these top-tier organisations, two longstanding entities stand out: ARCI (Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana) and ACLI (Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani). Both of these boast a rich history of societal impact and have particular political and ideological affiliations.

Furthermore, both organisations are broad-spectrum social actors in terms of their actions and policy areas. They can be categorised as organisations dedicated to solidarity and volunteering, and more specifically to social promotion. However, their activities extend beyond these realms to encompass social enterprises, cultural initiatives, and service functions aimed at vulnerable social groups.

ACLI was established in 1944, at a time when a significant proportion of the country was still under German occupation, following an

agreement among representatives of communist, socialist, and Christian-inspired workers' organisations. It describes itself online as “an association for social promotion ... composed of Christian laypeople who promote labor and workers, educate and encourage active citizenship, defend, help, and support citizens, especially those in marginalized or at-risk-of-social-exclusion conditions” (ACLI, 2024). Through a widespread and organised network of circles, services, enterprises, projects, and specific associations, ACLI contributes to weaving the fabric of society, nurturing various forms of participation and democracy.

This Catholic organisation, whose actions are guided by “the teachings of the Gospel and Christian social doctrine” (Ibid.), provides services to approximately three and a half million people. Today, it boasts over 880,031 members, both in Italy and abroad, and operates through 7001 territorial structures, including 2899 circles, 105 provincial headquarters, and 21 regional offices.

ARCI, one of the largest cultural and social promotion associations, was founded in 1957 during the reconstruction era in Italy. It originated as a federation of circles, people's houses, and mutualistic societies, aligning with the values of the left and particularly those of the two main opposition parties at the time: the Communist Party (PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI).

Describing itself as “an organization for the defense and development of people's houses and recreational circles”, ARCI asserts its heritage “from the mutualistic tradition of popular and anti-fascist movements that contributed to building and consolidating Italian democracy based on the Constitution” (ARCI, 2024). With a staggering membership of 1,015,204 individuals, the organisation operates through 4401 territorial circles distributed across the country.

The third organisation, AiBi (Associazione Amici dei Bambini, AiBi 2024), is a CSO founded in 1986. It specialises in facilitating the adoption of abandoned children, falling under the category of international aid. Specifically, AiBi operates in the policy areas of international cooperation, long-distance adoptions, and support for orphanages worldwide, while also assisting potential Italian parents to adopt children.

Similar to the first two organisations, AiBi maintains a national headquarters, along with 25 regional offices and information points across all regions of Italy, as well as in many other countries outside Italy. Additionally, and like the other organisations, AiBi has a clear political and religious affiliation as a declared Catholic association with ties to the Church.

Moving slightly down the hierarchy, organisations with an elite score of 4 are also numerically limited, totalling only 11. Among these top-tier organisations, as in those with an elite score of 5, we observe a significant presence of CSOs engaged in service functions, aligning with the overall orientation of the civil society sector. Four of these organisations are involved in international aid and the international cooperation movement, which appears to be a significant sector in the hierarchy of national CSOs.

Among this select group, we encounter the national third-level network within the realm of international aid and cooperation, AOI (Associazione delle Organizzazioni Italiane di Cooperazione e Solidarietà Internazionale), which serves as the association for Italian CSOs engaged in international aid efforts. AOI boasts a membership comprising CSOs from both Catholic and communist traditions, totalling over 250 CSOs. Additionally, we find two second-level networks within the same area, one representing the Catholic tradition and the other the secularist tradition. Here we also find ActionAid, which notably stands out as the sole international organisation to enter the elite group of CSOs with such a high elite score.

Furthermore, there are organisations which, although categorised within a specific policy area, that of solidarity and volunteering, undertake a broad spectrum of actions ranging from social promotion, social services, and volunteerism to cultural and recreational activities. An example is the UNPLI (Unione Nazionale Pro Loco Italiana), another historical organisation dating back to 1962, boasting 600,000 members and over 6200 local associations. UNPLI is registered in the national register of Social Promotion Associations and the national registry of the National Civil Service. The association's network is structured into regional, provincial, and local committees and it has a pervasive presence across the national territory. UNPLI describes itself as:

Pro Loco association is a non-profit organization formed by volunteers committed to promoting the local area, discovering and preserving local traditions, improving the quality of life for residents, and showcasing the products and beauties of the territory. Pro Loco organize events in the tourism, cultural, historical, environmental, folkloric, gastronomic, and sports sectors. (Proloco UNPLI, 2024)

Additionally, among these elite organisations, we find one representing an interest group, specifically the disability movement; an environmental organisation; a sports organisation; and an organisation dedicated to human rights, particularly migrants' rights.

THE CENTRAL GROUP OF CIVIL SOCIETY ELITE ORGANISATIONS

In the sample with an elite score of 3, we observe the presence of 36 CSOs. The dominant policy area is that of solidarity and volunteering, encompassing 16 organisations. These range from the civil service to social promotion, primarily focusing on service provision. Following closely are CSOs active in the international sphere (7), human and group rights (4), and those engaged in culture and sports (4). Additionally, the group includes sector-specific organisations (2) and those affiliated with the disability movement (2).

Upon examining the group as a whole, it is evident that the majority are active in service provision, while also serving a role in political representation. An illustrative example of such representation is the Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore. This entity is referred to as a “fourth-level” network and serves as a permanent civil society platform representing the entire sector at the national level, including networks at the second and third levels. As stated on its website, it is recognised by the state as the representative actor of the Italian third sector:

In January 2021, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies announced that the National Third Sector Forum [...] emerged as the association of third sector entities with the greatest representation on a national scale, in terms of the number of adhering entities. Its members include 100 national organizations of the second and third levels—for a total of over 158,000 territorial offices—operating in the fields of Volunteering, Associationism, Social Cooperation, International Solidarity, Ethical Finance, and Fair Trade in our country. (Forum Terzo Settore, 2024)

The reason why it holds an elite score of 3, and not 4 or 5, is that, because it represents the entire sector, it is not included in specific ministries’ registries for consultations or networks for specific policy areas. This demonstrates that, beyond differences in specific resources, all organisations within the sample with elite scores of 5, 4, or 3 hold a central position in the national hierarchy. Indeed, we find other third- and second-level networks here, alongside well-known organisations with branches across the country. For instance, we have the Associazione Volontari Italiani Sangue, the largest blood donation volunteer organisation in Italy with 1,300,000 members and 3300 branches. Another example is Federconsumatori, which is a Social Promotion Association established in 1988 with the support of one of the major national trade unions, called

CGIL, and is thus affiliated with the secularist movement, and formerly with the Communist Party. It operates with expertise and professionalism in defending consumer rights through information, consulting, and assistance services.

There is also a notable presence of Catholic CSOs whose primary sphere of action is not religious but rather service oriented. A prime example is Caritas Italiana. Caritas is the pastoral organisation of the Italian Episcopal Conference, established in 1971. Therefore, it is the most important national association directly linked to the Church and operates in various sectors within the framework of solidarity. It has a strong service-oriented approach but also often plays a central role in defending the rights of the most vulnerable groups, from the poor to migrants, through both direct and indirect lobbying activities.

Additionally, we find two international organisations—Croce Rossa Italiana and Oxfam—which, along with ActionAid, are the three CSOs included in this high elite score category. Croce Rossa Italiana is part of the international Red Cross movement but has a strong national character. Founded in 1864, it was the fifth National Red Cross Society to be formed after the founding of the International Red Cross in 1863 in Geneva. Therefore, it is considered a nationally prominent association, under the high patronage of the President of the Republic. On the other hand, Oxfam is an international organisation, but has established forms of collaboration with national third-sector actors, particularly with the Forum Nazionale del terzo settore, although it is not part of this network, unlike ActionAid.

THE LARGEST GROUP

CSOs with elite scores of 1 and 2 constitute the largest group in our sample, totalling 243 organisations. Within this group, there is a greater diversity of actors in terms of policy areas and fields of action. Here, organisations tend to narrow their scope of action compared to those with higher elite scores, focusing on specific policy areas while still maintaining a dual role of service and advocacy, like many other CSOs in the sample. Moreover, these organisations tend to be younger compared to those with higher elite scores.

The primary policy area, comprising 58 organisations, is human and group rights. These organisations address issues predominantly concerning migrants, as well as LGBT groups, women, children, consumers,

organisations involved in the fight against crime, and foundations focusing on democracy and peace.

Following is the disability policy area with 38 organisations, ranging from research actors to those linked to disability movements. Next are organisations dedicated to international aid and politics, and those involved in solidarity and volunteering, both with 35 CSOs. The latter primarily engage in social promotion activities.

CSOs within these policy area categories represent the group where service activities and advocacy efforts are most clearly combined. For example, we find the *Associazione per gli studi giuridici sull'immigrazione*, which was established in 1990 by a group of lawyers, jurists, and scholars specialising in immigration and asylum matters. It primarily engages in advocacy for the rights of migrants and asylum seekers while also providing legal support to these individuals. Another example is *Lega Italiana per la lotta contro l'AIDS*, founded in 1987, which engages in support and advocacy efforts in the field of health, with a mission to promote and protect the right to health and fight against violations of the rights of people with HIV or AIDS and the communities most affected by the infection.

Another well-known organisation at the national level, as well as internationally, is *Libera*, a network of associations, social cooperatives, movements, groups, schools, unions, dioceses, parishes, and scout groups, established in 1995 to combat mafia influence. In this group, we also find *Emergency*, which is involved in humanitarian activities and has been engaged in the promotion of solidarity and respect for human rights since 1994.

The area of culture, sports, and hobbies is also strongly represented in this group (23 CSOs), as well as organisations aiming to promote activities or visions with a Catholic influence (22 CSOs). Among these are conservative organisations like *ProVita e Famiglia*, an association with a mission to defend the right to life from conception to natural death, promote families based on marriage between a man and a woman, and support the freedom and educational priority of parents. It is interesting to note that this group of associations is present only in elite scores 1 and 2.

In smaller numbers, but still nationally relevant, we have organisations linked to the cooperative movement (8), those in policy areas related to the sector (9), environment (8), other religions (5), and workers' rights (5).

CONCLUSIONS

In exploring the organisational landscape of Italian civil society's elite, we have uncovered a rich tapestry of actors, ideologies, and policy priorities that collectively shape the sector's dynamics. At the heart of this landscape lies a hierarchical structure, with elite organisations wielding significant influence over decision-making processes and policy agendas. These organisations, which are distinguished by their resource accumulation and strategic positioning, occupy central roles within the sector, navigating the complex interplay between economic, political, and social forces.

Our categorisation of elite scores highlights how organisations exhibit distinct characteristics and roles within Italian civil society elite, reflecting varying levels of resource accumulation, influence, and strategic positioning.

At the apex of the hierarchy are organisations with an elite score of 5, representing the pinnacle of influence and resource accumulation within the sector. These top-tier entities boast rich historical legacies, broad-spectrum actions, and close ties to decision-making bodies. They often hold positions on national-level committees, receive core funding from public sources, and play central roles in shaping policy agendas. Additionally, they maintain extensive networks and partnerships, both domestically and internationally, further enhancing their reach and impact.

Moving down the hierarchy, organisations with elite scores of 4 and 3 occupy a slightly lower tier but still wield considerable influence and resources. These organisations are actively engaged in service provision, advocacy, and international cooperation efforts. They often operate as part of larger networks, representing specific policy areas or interest groups, and play key roles in advancing sectoral priorities and initiatives. They also serve as important intermediaries and representatives of the sector at the national level. For this reason, the entire group of organisations with elite scores of 5, 4, or 3 can be considered as forming the apex of the hierarchy. The differences between the three groups reside mainly in our method of categorisation based on specific types of resources. The Forum, for example, is the network representing the entire national sector and for this reason has greater access to decision-making processes than any other CSO. However, it is included in the elite score 3 group because it is not part of a larger network (because it is the largest) or specific policy area committees because it tends to represent them all. Therefore, taking into

account the limitations of our method (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2024), we can consider the three groups as a single large group of elite CSOs.

Further down the hierarchy, organisations with elite scores of 2 and 1 represent the largest and most diverse segment of the sector. While still contributing to the sector's vibrancy and diversity, these organisations tend to have narrower scopes of action and fewer resources than those with higher elite scores. They often focus on specific policy areas or local-level initiatives, engaging primarily in service provision or advocacy within their respective communities. Despite their relatively lower levels of resource accumulation, these organisations play vital roles in addressing local needs, encouraging community engagement, and amplifying marginalised voices within the broader civil society landscape.

Overall, the differences between these groups underscore the hierarchical nature of Italian civil society elite, where organisations with higher elite scores have more resources, strategic significance, and wield greater influence.

Central to the functioning of Italian civil society elite are its ideological affiliations, notably the polarisation between the Catholic group and the secular leftist group. These ideological frameworks not only guide the orientation and actions of their respective CSOs but also reflect deeper historical and cultural divisions within Italian society (Bassoli, 2017; Bassoli & Theiss, 2014). While these ideological divisions, as demonstrated by Tosi and Vitale (2009), are often intermingled and hybridised to promote political causes at the national level, such as in the case of the peace movement during the 1980s, they may at times impede collaboration and consensus-building. However, they also encourage diversity of thought and action, enriching the sector's capacity to address a wide range of societal challenges. Such ideological divisions are more prominent in the highest elite score groups, indicating their influence in the power hierarchy of the sector, as well as in the reproduction of leaders (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021).

Moreover, the sector's engagement with diverse policy areas, from human rights advocacy to international aid and environmental activism, underscores its multifaceted approach to social change. Elite organisations, which often combine service provision with advocacy efforts, play a dual role in addressing immediate social needs while also advocating for systemic change. This holistic approach reflects the sector's commitment to improving individual well-being alongside broader societal transformation.

The picture of civil society elite organisations that emerges from our analysis reveals specificities that are not visible in data on the entire third sector. For example, at the general level, we have seen that the most numerous organisations are those of volunteering, and an important role at the local level is played by cooperatives. Also, among the elites, the main organisations are those operating in the field of solidarity and volunteering, while associations belonging to the cooperative movement are much less numerous. What differentiates our group from the sector in general is its scope of action. At the general level, associations operating in the recreational and sports sector dominate. The elites are instead more oriented towards the areas of social promotion and international aid. Furthermore, the dual nature of Italian elite CSOs, as both service- and voice-oriented, is evident.

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The Profile of the Italian Civil Society Elite

Abstract This chapter examines the socio-demographic profile and attitudinal orientations of Italy's civil society elite, offering critical insights into the power dynamics and representation within the sector. Comparative analyses situate the elite vis-à-vis the general population, grassroots activists, and economically privileged groups, revealing disparities across age, gender, education, and nativity indicators. The elite emerge as predominantly older, male, highly educated, and native-born, and are thus emblematic of entrenched privilege structures. However, their attitudes chart a strikingly divergent trajectory, exhibiting greater social trust, left-leaning ideologies, and robust support for progressive causes like LGBTQ+ rights relative to other cohorts. Qualitative perspectives elicited from elite leaders contextualise these findings, illuminating perceptions around gender representation challenges, generational barriers, and ideological tensions within the ranks of civil society. This duality—socio-demographic privilege juxtaposed with progressive attitudes—positions the elite as potential catalysts of transformative change. The chapter's rigorous examination exposes power geometries shaping the sector while highlighting civil society's avant-garde role in catalysing inclusive leadership, intergenerational dialogue, and equitable social progress. Grappling with intersections of privilege and ideology leads to the emergence of new pathways towards realising civil society's transformative potential.

Keywords Socio-demographic profile • Attitudinal orientations • Comparative analysis • Representation • Reproduction

INTRODUCTION

Many elite studies focus on the composition of elite groups, an approach that involves identifying who the elites are and what characterises them (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). This chapter follows a similar pattern and addresses the composition of the Italian civil society elite. Interest in the composition of elites is based on an expectation that elites are different from the general population. This statement is, in a sense, implicit in the very definition of an elite. If an elite is a group of individuals who accumulate a disproportionate amount of resources (Khan, 2012), then we have already defined them as a group within a larger population. The adjective “disproportionate” characterises them from a relational perspective, in terms of being disproportionate in relation to someone else. Hence, a prerequisite for the existence of an elite is that resources are unequally distributed and, within a hierarchical order, the elite is at the top.

The composition of an elite is often studied by looking at the proportion of men and women within that elite, or the proportions of native-born and foreign-born, young and old, highly educated and poorly educated, etc. Although these proportions do not say anything directly about the mechanisms of power, they do indicate which groups in society tend to occupy positions of power within a specific sphere. This interest in the composition of an elite can be understood as an acknowledgement that different forms of durable inequality are linked to specific social categories (Tilly, 1999). There is also an understanding that these patterns of inequality tend to reproduce the same hierarchical structure over time. In fact, we can expect that the higher the social status of a position, the greater the proportion of individuals from high-status families we will find occupying that position (Putnam, 1976).

Unsurprisingly, studies of elites repeatedly find that elites differ from the general population, in both demographic and social composition (Mills, 1959; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1998; Göransson, 2007) and political preferences and attitudes (Müller et al., 2012; Kertzer, 2020; Dellmuth et al., 2022). This issue is particularly interesting from a power perspective, because the reproduction of elites who are not representative of the general population in either their social composition or their

attitudes can maintain or even exacerbate unequal access to resources and positions of power. Therefore, the gap between the elite and the masses as a phenomenon raises crucial questions about persistent inequality and problems of democratic accountability (Vogel et al., 2019; Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024). In fact, in many spheres of society, there is a risk of excluding the voices and perspectives of groups that are underrepresented in positions of power from decision-making: for example, women, the foreign-born, and younger people. This issue is particularly central to civil society due to its role of advocacy and as a watchdog towards the state and the market.

This chapter is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the socio-demographic characteristics, attitudes, and ideological orientations of the Italian civil society elite compare with those of the general population, grassroots members, and the economically privileged?
2. How do the socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes of the civil society elite relate to prevailing narratives regarding the reproduction of elites and biased practices within institutions?

COMPARING ELITE COMPOSITION

As discussed above, we begin by acknowledging that the definition of an elite presupposes some kind of comparison because we can only conceptualise the elite in relation to the masses, the general population, or “regular people”. This relationship is implicit in the “disproportionate” amount of resources that, by definition, they control as an elite. This feature of the elite concept makes it important not only to describe the composition of the civil society elite but also to analyse it in comparison to other groups. In this chapter, we engage in comparing the Italian civil society elite with three different groups: the whole population, the grassroots, and the economically privileged.

Comparison with the whole population is motivated by the democratic function that is often ascribed to civil society of channelling the voices and representing the interests of the people within a democratic and pluralistic society (Kohler-Koch, 2010). This function is achieved through internal democratic structures of representation of the constituencies: for instance, through the election of representative leaders and deliberation around the organisations’ stances on important issues. The link between elite

composition and the democratic function of civil society is even more evident from the perspective of descriptive representation. A leader who accurately represents their constituents has the potential to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalised communities within the political sphere (Pitkin, 1967). Likewise, “mirroring” can be viewed as a subtype of representative claims, wherein representatives emphasise the resemblance between themselves and the constituency they aim to advocate for or represent (Saward, 2010).

Our comparison with the grassroots follows a slightly different logic. The grassroots of civil society, whether we define them as the members, the volunteers, or the activists, are the broader human resources of organisations within civil society (cf. Kreuzer & Jäger, 2011). It is one of the most important resources available to a civil society organisation (CSO) (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Furthermore, many CSOs tend to recruit their leaders from within the own organisations and long career trajectories from volunteering in the grassroots to elite positions are quite common, not least in Italy (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). Hence, exploring how the elite differ from the grassroots in their composition helps us to understand which groups are more likely to advance from the lower ranks of their organisations to the top.

The comparison with the economically privileged follows a different logic. It is based on the fact that the civil society elite often enjoys a privileged position in society. Although previous studies in Italy (Carboni, 2016) have suggested that the leadership of civil society is a lower-tier elite, they are still spokespersons for elite organisations. Studies of Swedish civil society elite (Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024), for instance, show that civil society elites tend to have an income that is well above the average. Hence, comparing the civil society elite with the economically privileged in society enables us to explore the extent to which members of this particular elite group differ from their social class peers.

The comparison draws on data from the European Social Survey Round 10 Data (2020) (ESS) and the most recent data set. We have used the Italian ESS survey study to enable us to access data that is comparable to our Civil Society Elites Survey Study (see Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024). When we compare the civil society elite with the whole population, we use all 5160 respondents from the Italian ESS dataset.

To identify the grassroots, we used a question in the ESS questionnaire asking whether, during the last twelve months, the respondent has volunteered for a not-for-profit or charitable organisation. The question is asked within the context of “different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong”. Hence, this question identifies the grassroots as people who have done volunteer work for CSOs. In the ESS, the grassroots consists of about 17% of the total population ($N = 893$).

To identify the economically privileged, we used a question in the ESS questionnaire asking about the respondent’s household’s total income, after tax and compulsory deductions, from all sources. The question is based on ten categories of income from which the respondents can choose. We identify the economically privileged as people who have a net household monthly income of at least 3501 euros. This income level comes quite close to the mean income of the civil society elite which, according to our survey study, is 3404 euros. In our survey, however, we ask for individual income and not household income, so the household income of the civil society elite should on average be even higher. In this sense, we can argue that a consistent share of the civil society elite conforms to our description of the economically privileged. The proportion of this group in the ESS is about 5% of the total population ($N = 253$).

Hence, in the next section we compare the civil society elite with three groups to which the elite is related in different ways. Firstly, the civil society elite is arguably part of the country’s population. Secondly, the civil society elite is part of the workforce of civil society in the same way as the volunteers. It is also reasonable to think that the individual leaders in the civil society elite have been volunteers in civil society and may still do some volunteering. Thirdly, as well-remunerated leaders of elite organisations, a consistent proportion of the civil society elite is also potentially part of the economically privileged parts of society.

The variables we use for the comparison include four socio-demographic and four attitudinal factors, as shown in Table 5.1 (see also Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024).

Table 5.1 Variables used in the analysis of civil society elite's composition

<i>Civil society elite survey study</i>	<i>ESS</i>	<i>Measure</i>
Socio-demographic background		
Age	Age (15–90)	Mean
Gender	Gender	Percentages (female)
Education (level)	Education (level)	Percentages (higher education)
Country of birth	Born in country	Percentages (foreign born)
Attitudes		
Social trust	Social trust	Mean (0–10)
Ideological position	Ideological position	Mean (0–10)
Satisfaction with democracy	Satisfaction with democracy	Mean (0–10)
Gay and lesbian rights	Gay and lesbian rights	Mean (1–5)

Source: The Civil Society Elite Survey; European Social Survey Round 10 Data (2020). Data file edition 3.0. Sikt—Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Norway—Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. <https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS10-2020>

THE SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Starting with the socio-demographic background, we present a comparison of the civil society elite and the other three groups in the first part of Table 5.2 (at the end of the chapter). Compared to the general Italian population, the civil society elite appears to be much older, eight years older on average. It also appears to be male dominated, as a whole 72% of leaders are male. The civil society elite is also comparatively highly educated. It is in fact in relation to higher education that we find the largest gap between the civil society elite and the general population. While 79% of the elite has achieved a higher education degree, only 17% of the general population has done so. Although we find a small percentage of the population being born in other countries in the ESS data, we find a slightly smaller percentage of foreign-born people in the civil society elite.

When we instead compare the civil society elite with the grassroots, we find an even larger age gap, of ten years. The gender gap is also larger, with the grassroots being female dominated with only 43% of volunteers being men. The civil society elite is also much more highly educated than the grassroots, although the gap is smaller than that with the whole population as the grassroots tend to have a higher level of education than the

Table 5.2 The composition of civil society elite in comparison

	<i>Civil society elite</i>	<i>General population</i>	<i>Grassroots</i>	<i>Economically privileged</i>
Socio-demographic profile				
Age (mean)	59	51	49	48
Gender (% male)	72	48	43	51
Education (% higher education)	79	17	29	37
Country of birth (% native)	94	92	94	96
Attitude profile				
Trust (0=low; 10=high)	6.8	4.9	5.5	5.6
Political position (0=left; 10=right)	3.1	5.1	4.8	5.3
Satisfaction with democracy (0=dissatisfied; 10=satisfied)	5.1	5.1	5.2	5.6
Gay/lesbian rights (1=acceptance; 5=refusal)	1.5	2.1	1.8	1.9

Source: The Civil Society Elite Survey; European Social Survey Round 10 Data (2020). Data file edition 3.0. Sikt—Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Norway—Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. <https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS10-2020>

population as a whole. Concerning country of birth, we find the same small overrepresentation of native-born people in the grassroots as in the civil society elite.

Finally, when we look at the economically privileged and compare them with their peers in the civil society elite we find an even larger age gap, of eleven years. The gender gap is still large but smaller than compared to the other groups. The economically privileged are also more likely than the other groups of comparison to have a higher education degree. In fact, 37% of the group has a degree. The education gap is still large, however, at 42 percentage points. Finally, we find even lower representation of foreign-born people among the economically privileged than in the civil society elite by 2%.

In summary, we find that the socio-demographic composition of the civil society elite quite closely resembles the results of Carboni's (2016) study of the general elite in Italy, as described in the context chapter (see Chap. 2). The Italian civil society elite is of older age, male dominated, highly educated, and mostly born in the country. If we consider older age, male gender, higher education, and being native-born as social positions of privilege, we can conclude that the civil society elite is characterised by

an overrepresentation of all four social positions of privilege compared to the general population. The distance becomes even larger from the grassroots when it comes to both age and gender, with the grassroots tending to be more inclusive of younger people and women. We find instead an overrepresentation of highly educated people and the native-born also in the grassroots, although the proportion with higher education is still much smaller than among the civil society elite. Looking at the economically privileged, we find this group to also be more inclusive than the civil society elite, except for country of birth, where we find a lower representation of foreign-born people than among the civil society elite. It is important here to keep in mind that the variable is based on household income, which means that not only individuals earning high wages would be included but also people living in the same household, including partners, children, and relatives.

THE ATTITUDE PROFILE

The attitudes of the civil society elite compared with the other three groups are presented in the second part of Table 5.2. The comparison with the general population shows that the civil society elite tend to have more trust in people. On a scale between zero and ten, the average trust of the civil society elite is almost two units higher than that of the general population. Looking at the political position of the civil society elite on a left–right scale, we find a similar difference of two units on a scale of zero to ten, placing the civil society elite much more to the left than the general population. In contrast, the level of satisfaction with democracy is about the same, placed almost in the middle of a scale between the most dissatisfied position and the most satisfied. The civil society elite also appears to be much more progressive than the general population when it comes to gay and lesbian rights, with an average difference of more than half a unit on a scale of 1 to 5.

Comparing the civil society elite with the grassroots, we find similar differences, although less pronounced. In their attitude profile, civil society grassroots appear to be about halfway “in between” the civil society elite and the general population. Concerning trust, instead of a difference of 1.9 we find a difference of 1.3. When it comes to political position, instead of a difference of 2 we find a difference of 1.7, and for gay and lesbian rights the difference is 0.3 instead of 0.6. Only when it comes to satisfaction with democracy do we find almost no difference at all.

Comparing the civil society elite to the economically privileged, we find a more complex pattern. We find smaller differences than with the general population and even with the grassroots when it comes to generalised trust and gay and lesbian rights. The largest difference emerges in relation to political position and satisfaction with democracy. In fact, concerning these two dimensions, the economically privileged appear to be relatively at the opposite side as the most right-leaning group and the most satisfied with democracy.

In summary, we find that the attitude profile of the civil society elite is quite distinct from those of the other groups. High levels of trust, left-leaning, and progressive concerning sexual minorities' rights are the most evident differences with the general population. The civil society grassroots' attitude profile, as described above, appears to be closer to that of the general population, but oriented in the same direction as the elite. Satisfaction with democracy, however, is about the same in the civil society elite, the grassroots, and the general population. The economically privileged part of the population is the group most at odds with the civil society elite when it comes to political orientation and satisfaction with democracy. They are, however, closer when it comes to the other two dimensions.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ELITE'S VIEW OF ITS COMPOSITION

The ruling class of the third sector, I believe, reflects the political ruling class of the country. We are mainly men, I must admit, of a certain age ... for women, things are beginning to change, but for young people, it's more difficult to become part of it. Just as it's difficult, if not almost impossible, for foreigners. (Director)

We have chosen to begin this qualitative section on the opinion that the civil society elite has of its own composition with this statement, taken from one of the interviews with the director of a voluntary organisation, which perfectly describes the composition of the "ruling class" of the "third sector" in Italy.

As shown by the quantitative data, the socio-demographic profile of the civil society elite is marked by a strong male presence, advancing age, and a very low, if not absent, presence of leaders born abroad. However, the director emphasised that the gender issue is changing. In recent years, the presence of women in key positions has increased. For example, the Forum

Nazionale del Terzo Settore, the representative organisation of the entire third sector, is currently led by a woman, who succeeded another woman. However, as the following interview shows, these female leaders often feel themselves to be a minority and acknowledge that it is more difficult for them to reach such positions:

For many years, men have held the roles of president, and central positions have almost always been the prerogative of men. I was the first female president of [CSO], but it was difficult; I had to do double the work of my male colleagues to have my worth recognised. (President)

Although most interviewees recognised the issue of low female representation in the sector's leadership as a problem, and despite the fact that many CSOs are active in projects promoting gender diversity, female presence remains low, apart from CSOs active in international cooperation, where in 2023, 30.9% of leadership and presidency positions were held by women (Open Cooperation, 2023).

Continuing with the first excerpt from the interview, another issue that emerges and is also present in other interviews is that of the generational gap. The group of civil society elite is closed off to young people, as shown by the following excerpt: “*My desire would be to become president; certainly I'll have to wait until our president retires to have a chance ... in reality, few young people hold this role, and I don't know if I'll have the opportunity any time soon*” (Director).

This excerpt, taken from an interview conducted with a young director of an international development organisation, highlights the gap between their desire, namely, to assume the role considered most important in the Italian third sector (Santilli, 2024), and the reality, which favours older individuals. When we discussed this aspect with another leader of a significant voluntary organisation, his statement was: “*[W]e're a generation of leadership orphaned of fathers and sons. The old leaders who inspired and guided us are no longer here, and we've lost appeal to the young, [who are] increasingly distant from us, from the third sector*” (President).

This statement, which also reflects the sense of loneliness perceived and experienced by these leaders that was present in many interviews, speaks to the growing distance between leaders and members, but also between leaders and young people, who do not seem interested in following them.

On the other hand, the perception of young people, who in the case of our sample are more often found occupying director positions (4 out of 9

directors and 1 out of 31 presidents, which is representative of the Italian situation), is that of a blockade against entry for young people. Some interviewees believed that this is due to economic factors. One interviewed president said:

The salary of a president is not very high, so this position is usually held by people who have another job, a job that leaves them time to also be in the third sector, or especially by people who are retired, so they have free time and money ... young people don't have other jobs, except those in the third sector, and they can't survive only with the president's salary, especially if they hold this role in small organisations.

There is also the factor of experience, which is considered important by all leaders, and is also evident from the career trajectories of these leaders. Leaders tend to spend many years in the sector, and often within the same organisation, before reaching top positions (see also Chap. 7), and this presupposes that they reach such positions when they are no longer young. We can therefore affirm that advanced age brings legitimacy, fits into the culture of the Italian third sector, and represents a boundary element between the elite and the rest of an organisation's members. The position of director is slightly different because this role is often more technical and less representative, thus a bit more open to people with technical skills, independent of age (Santilli, 2024).

While the gender gap and age gap were frequently cited in the interviews, aspects related to higher education and being born in the country were less often discussed. The first aspect was almost never mentioned as a determining factor for occupying key positions, and the second was rarely raised as a problem within the leadership of the third sector.

Returning to the first interview quote, it was common in interviews for leaders to describe their group as similar in terms of composition to the political leadership class, while rarely mentioning the economic elite: “[W]e’re not so different from the political leadership class”, said one president, “we have the same problems”.

Looking at the latest data concerning the composition of the Italian political elite, specifically the members of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, the average age is 55 years. Women constitute 36%, and the political elite also exhibit significantly higher levels of education than the general population, grassroots, or the economic elite (55% in the Chamber and 70% in the Senate) (Camera, 2022; Senato, 2022). This indeed

suggests that the composition and socio-demographic characteristics of the political elite are much more similar to those of the civil society elite than to the other groups under examination and confirms the leaders' perceptions of their groups.

Leaders in the interviews did not directly discuss values. However, from their career narratives, it is evident that they are attached not only to the organisations they represent but also to the political and cultural group to which both the leaders and their organisations belong. For instance: "If you start your career in an organisation, or more precisely in a specific group, which could be the Catholic one or the secularist one, then you stay there" (President). Or: "[CSO] is my home, I've shared its values since I started my career twenty years ago" (Director).

The issue of the overall values of third-sector leaders, specifically the progressive vision reflected in the questionnaire data, is less direct. These aspects are often taken for granted and can be inferred from phrases such as: "The issue of equal rights is common throughout the third sector" or, from an interview with the leader of a Catholic organisation: "[W]e share a lot, despite different political and religious origins, such as the defence of migrants, the poor, and the disabled. The only issue that sometimes creates tension between different cultural groups is that of LGBT rights" (Director).

This last quote shows how values are generally shared, except for the gender aspect, which seems to divide Catholic associations from secular ones. However, some argue that this division is not very strong, as evidenced by the following excerpt from an interview with the President of a conservative CSO: "They [the representatives of the major CSOs in the third sector] always agree, Catholic representatives in the Italian third sector tolerate the secular line and do not oppose actions in favour of gender and LGBT issues".

From these discussions, it is evident that the majority of the civil society elite exhibit a certain progressive openness, which is indeed criticised by more conservative Catholic individuals. According to recent research, this aspect has also grown due to a political context that, for some years now, has challenged CSOs on various human rights issues, such as gender and increasingly restrictive migration policies, and not least with the rise of populist political parties. This has led to, and continues to contribute to, a reorganisation of relationships between historically ideologically divided CSOs (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022). However, despite this, shared values remain somewhat implicit in the interviews.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented in this study offer a nuanced understanding of the composition and attitudes of the civil society elite in Italy, shedding light on their role within the broader social landscape.

From a socio-demographic perspective, the civil society elite emerges as a group marked by disparities in age, gender, education, and nativity compared to the general population, the grassroots, and the economically privileged. Notably, they are characterised by older age, male dominance, higher educational attainment, and predominantly native-born status, aspects which underscore the enduring influence of traditional power structures within civil society. These socio-demographic trends reflect broader patterns of inequality and privilege within Italian society and the general elite, highlighting the need for critical reflection upon representation and access to leadership positions within CSOs.

However, while these characteristics may align with conventional notions of elite status, they belie a more nuanced reality. In fact, the attitudes of the civil society elite reveal a divergence from expected elite norms, challenging prevailing narratives and offering glimpses of a more progressive ethos. Their higher levels of social trust, left-leaning political orientations, dissatisfaction with democracy and support for progressive causes such as LGBTQ+ rights compared to the general population and the economically privileged defy traditional elite stereotypes and suggest a divergence between socio-demographic background and ideological orientation within civil society leadership circles.

This disjunction between socio-demographic background and ideological orientation, which is also found in Sweden and the UK, for example (Baxter et al., 2024), positions the civil society elite at the nexus of tradition and innovation. This elite group serves as torchbearers of progressive values and agents of transformative change within the broader social landscape. For this reason, they might be considered as the avant-garde of civil society, encapsulating their pivotal role in shaping the ethos and direction of societal progress.

Drawing upon the comprehensive analysis presented in this chapter, it becomes evident that the civil society elite embodies a unique blend of privilege and progressive ideology. Their socio-demographic composition reflects entrenched power structures and historical patterns of exclusion. However, their attitudes and actions diverge from traditional elite norms,

signalling a departure from conventional paradigms and a commitment to promoting progressive causes.

Moreover, the qualitative insights gleaned from our interviews with civil society leaders provide an invaluable context for understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of those at the helm of CSOs. Themes of gender representation, generational dynamics, and barriers to entry emerge as salient issues, underscoring the ongoing struggle to reconcile ideals of inclusivity and diversity with entrenched power dynamics within the sector. The notion of the civil society elite as an avant-garde—a vanguard of progressive values and social change—resonates in these narratives, as leaders grapple with the tensions between tradition and innovation, continuity and renewal.

Indeed, this elite group occupies a unique position as both stewards of tradition and catalysts for change within civil society. The group's socio-demographic composition reflects historical legacies of privilege and exclusion, yet their individual attitudes and actions signal a departure from entrenched norms and a willingness to challenge the status quo. As agents of social transformation, the civil society elite have the potential to catalyse inclusive leadership structures, encourage intergenerational dialogue, and promote progressive agendas that resonate with the diverse constituencies they serve. Their attitudes and ideological orientations challenge prevailing narratives regarding elite capture and institutional bias by demonstrating a departure from expected elite norms towards progressive values and advocacy for social justice.

Moving forward, efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within CSOs are paramount. Addressing barriers to entry for underrepresented groups, supporting mentorship and leadership development programmes for young leaders, and amplifying marginalised voices are critical steps towards realising the ideals the elite claims to embody as well as the transformative potential of civil society as a force for social justice and democratic renewal.

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Professionalisation and Elitisation

Abstract This chapter investigates the process of professionalisation within civil society elites, defined as the shift from unpaid voluntary engagement to paid employment within CSOs. Comparing Italy's corporatist civil society tradition with the UK's liberal model reveals contrasting dynamics. Italy exhibits lower levels of professionalisation, with a predominance of unpaid leaders and minimal reliance on salaried staff roles. In contrast, the UK's civil society landscape demonstrates advanced professionalisation, marked by a higher proportion of remunerated positions and greater dependence on state funding. Leadership composition reflects these divergent trajectories. Italy's elite predominantly comprises presidents aligned with political advocacy, while the UK's leadership cadre features a stronger presence of directors embodying managerial expertise. Demographic analyses reveal greater diversity among the UK's elite regarding gender, age, and education, suggesting inclusive yet socioeconomically stratified leadership pathways influenced by professionalisation. Qualitative insights from Italian leaders illuminate tensions between the merits of professionalisation in fostering meritocracy and apprehension about compromising the sector's historical identity. This dichotomy underscores the delicate equilibrium between tradition and innovation within civil society's evolving governance structures. Ultimately, this comparative exploration elucidates how professionalisation intersects with

elitisation processes, power dynamics, and institutional biases, offering a nuanced perspective on civil society's transformative role in championing inclusive leadership and equitable social progress.

Keywords Professionalisation • Career trajectories • Leadership • Management • Italy • UK

INTRODUCTION

The process of professionalisation that has been witnessed in Western civil societies has been extensively debated in recent literature. In essence, it refers to the integration of market principles into civil society organisations (CSOs), which have adopted professional norms and structures to enhance their effectiveness and efficiency. Some scholars have defined this phenomenon as the presence of professionals, paid or unpaid, within CSOs (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983), while others relate it to the number of paid staff working for these organisations (Suárez, 2011). Still others see it as “the recruitment of individuals with necessary organizational competencies” (Ivanovska Hadjievska & Stavenes, 2020, p. 99). This chapter explores the link between civil society elites and professionalisation by comparing the conditions of engagement within Italian and British civil society elites. This comparison is important because the civil society sector in the UK is characterised by higher levels of professionalisation.

Practically speaking, professionalisation is a multifaceted process that involves structural changes within civil societies, encompassing the adoption of formal organisational structures, the employment of professional staff, and the implementation of professional practices and standards. This trend, observed across many civil societies, has been triggered by shifts in public and economic policies initiated by New Public Management and subsequent neoliberal reforms. These changes have prompted heightened rationalisation and competition between CSOs for funding, leading these organisations to develop sophisticated management tools to enhance their accountability and competitiveness, and taking on a more market-oriented approach in both their actions and their organisational structures (Hwang & Powell, 2009). Within the civil society sector, there is an increasing emphasis on measuring results and competencies while projecting a professional image to reinforce legitimacy (Noordegraaf, 2007). This growing structuration has had an impact not only on CSOs but also on social

movements, particularly since the 1980s. Some social movements, by accumulating resources, enhancing public recognition and membership, commercialising activities, and establishing paid staff positions, have evolved into highly institutionalised entities, thus gaining access to decision-making arenas like CSOs.

A significant fraction of the literature on professionalisation within the non-profit sector has focused on analysing these external influences, examining how state regulation and funding might shift the balance between non-professionalised and professionalised staff (Salgado, 2010; Suárez, 2011; Ivanovska Hadjievska & Stavenes, 2020). Other studies have highlighted the consequences of this process, particularly the increased utilisation of management tools and management-oriented staff (Hwang & Powell, 2009). There is also an ongoing debate about the impact of professionalisation on philanthropy and the political actions of civil society, especially concerning shifts in practitioners' and organisations' social identities, values, and ethos (Schambra & Shaffer, 2011).

Another segment of literature has emphasised the growing role played by professionals in advocacy activities (Mellquist, 2022), their leadership positions (Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2022), and their careers (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). The rising expectation that CSOs will address societal challenges and function as professional service providers (Johansson et al., 2015) has driven the professionalisation of leadership in order to attract the necessary expertise and know-how. However, this professionalisation, alongside managerialisation and NGOisation processes, has led to increased social distance between leaders and members (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Heylen et al., 2020). As professionals gain decision-making control over major CSOs, beneficiaries and members risk becoming marginalised as mere "donors" (e.g., Skocpol, 2003). Moreover, as some studies have highlighted, this trend seems to have led to a noticeable lack of diversity among many civil societies' leaders, particularly concerning class and gender (Pynes, 2000; Dean, 2020).

However, scant attention has been paid to how professionalisation might influence the formal governance structure of organisations and leaders' engagement (with exceptions such as Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2023). In this chapter, we aim to contribute to this area of research by comparing the level of professionalisation among the elite of Italian civil society, mainly considered as a corporatist sector with low levels of professionalisation by the international literature, with that of British civil society, which is marked by high levels of professionalisation. Specifically, we

start from the classical definition of professionalisation as a shift from unpaid volunteering to paid employment within CSOs, and thus understand civil society elites' professionalisation as the process by which leaders' engagement is now based on monetary remuneration as opposed to non-paid commitment. In our comparison of the two countries, we address the following research questions:

1. How does the level of professionalisation among the elite of Italian civil society compare to that of British civil society?
2. To what extent do the different leadership positions within Italian and British CSOs reflect varying degrees of professionalisation?
3. What demographic and socio-economic implications does professionalisation have for Italian and British civil society elites?

These questions have guided our analysis and at the end of the chapter we discuss how the professionalisation of civil society leaders can be related to elitisation.

PROFESSIONALISATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ITALY AND THE UK

Italy and the UK represent two different civil society regimes. Italian civil society follows a corporatist tradition and represents a hybrid regime with minimal dependence on public funding, a high concentration of organisations with dedicated welfare service provision, a larger proportion of volunteers compared to paid staff, and a rather small workforce in general. Meanwhile, British civil society follows a liberal tradition, marked by a higher level of paid staff members, and greater dependence on public funding (Salamon et al., 2017). Here, the field of CSOs has been formed by the laws of the Charity Commission, set up in the mid-nineteenth century. The law emphasised that charities could provide support and social services but hindered registered charities from being openly political (Hilton et al., 2013). In fact, the sector tends to mix public service delivery and advocacy activities. Since the early 2000s, the UK government has encouraged partnerships between state and civil society, resulting in capacity-building (leadership, management) within CSOs and increased funding. Following this, the sector has become highly professionalised and stratified with a small group of large charity organisations having extensive

resources and regular access to decision-making processes. These major organisations, which have significant access to state funding, are characterised by strong professionalisation and bureaucratisation. When it comes to the British civil society elite, recent studies have shown that the demographic characteristics, cultural capital, and professional legitimisation of its leaders are similar to those of political and business elites (Altermark et al., 2023; Ivanovska Hadjievska et al., 2023).

While the professionalisation of both the sector and its elite is apparent in the UK, in Italy this process appears less straightforward, with limited analysis focused on the professionalisation of third-sector leaders. Much research has instead addressed the process of institutionalisation of the sector, its interrelation with the state, and the consequences of such trends in terms of managerialisation (Ascoli, 1999; Ranci, 1999; Borzaga & Fazzi, 2011). When examining the professionalisation linked to this phenomenon, scholars have studied the typology of organisations undergoing the most pronounced professionalisation and its effects on the political role of the sector and on the professionalisation of voluntary staff. For instance, Polizzi and Forno (2016) highlighted that the most professionalised associations are hybrid organisations, which combine service activities and civic engagement.

However, there is a gap in our understanding regarding the level of professionalisation among the national elite within the third sector. While the existing literature sheds light on the process of professionalisation in European civil societies in general, including Italian civil society, there is a dearth of detailed research on how and whether such a process affects the social group occupying top positions within the sector.

THE PROFILE OF THE BRITISH CIVIL SOCIETY ELITE

Before delving into the conditions of engagement and professionalisation of civil society elites in Italy and the UK, we present a brief overview of the composition of the British civil society elite in comparison to the Italian one (see Chap. 5).

The British civil society elite tends to lead a set of organisations that make up a less stratified organisational landscape than that of Italy. This means that, while a small proportion of Italian CSOs tend to accumulate four or even five types of resources, British CSOs do not score on more

than three indicators. This is partly due to the small number of umbrella organisations and the lack of a clear multi-level structure of organisations such as the one we see in Italy. Just as an example, the main national organisation for civil society in the UK, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), has all kinds of CSOs among its 17,000 members, including local organisations. The Italian Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore instead has only 100 members, most of which are, in turn, national umbrella organisations at lower levels.

Looking at the composition of the two elite groups (see Table 6.1), we notice that, on average, Italian civil society leaders tend to be slightly older than British leaders. The average age of Italian leaders is 59 while for British leaders it is 57 (N = 253). However, this difference in age is rather small and not significant statistically. The proportion of female leaders in the British civil society elite is larger than within the Italian one, at 40% versus 28%. The British leaders are more often foreign-born than the Italian leaders, at 13% versus 6%. Furthermore, British leaders more often have a higher education degree, at 88% versus 79%. In summary, the British civil society elite, compared to the Italian one, appears to be more equal in terms of gender, more diverse in terms of ethnic background, and more highly educated.

Table 6.1 The composition and professionalisation of civil society elites in Italy and the UK

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Measure of association and No.</i>
Composition			
Age (mean)	59	57	Non-significant (N = 253)
Gender (female %)	28	40	0.131* (N = 254)
Country of birth (foreign born %)	6	13	0.120† (N = 251)
Education (higher education %)	79	88	0.116† (N = 251)
Professionalisation			
Economic compensation (no compensation %)	67	40	0.315*** (N = 205)
Self-support through economic compensation (%)	76	89	0.179† (N = 115)
Leadership position (directors %)	23	48	0.262*** (N = 255)

Source: The Civil Society Elite Survey; measure of association for mean values is Eta Squared, for percentages Cramer's V. (Sig. †: P<0.1 *: P<0.05 **: P<0.01 ***: P<0.001)

LEVELS OF PROFESSIONALISATION

To explore the professionalisation of civil society elites, understood as a shift in the human resources of CSOs from unpaid volunteering to paid employment, we can start by looking at the extent to which leaders in Italy and the UK receive economic compensation for their engagement. It is also relevant to check whether such economic compensation is their main source of income. The first dimension relates to the “voluntariness” of the position, while the second to the relative size of the economic compensation in relation to the overall income of the leaders (see also Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024).

It is clear from our survey study that the Italian civil society elite is much less professionalised than the British one (see Table 6.1). In fact, two out of three Italian leaders (67%) do not receive any economic compensation for their engagement as leaders. In the UK, less than half of civil society leaders (40%) share the same condition of engagement.

Furthermore, it is less common in Italy for leaders of the civil society elite to primarily support themselves economically through their leadership position. The economic compensation is in fact the main source of income for 76% of Italian leaders, while the same figure for British leaders is 89%.

PROFESSIONALISATION AND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

One important question is whether the professionalisation of civil society elites is related to all leadership positions or only to some parts of the elite. We have already seen, for instance (see Chap. 5), that the Italian civil society elite is predominantly composed of presidents, rather than directors. In the UK, in contrast, there is a much stronger presence of directors (see Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024). Previous research also shows that the leadership position of directors is clearly linked to an executive, management position rather than a political, representative position, while the role of the president is an expression of the latter. Swedish studies in fact show that the position of directors is clearly related both to employment and to professional values and ideals (Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2023; Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2023).

Our survey study tends to confirm these findings for Italy and the UK as well (figures not in tables). First of all, the proportion of directors in the more professionalised UK civil society elite is much higher than in Italy

(48% vs. 23%), (N = 255; Cramer's V. 0.262***). The stronger presence of directors in the British civil society elite could be seen as a sign of a more professionalised civil society sector which thus requires executive and management skills and expertise within organisations. Furthermore, the different conditions of engagement of presidents and directors are confirmed by our survey study. In both Italy and the UK, directors are much more often economically compensated for their engagement than presidents (89% vs. 24% on average for both countries) (N = 249; Cramer's V. 0.641***). The difference is even more pronounced in the UK than in Italy. Finally, even when they receive economic compensation for their engagement, that compensation is more often the main source of income for directors than for presidents (91% vs. 71% on average for both countries) (N = 115; Cramer's V. 0.257**).

PROFESSIONALISATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION

If we want to understand the professionalisation of civil society elites beyond the mere level of it, we can look at how it potentially relates to the composition of these elites. Using binary logistic regression, we explored the likelihood of civil society leaders within the elite receiving economic compensation depending on whether they lead an organisation in Italy or the UK, whether they hold the position of director or president, and depending on their age and gender (the results are presented in Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Demographic factors explaining professionalisation

<i>The leaders receive economic compensation for their engagement</i>		
	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
British leaders (Italian ref.)	0.349	1.917†
Gender (female ref.)	0.381	0.533†
Age 45 or younger (66+ ref.)	0.703	Non-significant
Age 46–55 (66+ ref.)	0.520	5.140**
Age 56–65 (66+ ref.)	0.475	4.455**
Position (president ref.)	0.435	23.917***
Constant	0.519	0.0118
Observations	244	
Nagelkerke R square	0.537	

Source: The Civil Society Elite Survey; Binary Logistic Regression (Sig. †: P<0.1 †: P<0.05 **: P<0.01 ***: P<0.001)

Thus, our model explores these four independent variables (country, position, gender, and age) as predictors for the dependent variable of whether or not the leaders receive economic compensation for their engagement. The model has strong explanatory power, with 54% of the variation in the dependent variable explained by the predictors. The strongest predictor, as expected, is the position of the leaders. Directors are in fact much more likely to receive economic compensation. Male leaders are less likely to receive economic compensation, suggesting that a civil society elite position is more often part of a professional career path for female leaders than male leaders.

In relation to age, we explored the extent to which three age groups pertaining to working life tend to increase the likelihood of professionalisation, with retirement age (i.e., 66 or older) as a reference category. It is clear from the analysis that leaders aged between 46 and 55 and those aged 56 to 65 are more likely to be remunerated for their engagement. This shows that professionalisation tends to involve leaders in the middle or later part of their working life. It is also interesting to note that, even controlling for these variables, British leaders are still more likely to be economically remunerated for their engagement than Italian leaders.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF PROFESSIONALISATION

Professionalisation, understood as a shift in the human resources of CSOs from unpaid volunteering to paid employment, can be related to the material conditions of engagement for the civil society elite. Non-remunerated positions do not provide an economic return, thus possibly requiring post-holders to have other incomes in terms of other employment, income from properties, or other transfers from social insurance such as age-related pensions. Hence, it is reasonable to explore the extent to which the professionalisation of civil society elites can be related to a privileged socio-economic position (figures not in tables).

Starting with class background, we find a correlation between receiving economic compensation and class background. This correlation does not hold in the Italian context, however. In contrast, in the UK, we find a clear pattern whereby leaders coming from the lower middle class, working class, or underclass are engaged in remunerated positions to a larger extent than leaders from the upper middle class or the upper class (60% vs. 31%) ($N = 121$; Cramer's $V. 0.252^{**}$).

Following up on class background, we can also compare the levels of income of the leaders to determine the extent to which leaders who receive economic compensation for their engagement have higher incomes than leaders who do not. As the income distributions between Italian and UK elites are quite different, we cannot produce a comparison that includes both countries. But looking at differences in income within each country, we find the same pattern; namely, that leaders who are economically remunerated for their engagement have on average lower incomes than leaders who do not receive any economic compensation. Although this pattern is only supported by weak evidence that does not achieve significance levels, it is interesting to notice the same pattern in both countries.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ITALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ELITE

Our data paints a picture of Italy's civil society as less professionalised than the UK's. There are two strands of evidence for this. Firstly, we find a higher proportion of unpaid leaders within CSOs and a lower reliance on paid staff positions in Italy. Secondly, the prevalence of presidents within Italy's civil society elite suggests a less formalised approach to leadership and governance within Italian CSOs than those of the UK, where directors are more common. Moreover, directors in Italy are more likely to receive economic compensation for their engagement than presidents.

The interviews with leaders of Italian CSOs confirmed and deepened our understanding of this phenomenon. Many of the directors we interviewed emphasised the pivotal role of their technical skills in shaping their careers and guiding their current work. For instance:

I hold this position due to my technical and managerial expertise, which are increasingly valuable in the third sector. With a background in economics and commerce, I previously served as a director in smaller organisations. The president offered me this role to fulfil the need for a skilled technician adept at budgeting and administrative tasks. (Director)

Additionally, some directors highlighted the challenges of transitioning from a directorial role to that of president, citing disparities in technical versus political skills. One director stated:

While I wouldn't mind becoming a president someday, I must acknowledge the stark differences in our roles. I handle technical matters, whereas the president is a political representative who may not always require technical prowess, at least according to prevalent notions within the Italian third sector. My challenge lies in my limited political inclination and lack of affiliation with a political tradition, which I believe may hinder my transition from director to president.

These statements underscore the distinct separation between the two positions. The president is not only expected to fulfil a political representational role but also to pursue a career that is aligned with a specific political trajectory. As highlighted in other studies, both the career trajectories of leaders and the broader dynamics within the third sector are often structured around belonging to specific cultural and political pillars (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). Directors, however, sometimes deviate from these frameworks in favour of prioritising professionalisation.

This aspect highlights two main facets of the Italian civil society elite. On the one hand, it explains why the number of directors is lower than that of presidents. The sector is still relatively under-professionalised, especially at the leadership level. On the other hand, the directors' statements suggest a shift in the sector towards a higher level of professionalisation. For example:

The reform of the third sector entails much more work in terms of accountability and technical organisation. Organisations are required to produce more administrative and technical documents, such as budgets, to be recognised as formal parts of the third sector. This means that individuals with purely technical skills are becoming increasingly essential, even at the leadership level. Our director is an expert with years of experience in both the volunteer sector and the business industry. As for the political direction, well, that remains a prerogative but is ultimately in the hands of the president. (President)

The trend towards a more professionalised sector, as mentioned by this president, is closely tied to the process of institutionalisation formalised in the recent reform of the third sector in 2017. Some leaders, mainly directors, view this trend as a positive development for the sector's leadership. As suggested by another director we interviewed: “[W]ith such an old

political structure, it's impossible for young and skilled individuals who want to reach top positions to do so". This director suggested that professionalisation might create the possibility to open up the third-sector elite to younger leaders, based on their skills. This implies that, to date, professional skills have not been key factors for advancement in the sector, at least for top positions. However, for other leaders, the risk of such a process is "losing the political identity" (Director) or the "historical political role" (President) of the sector. The following excerpt from an interview illustrates this concern:

We have some highly professionalised organisations here [in Italy], mainly the more internationalised ones that are not truly part of the historical national third sector. Without criticising these organisations, the Italian third sector has a specific history with precise political traditions, highly structured, and the professionalisation of these large international organisations doesn't perfectly fit our context. Professionalisation risks leading organisations towards a marketisation that is not inherent to our tradition. (President)

As evidenced by the two above extracts from interviews, the Italian third sector and its elite are characterised by significant tension between leaders who mistrust professionalisation and those who hope and advocate for sector development towards such professionalisation, believing that it will lead to a renewal of the leadership class and greater openness to diversity. This would imply that young individuals with strong skills could attain top positions. In this regard, some interviewed leaders also emphasised that "currently, without professionalisation, many leaders work without being paid" (President), and that this "prevents young people from reaching top roles because they have to do other jobs to survive" (President). Therefore, according to some leaders, professionalisation would open up the elite to greater diversity and a more equitable organisational structure. In contrast, other leaders, mainly presidents, hoped that the sector would remain as it is, with its own specificities, without succumbing to a system of marketisation.

CONCLUSIONS

In delving into the professionalisation of civil society elites in Italy and the UK, we have embarked on a journey that transcends mere organisational structures. Rather, we have uncovered the interplay between historical legacies, institutional frameworks, and socio-economic dynamics shaping the very essence of civil society governance. At its core, professionalisation within CSOs reflects a broader societal trend of integrating market principles and professional norms into the fabric of organisational operations in civil society. This phenomenon, deeply rooted in shifts in public policies and funding dynamics, has potential implications for the composition, governance, and effectiveness of civil society elites.

Our comparative analysis of professionalisation levels revealed significant disparities between Italy and the UK. Italy's civil society, entrenched in a corporatist tradition and characterised by minimal dependence on public funding, presents a landscape in which professionalisation is less pronounced. Here, the prevalence of unpaid leaders and a lower reliance on paid staff positions denotes a sector still tethered to traditional modes of engagement. Conversely, the UK's civil society sector, buoyed by a liberal tradition, presents a more professionalised landscape. A higher proportion of paid staff members and a greater dependence on state funds underscore a sector in which professionalism is valued higher than in Italy.

The composition of leadership positions within CSOs offers further insight into professionalisation dynamics. In the UK, the higher prevalence of directors signals a more formalised and management-oriented approach to leadership. Directors, often synonymous with executive and managerial roles, embody a sector driven by professional expertise and managerial acumen. Conversely, Italy's civil society elite is predominantly composed of presidents, reflecting a more traditional, representative, and "political" leadership. Here, the emphasis lies not on formal qualifications or managerial prowess, but rather on political representation and grassroots activism.

Our demographic analyses of civil society elites revealed important nuances. The UK's civil society elite, which is younger, more gender diverse, and highly educated, mirrors broader societal trends towards inclusivity and diversity within organisational leadership, suggesting a

more inclusive leadership landscape within British CSOs. However, the impact of professionalisation on socio-economic dynamics cannot be overlooked. While professionalisation may encourage inclusivity by offering opportunities for leaders from diverse backgrounds based on formal merits in recruitment processes, it may also perpetuate socio-economic inequalities if certain groups continue to have only limited access to remunerated positions.

The perspectives of Italian civil society leaders provide valuable insights into the ongoing debate surrounding professionalisation. While some viewed professionalisation as a positive development that could open up the sector to younger, highly skilled individuals and promote greater diversity, others expressed concerns about losing the sector's historical political identity and traditions. This tension underscores the complex interplay between professionalisation, tradition, and identity within the Italian civil society sector.

Moreover, professionalisation's influence on the governance and structure of CSOs cannot be understated. In both Italy and the UK, professionalisation has led to structural changes within CSOs, including the adoption of formal organisational structures, the employment of professional staff, and the implementation of management practices. These changes, while enhancing organisational effectiveness and accountability, also raise questions about the potential loss of grassroots engagement and the risk of marginalising certain segments of society within CSOs.

Finally, the implications of professionalisation for elitisation and political careers are worth considering. In the UK, professionalisation may serve as a pathway for individuals from lower social classes to ascend to leadership roles within CSOs. This trend aligns with broader societal shifts towards greater social mobility and inclusivity. However, the extent to which professionalisation actually influences political careers and social mobility requires further investigation, particularly regarding its impact on underrepresented groups within civil society elites.

By scrutinising the relationship between elitisation and professionalisation, our study offers valuable insights into the evolving landscape of civil society governance. Studying how professionalisation pathways intersect with processes of elitisation uncovers nuanced understandings of power dynamics, inclusivity, and social mobility within civil society structures.

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Career Trajectories and Europeanisation

Abstract This chapter examines the career trajectories of Italian civil society leaders compared to those at the EU level. EU civil society organisations are a relatively recent phenomenon that has grown over the past few decades. They often act as umbrella groups with member organisations across European countries. While Italian civil society has a longer history, EU civil society leaders frequently transition from domestic roles. Our analysis explores how the career paths of these two elite groups differ and the extent to which Europeanisation impacts upon career trajectories. The chapter reveals that Italian leaders tend to have longer tenures and more internally developed career paths, which are deeply rooted within their organisations. In contrast, EU leaders more commonly transition from other roles, whether from within the same organisation’s EU office or by joining new European umbrella groups. This suggests that EU paths require more of a disruptive “leap” from domestic roles. Italian leaders are also more likely to rise through representative board positions at local/regional levels, whereas EU leaders take a more professionalised staff career track. While some nationally influential Italian leaders access EU roles, qualitative insights indicate that they face challenges in adapting individual skillsets to the more competitive European arena versus leveraging domestic organisational capital. Overall, career trajectories highlight

contrasting patterns shaped by national traditions versus emerging EU logics and opportunities.

Keywords Career paths • EU-level • Boundary-crossing • Professionalization • Multi-level organisational structure • Europeanisation • Italy

INTRODUCTION

In line with much research on elite groups, this chapter delves into the career trajectories of the Italian civil society elite in comparison with EU-level leaders in order to understand the role played by Europeanisation in the elitisation of civil society leaders. Unlike Italian civil society, which is characterised by a long history, EU civil society is a relatively recent phenomenon, which displays specific functions and logics compared to the national ones. It has, in fact, been conceived by the EU to act as a bridge between EU institutions and their bureaucratic elites and European citizens, and for the heightened EU institutions' interest in matters such as employment, social exclusion, discrimination, the environment, and human rights (Ruzza, 2019; Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020). EU civil society experienced its development and growth over the last three decades, with CSOs acting as agents of policy integration and the dissemination of EU policy ideas, especially in the above areas (European Commission, 2001; Smismans, 2003; Trenz, 2009). As in other contexts, this intermediary constellation of actors is marked by power disparities, with a strong dominance of specific umbrella organisations based in Brussels (Johansson & Kalm, 2015). EU civil society is also marked by a high level of institutionalisation, based on the financial support of EU institutions and occupying the role of consultative bodies, rather than that of political actors or citizens' movements (Greenwood, 2007; Ruzza, 2007; Michel, 2013).

Deeply embedded in the EU institutional system, civil society organisations (CSOs) at the EU level have own institutional arena, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Conceived as a consultative body producing opinions for the Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament, this committee represents the interests of three groups—employers, workers, and other civil society actors—and serves as an institutional channel for civil society input to EU decision-making processes (Johansson et al., 2022). The CSOs and leaders present in this

arena, and those occupying a dominant position, are particularly influential at both EU and national levels and play an important role in EU politics (Ibid.).

There is a substantial body of literature on civil society in the EU context (Smismans, 2006; Ruzza & Bozzini, 2008; Kohler-Koch, 2009; Oleart & Bouza, 2018). Some scholars have been particularly interested in the access and influence that European CSOs have over policymaking processes, and their implications for the democratic legitimacy of EU civil society (Ruzza & Bozzini, 2008). Some researchers have scrutinised power disparities among EU CSOs, shedding light on the dominance of specific umbrella organisations based in Brussels (Johansson & Kalm, 2015), and have paid attention to power disparities among CSOs in this field and on the representativeness of the CSO leaders (Kröger & Friedrich, 2012; Johansson & Lee, 2014). Recent studies have focused on the careers and forms of capital needed for the advancement of EU civil society leaders to top positions (Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020; Johansson et al., 2022), and on power relations and interactions within the EESC (Uhlin & Arvidson, 2022). However, the interrelationships and differences between the EU level and national level have received surprisingly little attention.

The analysis engages with the following research questions:

1. How do the internal and external career paths of Italian and European civil society elites differ?
2. How is a European career path integrated into the career path of Italian civil society leaders?

The analysis draws on the Civil Society Survey Study and elite interviews.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS' CAREER PATHS

The concept of career has frequently been employed to comprehend the relationship between individuals and societal structures (Garbe & Duberley, 2019). The forms of capital, skills, and experience that individuals possess and utilise in order to advance in their careers become valuable tools for understanding the characteristics of a specific field, its underlying logics, and its historical evolution. Within the realm of civil society, career

studies have predominantly focused on the professionalisation and managerialisation of CSOs and their repercussions for both professional workers (Garbe & Duberley, 2019) and leaders (Suárez, 2011). The concept of a career is often linked more closely to professionalism than voluntarism. Notably, some of these studies, primarily from the US, have centred on the career trajectories of paid executive leaders in the non-profit sector (Suárez, 2011; Norris-Tirrell et al., 2018), rather than those of presidents understood as voluntary or unpaid leaders (see, e.g., Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021).

However, there are noteworthy studies examining the qualifications of presidents and chairpersons. Some of these studies concentrate on the recruitment of executive managers and/or board members, including chairpersons (Abzug & Galaskiewicz, 2001; Iecovich, 2005), while others directly explore the characteristics of leaders (O'Regan & Oster, 2005; Iecovich & Bar-Mor, 2007; Prouteau & Tabaries, 2010). Nevertheless, most of these analyses of civil society leaders' careers, characteristics, and recruitment tend to overlook the connection between leaders' identities, biographies, and orientations and the organisations they lead and represent (Orlandini, 2010).

Recent empirical research has underscored the significance of such themes for a more profound understanding of the power relations characterising civil society elites and their reproduction (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). From an elitist perspective, in a context such as that of civil society, where formal education is not the primary pathway to elite integration (Ellersgaard et al., 2019), career trajectories, previous experience, and skills are particularly relevant when analysing the reproduction of this specific elite.

Both the EU and Italy have been the subjects of this strand of research studies. In Italy, a qualitative analysis emphasised the interconnectedness of individual career paths and the structural and ideological dimensions of the organisations within which these leaders operate (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). However, it focused only on presidents and not on executive leaders. For the EU level, we find more works about both the career trajectories within the civil society elite of EU-based peak CSOs (Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020) and the forms of capital necessary for advancing and gaining power within the EESC (Johansson et al., 2022; Uhlin & Arvidson, 2022). However, there have been no comparative studies conducted on these two contexts, examining both executive and representative leaders.

An examination of the distinctions and similarities in civil society elites' career paths between Italy and the EU level has the potential to make an innovative empirical contribution. This extends beyond highlighting structural differences between the civil society sector of one of the EU's member state and that of the EU level. As discussed, many umbrella CSOs at the EU level include member organisation in various European countries, and their leaders often have a clear anchoring at the domestic level (Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020).

From previous studies, we know that presidents' and directors' career paths tend to differ at the EU level, with directors being much more part of what has been called the "Brussels bubble", understood as the homogeneous social, educational, and professional backgrounds observed among both EU officials and CSO leaders active at this level (Dialer & Richter, 2019), while presidents have a clear anchoring at the domestic level (Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020). We also know that the process of entering the EESC plays out mainly at the national level (Johansson et al., 2022).

The comparison is hence intriguing due to this interrelation between the national and EU levels. On the one hand, they appear as two independent contexts, with specific logics, dynamics, and relations between civil society actors and institutions. On the other hand, the power relations inside national civil societies might have an impact on the access enjoyed by organisations and individuals to EU arenas, such as the EESC (Johansson et al., 2022). In fact, taking into consideration the individual level, it is not uncommon for a career path to the EU level to start at the domestic level, and access to EU bodies might thus represent an advancement of national civil society leaders' careers.

THE PROFILE OF THE EU-LEVEL CIVIL SOCIETY ELITE

Before delving into the career trajectories of civil society elites in Italy and at the European level, we present a brief overview of the composition of the European-level civil society elite in comparison to the Italian one (see Chap. 5) (see the first part of Table 7.1).

The European civil society elite tend to lead a set of organisations that revolve around the EU institutions aiming to influence EU policies. Some of these are umbrella organisations and networks that include as members national organisations engaged within the same issue areas. The European Women's Lobby, for instance, represents the women's movement in many

Table 7.1 The composition and career paths of civil society elites in Italy and at the EU level

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>EU</i>	<i>Measure of association and No.</i>
Composition			
Age (mean)	59	53	0.059*** (N = 277)
Gender (female %)	28	44	0.179** (N = 286)
Country of birth (born outside Italy/ the EU %)	6	20	0.198*** (N = 287)
Education (higher education %)	79	93	0.201*** (N = 283)
Career paths			
Leadership position (directors %)	23	45	0.231*** (N = 281)
Years in position (mean)	9	6	0.062*** (N = 283)
Years in organisation (mean)	21	11	0.198*** (N = 276)
Presidents/board member at the local level (%)	37	8	0.347*** (N = 259)
Presidents/board member at the regional level (%)	31	3	0.375*** (N = 259)
Presidents/board member at the national level (%)	50	18	0.334*** (N = 259)
Presidents/board member at the EU level (%)	6	40	0.396*** (N = 259)
Paying member (%)	24	10	0.190** (N = 259)
Volunteer (%)	42	23	0.206*** (N = 259)
Employed staff (%)	16	27	0.125* (N = 259)
Presidents/board member of national CSO (%)	69 (Present) 14 (Past)	37 (Present) 42 (Past)	0.338*** (N = 246)
Presidents/board member of EU-based CSO (%)	18 (Present) 17 (Past)	58 (Present) 21 (Past)	0.457*** (N = 217)

Source: The Civil Society Elite Survey; measure of association for mean values is Eta Squared, for percentages Cramer's V. (Sig. †: P<0.1 †: P<0.05 **: P<0.01 ***: P<0.001)

member states but is formally a separate entity with national women's organisations as its members (Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino, 2017). Other organisations include the EU offices of organisations that are present in many member states, such as the Red Cross or Oxfam. We also find a set of federations organising European CSOs engaged within a broader framework, such as the Social Platform, involving many European networks and organisations working on social issues.

Looking at the composition of the two elite groups, we notice that, on average, Italian civil society leaders tend to be older than EU-level leaders.

The average age of Italian leaders is 59, while for EU-level leaders it is 53. The proportion of female leaders at the European level is greater than within the Italian civil society elite, at 44% versus 28%. The European leaders are more often born outside of the EU compared to the proportion of foreign-born Italian leaders, at 20% versus 6%. Furthermore, European leaders more often have a degree from higher education, at 93% versus 79%. In summary, compared to the Italian civil society elite, the European one appears to be younger, more gender equal, more diverse in terms of ethnic background, and more highly educated.

Our analysis centres around comparing the career paths of Italian and EU-level leaders, also taking into consideration the distinction between presidents and directors. Previous studies have revealed the different career paths of these types of leaders at the EU level (Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020). We have also shown in Chap. 6 that presidents and directors have different conditions for engagement in Italy, with directors displaying a more professionalised profile. Our data also suggests a more professionalised civil society elite at the EU level, with a stronger presence of directors than in Italy. As we have already seen, the Italian civil society elite is composed of only 23% of directors, while at the EU level we find a proportion more similar to that of the UK, with 45% of directors.

INTERNAL CAREER PATHS WITHIN THE ORGANISATION

Starting with the position they occupy (see the second part of Table 7.1), based on their answers to our survey, Italian leaders tend to remain in their leadership positions for longer than EU-level leaders, at nine years versus six years. An even more striking difference is the amount of time the leaders have spent in the organisations they lead. On average, Italian leaders have been engaged for ten years longer with their organisation than EU-level leaders, at 21 years versus 11 years.

These results suggest longer career paths for Italian leaders than for EU-level leaders. It seems reasonable that, while Italian leaders tend to have longer career paths in the national context and often within the same organisation or the same movement (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021), EU-level leaders must, at a certain point, take a leap to the EU level, whether this means physically moving to Brussels or not. As discussed earlier, while some organisations might have an EU office that allows EU-level leaders to remain within the same organisation, many European-level organisations are networks or umbrella organisations with their own

name and organisational identity. Becoming a leader of the latter type would imply a clearer “leap” up to the European-level organisational landscape and possibly a new start with a new organisation.

It is also relevant to explore the extent to which these patterns differ between presidents and directors (not presented in Table 7.1). We have already seen in Chap. 5 that Italian presidents are on average older than directors, at 60 years versus 55 years ($N = 132$, Eta Squared 0.036*). The same is true for EU-level leaders, at 56 years versus 50 years ($N = 145$, Eta Squared 0.074***). We do not find any significant differences between the types of leaders in terms of how long they have held the leadership position. However, we do find that Italian presidents have on average been engaged in their organisations for longer than directors, at 22 years versus 17 years ($N = 127$, Eta Squared 0.031*), suggesting longer internal career paths for the representative position than for the executive. This could be related to the representative position having a stronger need for accreditation and internally developed legitimacy. However, we find no significant difference between these positions at the EU level, perhaps suggesting that the “leap” from the national to the EU level has the same effect for both presidents and directors.

Career paths within an organisation for the civil society elite look quite different in Italy and at the EU level. Unsurprisingly, the career path of the Italian civil society elite is much more rooted in the multi-level organisational structure, beginning at the local level, than that of the European civil society elite. Italian leaders have more often been presidents or board members at the local level, at 37% versus 8%. We find the same pattern at the regional and national levels. Unsurprisingly, European civil society leaders have more often been presidents or board members at the European level than Italian civil society leaders, at 40% versus 6%. These differences can be linked to an organisational decoupling of the EU level from the domestic one. This would mean that leaders who move to the European level do so by entering a new organisational structure, while in the Italian context the multi-level organisational structure of many large CSOs (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021) enables longer internal career paths.

The differences can also be linked to different levels of professionalisation of the sectors, which seems to be supported by a comparison of presidents and directors. Although the available numbers are too small for full-fledged statistical comparisons (or significant differences), we do see a consistent pattern of representative leaders more clearly building a career through the boards at different levels than the directors. This is true both

in Italy and at the European level. Taking the national level as an example, we see that 27% of European presidents have been presidents or board members, while the same is true for only 4% of directors. For Italian leaders, the corresponding numbers are 53% for presidents and 37% for directors.

This interpretation tends to be corroborated when we look at the extent to which civil society elites in the two contexts have held non-paid roles as paying members and volunteers, rather than employed staff. Holding a paying membership and volunteering as organisational experience (in the same organisation) for the leaders is almost twice as common in Italy as at the European level (24% vs. 10%; 42% vs. 23%). The opposite is true when it comes to serving as employed staff, with European leaders more often having such experience than Italian leaders (27% vs. 16%). These differences suggest a clearer professionalised internal career path for the European civil society elite compared to the Italian one.

CAREER PATHS OUTSIDE OF THE ORGANISATIONS

If we look at career paths within civil society but outside of their organisations, we can start with representative positions as board members at the national and EU levels. Most Italian leaders are currently board members of a national CSO (69%). This, of course, is not surprising as most presidents are also board members. We have a smaller group of leaders (14%) who have previously been on boards at national level but are no longer serving. A larger minority (17%) have never been on such boards, and directors are overrepresented among this group. Looking at the European civil society elite, it is interesting to notice that here as well only a minority has never sat on the boards of CSOs at the national level (21%). At the European level, however, we find that the largest group consists of leaders who have been board members at national level but no longer hold this position (42%). We still find a considerable number of leaders holding positions on boards at the national level in civil society (37%). In conclusion, a large proportion of European leaders have moved their engagement to the European level and left their representative positions at the national level, although a significant number of them tend to retain positions at both national and European levels.

Looking instead at board positions at the European level in civil society, unsurprisingly we find that a majority of European leaders hold such positions (58%), and a smaller group have done so previously but not any

longer (21%). Only 21% of leaders do not have such experience, and directors are overrepresented among these. We find instead a large majority of Italian leaders, more than three out of four, who do not have such experience at the European level at all (64%). We find two smaller groups of leaders, of about the same size, who have been member of boards of CSOs at the European level, but are not any longer (17%) and who currently hold such a position (18%). In conclusion, the main difference seems to be that, while most Italian leaders have never been on the boards of CSOs at the European level, the opposite is true for the European leaders.

So, while a career on CSO boards at the national level seems to be a precondition for most European leaders within the civil society elite, only a minority of national leaders in the Italian civil society elite have had European experience on CSO boards.

When it comes to career paths involving the public and business sectors, however, we find very small differences between the two contexts. These experiences of “boundary-crossing” (Arvidson & Uhlin, 2024) are rather common in both contexts, although they still involve a minority within the elites. This is true when it comes to both board positions and executive employment in the business and private sectors. Boundary-crossing with the business sector is slightly more common, involving around 31–32% of leaders, while with the public sector it involves around 27–28% of leaders.

ITALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS AND THOSE AT THE EU LEVEL

As already hinted in the analysis above, there is a certain permeability between the two elite groups under examination in this chapter: the Italian civil society elite and the European civil society elite. As Italy is a member state of the EU, many Italian CSOs are members of European CSOs, allowing Italian leaders to follow a European career. This means that we would expect to find some leaders among the Italian civil society elite who are clearly Europeanised. Similarly, within the European civil society elite we find some leaders who have an Italian background.

To identify the first group, we looked at leaders within the Italian civil society elite who have held or currently hold positions on the boards of CSOs at the European level. We have already presented the percentages of these leaders. Among the 126 answers to this question, we found 29

Europeanised leaders and 97 national leaders. We identify the second group as European leaders who are currently residing in Italy or who have a degree from an Italian university. Among the respondents to these two questions, we found 151 leaders, 15 who have an Italian background (10%) and 136 who do not.

The groups obtained in this way are very small and hence not suitable for significant statistical analysis. However, it might still be interesting to mention that, demographically, the Europeanised Italian civil society elite and the Italian sub-group of the European civil society elite tend to differ in the same ways as the two general elite groups. For instance, given that the Italian civil society elite is on average older than the European civil society elite, we might have expected Europeanised Italian leaders to be younger than the national elite and the Italians within the European civil society elite to be older than the non-Italians. However, we find no such pattern. The same goes for gender, where we find that the proportion of female leaders within the Italian sub-group in the European civil society elite is much more in line with European standards. In contrast, the Europeanised civil society elite in Italy is as male-dominated as the rest.

While we should be careful about drawing too far-reaching conclusions based on these results, they do suggest that we are looking at different groups of leaders. While Italian leaders who become part of a European civil society elite tend to follow a European pattern, the Italian civil society elite that is involved in the boards of European CSOs tend to still be embedded in an Italian civil society elite logic, with its gerontocratic and male-dominated mechanisms.

PERSPECTIVES OF THE ITALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ELITE

As evidenced by the findings of our quantitative study, the career paths of Italian leaders are predominantly characterised by internal advancement within a specific organisation. This is often accompanied by a strong commitment to and integration within a particular organisation or group, resulting in a deeply rooted engagement with multi-level organisational structures. Recent research on the career trajectories of Italian third-sector leaders further supports this notion, indicating that individual career progression is significantly influenced by affiliation with ideological, political, and cultural groups that are integral to the sector (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). The leaders of the organisations most prominent at the national level, particularly presidents, typically rise through the ranks of a single

organisation or movement and gain influence by prominently showcasing their cultural identity, whether aligned with Catholic or secularist groups. This often holds more significance for attaining top positions than specialising in a specific sub-field within the sector, such as migration, education, or cooperation. However, what happens when a member of the Italian civil society elite aims to transition to the EU level?

Entering the EU level, and more specifically the EU civil society elite group, appears to be a privilege reserved for a select few. For many leaders, achieving influence at the EU level represents the pinnacle of their careers in the sector, as illustrated by this excerpt from an interview with a director of a prominent Italian organisation: “If you reach Europe as a representative of the Italian sector, it means you’re extremely influential at the national level, that all sector leaders know you and recognise your capabilities. Once you reach that level, there’s no turning back”.

Being part of the EU elites is considered a privileged status reserved for a select few. In fact, many of the leaders interviewed for our study primarily operate at the national level, with limited exposure to the EU arena. It is interesting to note that some have been involved in European CSOs as board members, but their participation is often restricted, as highlighted by one president’s statement:

I’m involved in [CSO], focusing on human rights in the EU, as a board member. My involvement is limited to attending annual meetings to decide on strategies, budget allocations, funding, and similar matters. However, I don’t usually participate in all activities in Brussels. It’s like stepping into another world that I’m not entirely familiar with.

Here, Brussels is portrayed as “another world” compared to the Italian context, and, like this president, most other Italian leaders have limited familiarity with this setting. Our quantitative analysis suggests a distinct division between leaders who only occasionally engage in EU CSO activities and those who have ascended to the EU civil society elite, such as by joining the EESC. The latter group constitutes a small minority, and our data provides valuable insights into why and how a few of them enter this circle.

The initial point to consider is that national leaders aspiring to join the EESC or EU umbrella organisations must represent their national context. Consequently, they are selected for this role at the national level by the most influential organisations and civil society groups. Therefore, the

first step towards initiating a career at the EU level as a national representative leader is to be an influential figure at the national level. The handful of leaders we interviewed, who are consistently active in Europe and hold prominent positions in this context (N = 3), previously held leadership roles in major and longstanding Italian organisations before relocating to Brussels, where they currently reside. Their influence was corroborated by our interviews, where they frequently emerge as the most influential figures identified by other leaders when asked to pinpoint influential leaders for our study. The following quote illustrates this point:

The most influential leaders? One is certainly [Name]. [Name] served as the president of [CSO] for many years, following his tenure as the president of [CSO], and currently holds one of the most important positions at the EESC. He possesses extensive knowledge of the Italian context and is recognised in the sector as an exceptional leader capable of representing the entire sector. (Director)

This leader's career trajectory exemplifies the typical path leading to the opportunity to enter the elite circle at the EU level. After involvement in two of Italy's largest historical organisations, spanning from the local to national level, he moved to Brussels as an Italian representative at the EESC. The careers of the other two leaders follow a similar trajectory: one entered as a member of another prominent Italian organisation, and the third served as president of another influential organisation at the national level before transitioning to Brussels and assuming the presidency of a European umbrella organisation, of which the previous organisation was a member.

However, while being influential at the national level is necessary when seeking to aspire to top positions at the EU level, this seems to be only the first step. Based on our interviews, we can affirm that, once in Brussels, the rules of the game change, and the influence one holds at the national level becomes much less relevant for advancement in the new context.

Once you arrive, everything changes. In the EU, you're on your own; the influence you had in Italy is no longer relevant. Your peers come from other countries and are unfamiliar with you or your organisation, which may have been dominant in Italy. In Italy, the name of your organisation precedes you; you're influential because you're a leader of [CSO] or [CSO]. Here, it's just you; you have no cover, and you have to start from scratch with new rules. (Director)

This leader highlights the fact that, in EU arenas, the essential aspects for implementing change entail new rules and a sense of loneliness compared to the Italian context, where, as suggested by another interviewee with positions of responsibility at the EU level, “the sector is structured by adherence to movements and organisations, and individual manoeuvring room is limited” (President). In contrast, in the EU, this president continues: “[Y]ou have to compete with leaders from other countries, and the competition is individual”.

From this data, it emerges that different forms of capital are required in the EU than in Italy if one is to occupy a prominent position. In Italy, organisational capital, which includes knowledge of the functioning of an organisation and the civil society sector (Ellersgaard et al., 2019), and belonging to a specific organisation or cultural and political group (Santilli, 2024; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021) are essential for gaining influence and power. In contrast, in the EU, according to our interviewees, individual skills are fundamental, such as “being able to speak in public, knowing the EU context and all actors, showing respect for the ideas and interests of everyone—there are many leaders who come from many different countries, groups, and organisations” (EESC member).

Consequently, this results in a more professionalised civil society structure in Europe, which is “highly competitive” (EESC member), where, if you do not have the necessary individual skills, allowing you “to create new networks and alliances based on your individual ideas” and convey “innovative ideas” (EESC member), it is difficult to achieve top positions. It is noteworthy that, when describing careers at the national level, the interviewees did not mention the notion of competition. This is probably linked to the fact that, at the national level, as discussed, the career trajectories of civil society elites are more deeply entrenched within the structures and ideological underpinnings of specific organisations or movements, encouraging a sense of collective identity and advancement over an extended period of commitment. In contrast, the European civil society sphere demands a more individualistic approach, where personal skills, networking abilities, and the capacity to introduce innovative ideas transcend organisational allegiances, necessitating a competitive mindset for attaining top positions.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter embarked upon an exploration of the career trajectories of Italian civil society elite in comparison with their counterparts at the EU level, with a focus on understanding the influence of Europeanisation on the elitisation of civil society leaders. A significant proportion of our analysis has revolved around delineating the internal and external career paths of Italian and European civil society elites, illustrating the shifting landscape of leadership and emphasising the growing interplay between national and EU contexts in shaping career paths.

The comparison between career paths outside organisations uncovered interesting disparities, particularly in relation to board memberships at the national and EU levels. These differences underscore the contrasting logics underpinning career advancement in the Italian and European civil society spheres. While the Italian context encourages long-term commitment and internal progression within specific organisations or movements, the European arena demands a more individualistic and competitive approach, prioritising personal skills, networking abilities, and the capacity to introduce innovative ideas across organisational allegiances (Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021).

Crucially, our analysis has revealed the interconnected dynamics of Europeanisation and elitisation within the Italian civil society elite. Europeanised leaders tended to follow European elite patterns that are disconnected from national organisational forms of capital (Dialer & Richter, 2019; Santilli, 2024). In contrast, Italian leaders who engaged transnationally via European CSO boards remained embedded in national logics, where cultural-political ties are pivotal (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021).

While some Italian leaders were able to leverage national influence to transition to the EU level, the qualitative insights we gained highlight challenges within this new competitive milieu, which demands individual skills over organisational forms of capital. The Europeanisation of elites emerged as negotiating national embeddedness and upskilling for EU arenas. Remarkably, despite the limited positions available and the competitive selection processes, one in four leaders within the Italian civil society elite has held or is currently holding positions on the boards of European CSOs. This highlights the permeability between national and EU civil society elites, even as dynamics diverge. However, the small size of our subsamples limits statistical robustness of analysis. Furthermore, “boundary-crossing” career experiences across public/business sectors

were relatively common (around 27–32% of leaders), underscoring the civil society elite’s positioning across societal spheres (Ellersgaard et al., 2019; Arvidson & Uhlin, 2024).

In conclusion, the career paths of civil society elites in Italy and at the European level reflect a complex interplay of organisational traditions, individual competencies, and institutional requirements. The analysis has highlighted how the Europeanisation of civil society elites is a complex phenomenon, shaped by the tensions between deep-rooted national affiliations and the imperative for individual adaptation and skills acquisition in the European arena. This tension is evident in the distinct patterns observed among Europeanised Italian leaders, who either adhere to European norms or remain embedded within Italian elite logics, despite their involvement on European CSO boards. The distinct patterns observed highlight the evolving nature of leadership within civil society contexts and the importance of adaptability and skill diversification for navigating diverse professional landscapes. The key implications are that Europeanisation prompts the recalibration of forms of career “capital”, and that boundary-crossing signals elites’ societal positioning. Future research could explore interconnections with democratic representation and longitudinal career tracking.

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The View of Power and Status

Abstract This chapter explores the subjective views and self-perceptions of top-level civil society leaders in Italy and Sweden regarding the general elite and the civil society elite. Drawing on data from the Civil Society Elite Survey study, it examines how civil society leaders define and delineate the boundaries between these two elite groups. The analysis uncovers both similarities and differences across national contexts, revealing nuanced understandings of elite status, power dynamics, and the normative underpinnings that shape civil society elites' positioning within broader power structures. Civil society leaders often frame themselves as wielding mediated influence and emphasise the organisational context as a key determinant of their elite status. Furthermore, they employ a normative lens to associate their elite status with positive attributes aligned with civil society values, contrasting themselves against perceived negative characteristics of the general elite. While acknowledging their own elite status, civil society elites perceive themselves as a counterweight to dominant power structures, championing solidarity, social justice, and democratic participation.

Keywords Self-perception • Power • Normative stances • Boundaries • Italy • Sweden

INTRODUCTION

The concept of a civil society elite has scarcely been explored so far and there are challenges in defining what the civil society elite actually is. These challenges have methodological implications, which have already been discussed in Chap. 3, and these can be related to the types of resources and power that define a civil society elite. The lack of a clear definition in the general societal debate also creates problems in research because without one we cannot expect people active in the field to have a shared view of the phenomenon. This is particularly evident when using a “reputational” approach to elite identification, which requires informants with knowledge of the field to identify the elite. We have shown how such a method tends to blur the sectoral boundaries of civil society, allowing, for instance, politicians and representatives of the state to enter the civil society elite (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2024a, 2024b). This is due to the fact that people tend to identify leading people outside of civil society as part of a civil society elite.

Another cognitive obstacle to defining civil society elites stems from the inherent tension that exists between civil society and the elite as concepts. As a societal sphere, civil society is generally understood as inherently good, egalitarian, and based on solidarity and social trust, counterbalancing economic and political power (cf. Cohen & Arato, 1992) as a “counter-elite” (Etzioni-Halevy, 2001). In contrast, elites in general are often understood as people who concentrate a disproportionate amount of resources and power into rather small and homogeneous groups (Best & Higley, 2018). Hence, associating the concept of an elite with that of civil society can be viewed as a contradiction in terms. In this chapter, we contribute to the conceptualisation of civil society elites by tapping into the subjective views and self-perceptions of the top-level civil society leaders who lead the most resourceful civil society organisations (CSOs) in Italy and Sweden. We explore how civil society leaders view and define general elites and civil society elites based on their answers to the Civil Society Elite Survey and the study comparing Italian and Swedish civil society elites, two elite groups acting in rather different contexts in relation to the societal role of CSOs. In this chapter, we seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How do civil society leaders perceive and define general elites and civil society elites?

2. How do civil society leaders delineate the boundaries between general elites and civil society elites?
3. How can we understand the similarities and differences in the definitions of civil society elites in Italy and Sweden?

We begin with the assumption that civil society is a societal sphere that normatively influences the way in which general elites and civil society elites are socially constructed as groups. CSOs tend to legitimise their leaders as competent, professional experts as well as representative, value-driven, and authentic leaders (Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2023). The question is how this view can be combined with the concept of an “elite”. The analysis draws upon results from the Civil Society Elite Survey study.

THE DEFINITION OF AN ELITE

Scholarship of elite studies has a long tradition of defining the sources of elite power as derived from resources, positions, and networks (Mills, 1959; Domhoff, 2002). The elite population is often already presumed by researchers, and the most widely used method of elite identification, the positional method, often begins by identifying the key organisations within a given field and the key leaders occupying the most influential positions within them (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). Scholars often select a certain threshold for identifying an elite organisation in rather arbitrary ways. There is also a strong assumption that it is the national-level organisations, be they in the public sector or the political field more broadly, that can be considered the most likely sites for finding elites, and this shapes the choices of elite researchers when, for instance, they are identifying a survey study targeting organisational elites (Göransson, 2007).

The phenomenon of the elite and the concept of an elite itself are not without controversy, however—some people holding arguably powerful elite positions may be reluctant to describe themselves as privileged or having elite status (Ellersgaard et al., 2022)—and drawing boundaries between the elite and non-elite is a challenging task (Keller, 2018). Perhaps due to this contested nature of the very concept of an elite, and also the difficulties in approaching elite populations for research purposes (López, 2023), relatively few studies have been carried out to examine the self-perception and self-understanding of elite populations (Yamokoski & Dubrow, 2008). Taking a constructivist approach, Yamokoski and Dubrow

(2008) used a semi-structured survey instrument to study a sample of local elites in a city in the US and analysed their self-described definition of sources of power. The study found, for instance, that the interpersonal attributes of personality and respect are sources of power among the elite population, in addition to more commonly discussed sources of power, such as economic and political resources, organisational positions, and social networks.

Santilli's (2024) study also delves into the subjective perceptions and understandings of influence among the top-level leaders of national-level Italian CSOs via a qualitative analysis of interview data. The study reveals different manifestations of influence, for instance, playing an influential role, participating in decision-making processes, being considered influential inside the sector, and having public visibility.

ELITES AND POWER

This chapter draws upon several different theoretical perspectives. Firstly, we focus on general theories of power and influence in society to unpack the “elite” concept. Accordingly, we expect our respondents’ views on what characterises an elite group to be informed by a general understanding of status, power, and influence. In fact, quite a common understanding of elites is that they comprise individuals or groups who control a disproportionate amount of resources (Khan, 2012).

Two separate strands of research become relevant here, considering that we are dealing with a specific group of leaders who can be considered an elite in civil society, leading organisations that function as interest groups as well as social movements (Johansson et al., 2019). Both elite theory (e.g., Scott, 2008; Best & Higley, 2018) and theories about the power and influence of interest groups and social movements (e.g., Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004; Ruzza, 2011; Beyers & Kerremans, 2012; Binderkrantz & Rasmussen, 2015) emphasise the multi-dimensional aspects of power. These two strands of research differ in terms of their focus, given that elite research tends to study individuals and groups who hold a powerful position in society, while interest group research studies the power and influence exercised by specific groups. The issue of how to define power, however, concerns both these strands of research.

One major distinction is between the preconditions for power and influence and the actual exercising of it. In elite theory, we draw upon the work of John Scott (2008), who emphasises the distinction between “the *holding* and the actual *exercise* of power” (ibid., p. 38, italics in original).

This distinction is also present in the methodological challenges of identifying elites, with the “positional method” focusing on the leaders who control organisational resources while the “decisional method” focuses on the individuals who actually exercise power (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018).

We find a similar distinction in interest group research, where the focus is either on the preconditions of power and influence in terms of resources and access to policymaking (see, e.g., Dür & Mateo, 2012; Johansson et al., 2018), or on the actual exercise of power in terms of direct influence on policymaking (Binderkrantz & Rasmussen, 2015; Linde & Scaramuzzino, 2018), or both. Hence, we expect our leaders to define general elites and civil society elites by reference to either the input side of power in terms of the preconditions for it or the output in terms of actual influence and being able to affect politics or society.

Furthermore, according to Scott (2008), elites can be defined in terms of individuals with specific characteristics, or as a homogeneous group sharing specific characteristics (i.e., a specific background, profession, etc.). We expect to see this tension between elites as individuals or as a group being played out in our data as well, in the ways in which civil society leaders define the elite or the civil society elite.

Our study draws upon the tradition of identifying elites using the so-called positional method. This method is based on the theoretical assumption that resources are tied to organisations occupying an apical position within the social structure or the structure of a specific field, be it politics, business, or civil society (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). Such an understanding, and its application to elite studies, produces an organisational elite who draw their power, status, and influence from the organisations they lead and manage. This, of course, creates tension between individual power and organisational power, and the extent to which the leader’s status and power transcend the organisational, especially when replaced by another individual. Hence, we expected that the definitions of elites given by our respondents would reflect this tension by making reference to either individual resources and influence or organisational ones (Wedel, 2009; Weber, 2013).

Finally, civil society is informed by a particular view of elites and power that stems from its specific role in liberal democracies of being a counter-balance to both the state and the market (Cohen & Arato, 2016; Tocqueville, 2003). Hence, civil society leaders have been described as a counter-elite (Etzioni-Halevy, 2001). The role played by CSOs matches with a normative understanding of civil society as inherently good (Alexander, 2006). Hence, we would expect civil society leaders to relate

their definitions of the elite and the civil society elite to normative standpoints in terms of normatively good or bad attributes and characteristics. We also expect them to have different views on and definitions of the general elite and civil society elite.

THE PROFILE OF THE SWEDISH CIVIL SOCIETY ELITE

The different roles that civil society plays in Italy and Sweden make the comparison between the two civil society elites particularly interesting. The two countries share a common tradition of corporatism, with some CSOs clearly being close to power, enjoying cordial relations with the government, and having access to decision-making. However, they can be seen as very different contexts when it comes to both welfare models and the role of CSOs (Scaramuzzino, 2012). Swedish civil society is more advocacy oriented within the context of a universalist social-democratic welfare system. Italian civil society is more service oriented within the context of a more rudimentary welfare system.

The organisational landscapes upon which the two civil society elites are based are quite similar in their structures. Swedish elite organisations, like those in Italy, are often umbrella organisations representing CSOs active in specific policy areas. This can be seen as part of the corporatist system of interest representation shared by the two countries. However, while the Italian civil society sector is characterised by one representative network, the Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore, we find at least four larger networks in Sweden aiming to represent the sector at the national level. This, combined with a less polarised structure, makes Swedish civil society more fragmented at the very top, but potentially more connected across policy areas (Lee et al., 2024).

The Swedish civil society elite appears to be somewhat similar to the Italian civil society elite (see the first part of Table 8.1). Swedish leaders are on average only two years younger than Italian leaders, at 57 years versus 59 years of age. The gender balance, however, is very different. The proportion of female leaders in Sweden is 58%, while for Italy it is 28%. Concerning country of birth, we find a slightly larger proportion of foreign-born leaders in Sweden than in Italy, but the difference is not statistically significant. Also, the differences concerning level of education are small and not statistically significant. However, the Swedish civil society elite includes a larger proportion of directors, at 38%, compared to Italy, which has only 23% of directors.

Table 8.1 The composition and views on power and status of Italian and Swedish civil society elites

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Measure of association and No.</i>
Composition			
Age (mean)	59	57	0.077 [†] (N = 436)
Gender (female %)	28	58	0.277 ^{***} (N = 436)
Country of birth (foreign born %)	6	9	Non-significant (N = 441)
Education (higher education %)	79	77	Non-significant (N = 433)
Leadership position (directors %)	23	38	0.139 ^{**} (N = 439)
Views on power and status			
There are elites (%)	66	71	Non-significant (N = 422)
There is one elite (%)	27	25	
There is a civil society elite (%)	67	72	Non-significant (N = 410)

Source: The Civil Society Elite Survey; measure of association for mean values is Eta Squared, for percentages Cramer's V. (Sig. †: P<0.1 *: P<0.05 **: P<0.01 ***: P<0.001)

A QUESTION OF DEFINITION

To explore the civil society elite's own definition of elites, we have made use of two questions in our survey (see the second part of Table 8.1). Both included a multiple-choice question and an open-ended question, which allow both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

The first question is: "In your view, is there a group of people who can be identified as an 'elite' in our society?" The first two of three answers were: "Yes, there is an elite in our society" or "Yes, there is more than one elite in our society". These answers acknowledge the presence of elites in society, but the first sees a more cohesive group and takes a monistic approach, while the second shows a more "pluralistic" approach. The third alternative denies the presence of elites in society: "No, there are no elites in our society".

The second question addressed the presence of civil society elites by asking: "In your view, is there a group of individuals who could be considered an 'elite' in the civil society sector?" The answers available were "Yes" and "No".

Both of these closed questions were followed by an open question asking the respondents to describe or define the elite and the civil society elite in the following terms: "What would characterise such a group?"

Most leaders answered the question about elites ($N = 422$), and we found no significant differences between the two countries. In answering the question on the elite in society, the pluralist perspective was the most popular, with around 70% of respondents choosing this answer. Around 25% of the leaders chose the alternative identifying one power elite. Only around 5% of the leaders chose the alternative that there were no elites in society.

The leaders who had acknowledged the existence of an elite or elites in society were asked the question about the presence of a civil society elite. Among these respondents ($N = 410$), 70% stated that there was indeed a civil society elite while 30% answered “No”.

CONSTRUCTING BOUNDARIES

Our qualitative analysis addresses the boundaries between the general elite and the civil society elite in the eyes of the leaders. It draws upon a comparison between how the respondents described and defined the elite and the civil society elite in their answers to the open-ended questions. We have only included the respondents who answered both questions. For Italy, this amounts to 39 answers and for Sweden 105 answers. Hence, for both countries we have included around one-third of the respondents. We found five main themes in the construction of boundaries: (1) boundaries constructed around normative stances, (2) boundaries constructed around different types of power, (3) boundaries constructed around the locus of power, (4) boundaries related to levels of cohesion, and (5) no clear boundaries.

A Normative Understanding of Elites

In the first theme, boundaries are constructed on the basis of normative stances that tend to characterise the general elite and the civil society elite. In both Italy and Sweden, this theme is not particularly dominant (13% in both countries) but it does include interesting constructions of boundaries. Many answers tend to depict the civil society elite as normatively better than the general elite. For one Italian respondent, the distinction is characterised by concepts such as “Power” for the general elite and “Solidarity” for the civil society elite. While power can be considered a neutral word, solidarity is usually understood as a positive attribute, and is often attributed to civil society with its tradition of voluntary work and

civic engagement. In a similar way, we find a Swedish respondent arguing that the general elite consists of “groups that consider themselves to be above the rest of us and use that attitude to gain power”. The civil society elite is still depicted as powerful, but working for the good of all: “These are groups that are influential in other parts of society that use their influence to do good”.

Boundary-construction can also generate a negative understanding of the general elite and a more neutral state of affairs for the civil society elite, according to the responses of one Italian leader: “The presumption that theirs is the right view of the world” among the former, against an “Abundance of economic resources and a cultural predominance” among the latter. One Swedish leader explained this distinction in their answer to the question on the civil society elite: “It is important to remember that not all forms of power and influence are elitism. And not everyone in a position of power necessarily belongs to an elite. Elitism and representative democracy/representation should not be confused even though they both generate power and influence”. This respondent, who has a negative understanding of the concept of an elite, argued that democratically elected leaders who represent their members are not part of an elite.

In Sweden, we also found respondents who held a more negative view of the civil society elite than the general elite. While the general elite was defined as “Senior decision-makers in different sectors of society. We tend to hang out with each other so it’s kind of a clique”, the civil society elite was presented as

a bunch of people who operate on the various civil society platforms (which are far too numerous) and exchange positions with each other. It often becomes a bit “sticky” and introverted with a focus on preserving the status quo and mission of civil society, even in contexts where it should reasonably be questioned.

Here, the civil society elite is described as a particular group within the sector that has lost its primary function.

In the Swedish context, we also found examples of leaders who had a negative view of both elite groups and where the boundaries were not easily drawn. One respondent defined the general elite as having a “lack of empathy” and being “indifferent towards vulnerable people” and the civil society elite as “A management that firstly enriches themselves. I.e. they are not at all altruistic”.

As we can see here, the concept of an elite can be used as an “empirical” concept describing a group of influential people and one can then ascribe them particular good or bad characteristics, or it can be used as a normatively charged concept with consequences for which individuals can be included within it. This tension is evident in the answer of one Italian leader to the question about the civil society elite, who stated how they should be, rather than how they are: “A true elite should be pro-social and competent”.

Types of Power

In the second theme, boundaries are constructed around the different types of power that general elites and civil society elites allegedly wield. This is a rather common understanding of the boundaries. In Italy, it was the most common theme, applying to 36% of leaders, while in Sweden it was expressed by 25% of respondents. One typical instance of this theme was expressed by an Italian leader. While the general elite was defined as having the “ability to direct the orientations of public opinion and public life”, the civil society elite was defined as having the “ability to influence and interact in decision-making processes”. Here we see a contrast between what we understand as the direct influence of the general elite on public opinion and public life and the more indirect influence of the civil society elite, which is brought to bear on decision-making and in interaction with others. We found a similar instance among Swedish leaders, where the general elite was defined as having “Great power at several levels”, while the civil society elite was seen as having “Access to the ‘corridors of power’”. It is evident here that, while the general elite has power, the civil society elite has access. In a sense, then, the boundary is constructed around general elites as powerful per se while the civil society elite is potentially powerful through its access to those with power. In the same way, some instances contrast the “impact” of the general elite against the “influence” of the civil society elite.

As a variant of this theme, we found many respondents who emphasised “networks” and “contacts” of civil society elites as a form of power, which was contrasted with the “influence” of the general elite. For example, one Italian respondent wrote: “Access to decision-making processes and policymakers, influence on public opinion through the media” versus “Networks and connections, personal acquaintances”. In Sweden, we find similar boundaries in terms of “Great power capital, whether it is

economic, cultural or any other form of power” among the general elite versus “Great power capital, wide network, often good at communicating everything they do, mingle professionals” among the civil society elite. This sub-theme is similar to the previous one but with an emphasis on the importance of networks and connections for civil society elites.

Swedish leaders also tended to emphasise other forms of power, such as “credibility” and “respect”. A Swedish respondent wrote: “Informal power, reputation and respect” for civil society elites” and “Power over decisions or information and debates” for the general elite. Here, we see that the power wielded by the civil society elite is defined as informal and related to reputation. Such a discussion is not really present in the answers of Italian leaders.

Loci of Power

The boundaries were constructed not only around different types of power but also around different loci of power, that is, the place where the power resides. For Italy, this aspect featured in 20% of the answers while for Sweden it was 23%. The most typical boundary was constructed around a general elite that wields a form of personal power, while the civil society elite wields organisational power. One Italian leader related the civil society elite to resources such as “Money, Family Background, Political Power”, which are specific to the individual. Civil society elites were instead associated with “Organisations with large financial means”, suggesting that civil society elites are elites due to their organisational position and the resources to which they gain access due to this position. We found a similar way of understanding the boundaries in Sweden, with one respondent defining the general elite as “Power. Money. Great influence”, while the civil society elite was defined as “The ‘bigger’ and ‘better’ the organisation, the more power”.

A similar way of defining and distinguishing the two elite groups identified civil society elites based on their positions. For Sweden, we find a clear instance of this in this response to the survey: “Good financial conditions, camaraderie, network” versus “Prominent positions in the form of elected representatives or employed leaders”. Here as well, the boundaries were constructed along the lines of general elites being based on personal resources while the civil society elite is built on organisational positions. A similar understanding was expressed by one Italian respondent, according to whom the general elite is defined by “Economic wealth, specialist

training, long professional career”, while the civil society elite consists of “Those who combine their activity with a professional, non-voluntary assignment”. Here, the elites in civil society were clearly related to professionalisation.

We also found instances defining civil society elites as representatives of specific organisations or movements. One Italian respondent defined civil society elites as “Historical and best-known environmental associations”, while the general elite was defined as financial resources. Similarly, a Swedish respondent defined the civil society elite as “e.g. trade unions, representatives of the Red Cross and Save the Children”, in contrast to the general elite, which was defined as those with “extensive influence both politically and in civil society”.

Levels of Cohesion

A few answers tended to construct boundaries around a more cohesive general elite contrasted against a more fragmented civil society elite. This is the least prevalent theme, accounting only for 5% of Italian answers and 3% of Swedish ones. One Italian instance of this theme defined the general elite as a rather cohesive group in terms of “competence and often relations with the political-financial power”. Civil society elites were instead defined as “competent in different fields”, suggesting a civil society sector divided into fields each with its own competent elite. A Swedish answer along the same lines defined the general elite as: “In all sectors, there is an elite of like-minded people who move within their circle”. In relation to civil society elites, the answer was rather different, however:

For me, there are several different groups of “elite individuals” in civil society who like to socialise with like-minded people. You rarely socialise with other elite colleagues in other parts of civil society. For example, the study associations, the sports movement, politics, the church, social activities, etc., where each part has its unique elite.

No Clear Boundaries

We also found a relatively large group that did not draw any specific boundaries between the two elite groups. This theme accounts for 36% of Swedish leaders’ views and 26% of Italian ones. This perspective was often

expressed by either writing the same definition as the answer to both questions or referring to the previous definition when commenting on the civil society elites. We have also included in this theme answers by leaders who did not define the boundaries in any other way than belonging to different sectors. One Swedish leader, for instance, described the general elite as being “Elite in the sense of dominating the media, politics and public debate with a fairly common view of society and with growing distance from the vast majority of people”. The civil society elite was clearly defined as mirroring the general elite: “A similar tendency can be found in the leading layers of civil society, which are quite closely linked to other elites in society”. In this answer, there seem to be no qualitative boundaries being drawn between the general elites and civil society elites other than the fact that they belong to different segments of society.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has explored how civil society leaders in Italy and Sweden perceive and define elites and civil society elites, while addressing the boundaries between these groups. By adopting a qualitative approach focused on self-perception, it offers an understanding of the complex relationship between the view of civil society and power structures within the civil society elite.

The findings uncovered both similarities and differences in how civil society leaders conceptualise elites across the two national contexts. In both Italy and Sweden, there exists a general understanding of elites as individuals or groups who control a disproportionate amount of resources, whether economic, political, or social. However, the analysis indicates that civil society elite tend to delineate boundaries between the general elite and the civil society elite in distinct ways.

One notable distinction lies in the perception of power dynamics. Boundaries were often constructed around different relations to power. Members of the civil society elite often portrayed themselves as wielding less direct power than the general elite. Instead, they emphasised the mediated nature of their influence, suggesting that their power stems from access rather than overt control. This nuanced understanding reflects a framing by civil society leaders to position themselves as dependent on inclusive decision-making processes, rather than as dominant figures within the power structure.

Furthermore, when examining the locus of power, leaders within the civil society elite were keen to highlight the organisational context as a key determinant of their influence. Unlike the general elite, whose power is often ascribed to individual attributes or connections, civil society elites underscored the importance of their roles within specific organisations. They emphasised the collective resources and networks afforded by their organisational affiliations, suggesting that their elite status is contingent upon their institutional positions, rather than inherent personal attributes. A logical conclusion to be drawn from this is that they would lose their elite status if they were to leave the position. This organisation-centric perspective serves to reinforce the legitimacy of CSOs rather than their leaders as essential actors within the broader societal landscape.

Additionally, civil society leaders approached the delineation of boundaries through a normative lens, associating them with either positive or negative attributes and drawing distinctions based upon alignment with civil society values and goals. While acknowledging their own elite status within civil society, they often positioned themselves as a counterweight to the perceived negative attributes of the general elite. This dichotomy between a positive civil society elite and a negative general elite underscored the moral imperative guiding the actions and advocacy efforts of civil society leaders. By framing themselves as champions of solidarity, social justice, and democratic participation, civil society elites sought to distinguish their role within the broader elite discourse, emphasising their commitment to improving societal well-being over narrow self-interest. A more negative view of the civil society elite was more clearly discernible in the Swedish context than in the Italian one.

Building on these observations, a significant distinction arises between how civil society leaders in Italy and Sweden delineated the boundaries between general elites and civil society elites specifically. While general elites were often perceived as a homogeneous group wielding influence across multiple domains, civil society elites were understood in more nuanced and sometimes contradictory ways. This nuanced understanding of civil society elites becomes apparent when we consider their complex relationship with power structures. On the one hand, civil society leaders acknowledged that their own organisations and networks represent a form of elite institution due to their access to resources and influence. They recognised the role of civil society elites in shaping agendas, mobilising

communities, and advocating for social change within their respective spheres. On the other hand, they often described civil society elites as a counterweight to the power of political and economic elites.

Remarkably, these research findings highlight minimal differences between the responses of leaders from Italy and Sweden. Quantitatively, there are no significant disparities in how these civil society leaders perceived the presence of elites in society and within civil society itself. Similarly, the qualitative analysis revealed subtle distinctions in the definitions of elite groups, with overall similarities prevailing across national contexts. This convergence suggests a shared understanding among civil society elites that transcends geographical boundaries, something that has already been observed concerning other attitudinal questions and involving also other national contexts (Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024). It indicates the existence of a broader civil society ethos that shapes the perspectives of the civil society elite on elite status and power dynamics.

In summary, while differences within the elite groups of the two countries are discernible, the overarching similarities in their views of civil society elites underscore the influence of a common civil society ethos. This shared perspective informs their engagement with power structures and reinforces their role as advocates for inclusive governance, social justice, and democratic values across diverse societal contexts.

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A Kaleidoscope of Power, Tradition, and Transformation

Abstract This final chapter discusses how this volume has explored the dynamics that shape the composition, trajectories, and societal influence of Italian civil society elite. By bridging civil society studies and elite studies, it unveils the complexities characterising this elite stratum, illuminating their socio-demographic profiles, ideological orientations, career pathways, and subjective perceptions. The findings highlight a paradox between the socio-demographic privilege and progressive ideological leanings of Italian civil society elite. The volume has also examined professionalisation trajectories and contrasting leadership models across national contexts. It explored the career mobility and boundary-crossing patterns, as well as the historical legacies, ideological divides, and subjective realities that shape the Italian third sector. By integrating civil society studies and elite studies, this work challenges theoretical frameworks, confronts the tension between inclusivity rhetoric and stratified realities, and contributes to a nuanced understanding of the role of civil society elites in democratic governance and social change.

Keywords Civil society studies • Elite studies • Democratisation • Social change • Power structures • Organisational evolution

INTRODUCTION

In this volume, we have embarked upon a comprehensive exploration of the Italian civil society elite, delving into the dynamics that shape their composition, trajectories, and societal influence. By bridging the realms of civil society studies and elite studies, this work has shed light on a hitherto understudied facet of civil society, offering a nuanced understanding of the power structures and hierarchies that govern this critical sector. Through a multifaceted approach combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, we have unveiled the complexities that characterise the Italian civil society elite, illuminating their socio-demographic profiles, ideological orientations, career pathways, and subjective perceptions.

Our investigation contributes to the burgeoning field of research on civil society elites (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020), which aims to bridge the gap between civil society studies and elite studies—two strands of research that have often been kept apart. While classical elite studies have traditionally focused on political and economic elites (Best & Higley, 2018; Ellersgaard et al., 2013), civil society has rarely been considered a sector that is capable of producing elites (Hartmann, 2015). By exploring Italian civil society leaders who accumulate significant political and economic resources, we have engaged with the concept of “civil society elites” (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020; Scaramuzzino, 2020), addressing those individuals who occupy top positions in major civil society organisations (CSOs).

In doing so, we are contributing to the growing literature on the internal status differences and modes of stratification among civil society actors (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020; Scaramuzzino & Lee, 2024). Our findings shed light on the power dynamics and hierarchies within the Italian third sector, unveiling the unequal distribution of resources and concentration of power in the hands of a select group of organisations and individuals.

Moreover, our investigation aligns with the broader theoretical debates surrounding the role of civil society in liberal democracies and the potential challenges posed by elitisation processes. The central paradox unveiled through our investigation of the Italian civil society elite is the apparent tension between the ideals ascribed to civil society and the stratified realities that manifest within its ranks. Civil society, long heralded as a bastion of democratic practices, civic engagement, and a counterweight to state and market forces (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Tocqueville, 2003), ostensibly represents a domain of collective action and solidarity. However, our

findings have exposed the existence of an elite stratum within this sphere, a cohort that wields disproportionate power and influence over decision-making processes and resource allocation.

This dichotomy challenges us to confront the complex interplay between the normative rhetoric of inclusivity and the persistence of entrenched power dynamics within civil society. It prompts a critical re-examination of theoretical frameworks and paradigms that have traditionally conceptualised civil society as a monolithic, egalitarian space (Michels, 2001; Putnam, 1976). Our empirical substantiation of civil society elites requires a more nuanced and contextual understanding of the complexities inherent within this domain.

In this last chapter, we aim to synthesise the key findings, theoretical contributions, and critical insights that emerge from our investigation, while contextualising the Italian case within broader theoretical frameworks and comparative perspectives.

NAVIGATING PRIVILEGE AND PROGRESSIVISM

One of the central contributions of this monograph lies in its empirical substantiation of the existence of civil society elites. By adopting a resource-based approach, we have identified a distinct stratum of individuals occupying leadership positions within the most resource-rich organisations of the Italian third sector. This empirical grounding serves as a foundation for further theoretical exploration and refinement of the concept of civil society elites.

Our exploration of the socio-demographic composition of Italian civil society elite has revealed a complex interplay between traditional power structures and progressive ideological orientations. On the one hand, the socio-demographic characteristics of this elite group mirror broader patterns of inequality and privilege within Italian society, characterised by a predominance of older, highly educated, and native-born men. This alignment with entrenched power dynamics raises critical questions about representation and inclusivity within civil society leadership structures, echoing broader concerns about persistent inequality and democratic accountability (Vogel et al., 2019; Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024).

Our findings resonate with previous studies on elites, which have consistently found that elite groups tend to differ from the general population in terms of demographic and social composition (Bihagen et al., 2013; Göransson, 2007; Mills, 1959; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1998). The

reproduction of elites who are not representative of the general population in their social composition or attitudes can perpetuate unequal access to resources and positions of power, potentially excluding the voices and perspectives of underrepresented groups from decision-making processes (Putnam, 1976; Tilly, 1999).

However, our findings have also revealed a paradoxical divergence between socio-demographic backgrounds and ideological orientations. Italian civil society elite exhibits higher levels of social trust, more left-leaning political tendencies, and greater support for progressive causes than either the general population or economically privileged groups. This disjunction positions civil society elites as an “avant-garde”—a vanguard of progressive values and social transformation, challenging traditional elite norms and potentially serving as agents of societal progress.

This dichotomy between privilege and progressivism resonates with the concept of an “elite-challenging elite” (Hartmann, 2004), where segments of elites may challenge prevailing norms and advocate for social change, even as they benefit from existing power structures. It suggests a potential divergence between the socio-demographic composition of elites and their ideological orientations, a phenomenon that has also been observed in other national contexts, such as Sweden (Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2024).

Our findings contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding the potential hijacking of CSOs by privileged groups and the risk of reproducing societal inequalities within the sector (Skocpol, 2003). While the socio-demographic composition of Italian civil society elite may reflect historical patterns of exclusion, its ideological orientations have the potential to catalyse inclusive leadership structures, encourage intergenerational dialogue, and promote progressive agendas that resonate with diverse constituencies.

By unveiling this paradox, our work highlights the complex interplay between power, privilege, and social change within CSOs, challenging simplistic narratives and encouraging a more nuanced understanding of elites, one that acknowledges the multidimensional nature of their identities, backgrounds, and ideological orientations (Anthias, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991), as well as the role of elites in promoting societal transformation.

BALANCING TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Our comparative analysis of professionalisation across Italian and British civil society elites has revealed important insights into the evolving governance landscapes within these sectors, contributing to the broader literature on professionalisation within civil society (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Ivanovska Hadjievaska & Stavenes, 2020; Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2022; Mellquist, 2022).

Italy's civil society, rooted in a corporatist tradition, exhibits lower levels of professionalisation, with a predominance of unpaid leaders and a lower reliance on paid staff positions in the elite. This observation aligns with the notion that CSOs in corporatist welfare regimes tend to be less professionalised. Conversely, the UK's civil society sector, buoyed by a liberal tradition, showcases a more professionalised landscape, characterised by a higher proportion of paid leaders. This divergence in professionalisation levels is further accentuated by the composition of leadership positions within CSOs. While the UK's civil society elite is predominantly composed of directors, embodying a sector driven by professional expertise and managerial acumen, Italy's civil society elite is largely composed of presidents, reflecting a more traditional and politically oriented leadership landscape.

The qualitative insights drawn from interviews with Italian civil society leaders reveal a tension surrounding the implications of professionalisation. While some view it as a positive development that could encourage greater diversity and attract skilled individuals, others express concerns about losing the sector's historical political identity and traditions. This tension resonates with broader debates within the literature on the potential implications of professionalisation for CSOs, including shifts in practitioners' and organisations' social identities, values, and ethos (Schambra & Shaffer, 2011).

In addition, our findings contribute to the ongoing discussion about the impact of professionalisation on governance and effectiveness within CSOs. While structural changes, such as the adoption of formal organisational structures and management practices, may enhance organisational effectiveness and accountability (Hwang & Powell, 2009), they also raise questions about the potential marginalisation of grassroots engagement and the risk of excluding certain segments of society from decision-making processes (Heylen et al., 2020; Skocpol, 2003).

By highlighting the tensions surrounding professionalisation within the Italian third sector, the analysis emphasises the need for a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon. Rather than viewing professionalisation as a monolithic process, our findings suggest that it is a multifaceted and context-dependent phenomenon, shaped by historical legacies, institutional frameworks, and socio-political dynamics. It is particularly interesting to highlight how a less professionalised civil society elite as the Italian might be less inclusive (than the British one) potentially due to internal processes of advancement that mirror unequal access to power positions. In this sense professionalisation and market-like dynamics can make recruitment of leaders more transparent and inclusive. However, such a development can come to the detriment of internal paths of legitimisation of longstanding commitment to the cause and democratic processes of appointment of leaders that have support and legitimacy among broader constituencies.

NAVIGATING NATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL, AND SECTORAL BOUNDARIES

Our investigation into the career trajectories of Italian civil society elites, juxtaposed with their counterparts at the EU level, has revealed the complex interplay between individual agency, organisational contexts, and broader socio-political landscapes. This comparative analysis illuminates the multifaceted nature of leadership pathways within the civil society sphere, which is shaped by historical legacies, evolving institutional demands, and processes of transnationalisation.

Within the Italian context, civil society elites exhibited a distinct pattern characterised by a strong commitment to internal advancement and “organisational loyalty” over extended periods (Bassoli, 2017; Biorcio & Vitale, 2016; Ranci et al., 2009). This phenomenon aligns with Italy’s corporatist tradition, where CSOs have historically been intertwined with ideological factions, social movements, and the welfare regime. The deep-rooted embeddedness of Italian leaders within their respective organisations reflects the sector’s enduring ties to its grassroots origins and the resilience of traditional leadership structures.

In contrast, the career trajectories of EU-level civil society elites displayed a more dynamic and fluid nature, marked by frequent transitions between organisations and a greater propensity to navigate the

transnational landscape (Kröger & Friedrich, 2012; Ruzza, 2007). This pattern can be attributed to the evolving nature of EU-based civil society, which is being shaped by processes of Europeanisation, the growing influence of transnational advocacy networks, and the increasing professionalisation and NGOisation of CSOs (della Porta, 2020; Hwang & Powell, 2009).

The contrasting career pathways that we observed in the Italian and EU contexts underscore the adaptive nature of leadership within civil society, as individuals navigate diverse organisational structures and institutional demands (Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). While Italian leaders navigated the national landscape with a stronger sense of organisational embeddedness, their EU counterparts exhibited a greater propensity for boundary-crossing and transnational mobility, reflecting the evolving supranational contexts and organisational landscapes.

This phenomenon of “boundary-crossing”, wherein civil society elites navigate career trajectories that span public, private, and civil society sectors, emerged as a prominent theme in our analysis (Arvidson & Uhlin, 2024; Ellersgaard et al., 2019). The permeability across societal spheres challenges traditional conceptualisations of civil society as a distinct and isolated domain, prompting a re-examination of the theoretical frameworks that define the boundaries and interactions between civil society, the state, and the market (Trenz, 2009; Habermas, 1996).

The increasing prevalence of boundary-crossing among civil society elites raises critical questions about democratic representation, accountability, and the potential hijacking of civil society agendas by external interests. As elites navigate career paths that transcend sectoral boundaries, there is a risk that the lines between public and private interests may become blurred, potentially undermining civil society’s role as a counterweight to state and market forces (Ruzza, 2007; Cohen & Arato, 1992).

Moreover, the transnational dynamics observed among EU-level civil society elites further complicate the notion of boundary-crossing, as these leaders navigate not only sectoral boundaries but also national and supranational arenas. This transnational mobility raises questions about the representation of diverse constituents, the potential for agenda hijacking by powerful transnational actors, and the need for enhanced mechanisms of accountability and transparency within transnational civil society networks (Steffek & Hahn, 2010; Tallberg et al., 2014). The question of long chains of representation when national civil society leaders that are part of

an elite within the sector take the leap to the European level is made evident by our analysis. The extent to which EU-based leaders lose embeddedness in the national context they are supposed to represent at the EU level when they take the leap is an important topic for further studies.

HISTORICAL LEGACIES, IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES, AND SUBJECTIVE REALITIES

The Italian third sector has been shaped by a rich historical legacy, characterised by deep-rooted ideological divides and evolving socio-political landscapes. Historically, the sector has been polarised between the Catholic group, rooted in the Christian democratic tradition, and the secular leftist group, aligned with labour movements and progressive causes (Bassoli, 2017; Bassoli & Theiss, 2014; Biorcio & Vitale, 2016). These ideological divides, while encouraging a diversity of thought and action within the sector, have also posed challenges for collaboration, consensus-building, and the development of a unified advocacy agenda (Tosi & Vitale, 2009).

The Italian third sector's engagement with diverse policy areas, ranging from human rights advocacy to international aid and environmental activism, further underscores its multifaceted approach to social change, often combining service provision with advocacy efforts (Busso, 2018; Della Porta, 2020). This diversity of perspectives and approaches has contributed to the sector's vibrancy and responsiveness to societal needs, yet it has also highlighted the challenges of navigating conflicting ideological orientations and priorities.

In recent years, the rise of populist political actors in Italy has further strained the sector, with civil society leaders facing accusations of being partisan political actors or promoting foreign agendas, which has led to a crisis of legitimacy (Ruzza, 2020; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022). These challenges highlight the complex interplay between civil society elites, political elites, and broader societal forces within the Italian context, as well as the need to re-examine the sector's role in democratic governance and representation.

The persistence of ideological divisions, combined with the evolving political landscape, has shaped the trajectory of the Italian third sector, influencing the composition and orientations of its elite stratum. Understanding these historical legacies and ideological undercurrents is

crucial for contextualising the sector's development and dynamics, as well as the subjective realities and perceptions of its leaders.

Our exploration of the subjective perspectives of Italian civil society elites offers a window into the lived experiences and daily challenges faced by those at the helm of these organisations. The tensions that emerge between tradition and innovation, between grassroots engagement and professionalisation, and between ideological commitments and pragmatic realities are not mere abstractions but rather the embodiment of the complex decision-making processes and trade-offs that civil society leaders must navigate (Schambra & Shaffer, 2011; Hwang & Powell, 2009).

The subjective accounts of our informants revealed leaders grappling with the potential implications of professionalisation, weighing benefits such as enhanced organisational effectiveness and diversity against the risk of losing the sector's historical political identity and traditions. This dichotomy reflects the sector's evolution towards a more professionalised landscape and the challenges of balancing organisational sustainability with the preservation of grassroots engagement and ideological authenticity.

These subjective narratives underscore the diversity of perspectives, motivations, and ideological orientations within this elite stratum, challenging monolithic representations and prompting a more nuanced understanding of their engagement. The lived experiences of these leaders are shaped by their intersecting identities, backgrounds, and social positions, contributing to a rich tapestry of worldviews and approaches to social change (Anthias, 2013; Bourdieu, 1984; Crenshaw, 1991; Khan, 2012; Wacquant, 1989; Wedel, 2017).

By incorporating these subjective perspectives into our theoretical frameworks, we can develop a more holistic and grounded understanding of civil society elites which tend to differ across societal contexts concerning societal function, demographic background, and status but potentially converge concerning values and attitudes. Such shared understandings can easily be challenged in times of polarisation of public opinion and influence of populist parties. Civil society elites can hence, on the one hand, become less in line with large sections of society concerning their values and attitudes at the same time as they remain firm in their role of representing the goals and missions of organisations devoted to issues of solidarity and human rights.

INTEGRATING CIVIL SOCIETY STUDIES AND ELITE STUDIES

Our endeavour to bridge the divide between civil society studies and elite studies aims at theoretical contribution to both domains. By bringing these traditionally siloed fields into dialogue, we aim at challenging the compartmentalisation of knowledge and opening up new avenues for cross-fertilisation and interdisciplinary collaboration. In our view, this integration enables a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics that shape civil society and the power structures governing it.

Historically, civil society studies have often operated within a normative framework that celebrates civil society as a bastion of democratic participation, civic engagement, and a counterweight to state and market forces (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Tocqueville, 2003; Putnam, 2000). However, this idealised perception has occasionally obscured the realities of power asymmetries and stratification within civil society itself (Michels, 2001; Skocpol, 2003). By integrating perspectives from elite studies, we can shed light on the existence of elite strata within civil society and the processes of resource accumulation and influence that shape these power dynamics (Johansson & Uhlin, 2020; Scaramuzzino & Lee, 2024).

Conversely, classical elite studies have traditionally focused on the realms of politics, economics, and business, often overlooking the potential for elites to emerge within civil society (Best & Higley, 2018; Hartmann, 2015). Our work contributes to this field by substantiating the existence of civil society elites and exploring the particular characteristics, pathways, and challenges that define this particular elite stratum (Lee & Scaramuzzino, 2022; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021).

The case of Italy, with its deep-rooted historical legacy and distinct socio-political context, offers a rich tapestry for examining the nuances of civil society elites. The country's third sector has evolved from a fragmented landscape marked by political and ideological divisions into a more institutionalised and professional sector, which is recognised by the state as an independent partner in addressing societal challenges (Busso, 2018; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2021). However, this evolution has also brought about processes of professionalisation, bureaucratisation, and NGOisation that have challenged the sector's grassroots foundations and possibly emancipatory potential (della Porta, 2020; Hwang & Powell, 2009).

Our findings reveal that this evolution has not been without its complexities and contradictions. While the Italian civil society elite has gained a seat at the decision-making table, it also faces scrutiny from populist political actors who question its legitimacy and representativeness (Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2022; Ruzza, 2020). Furthermore, the sector's leadership exhibits a socio-demographic profile that reflects broader patterns of inequality and privilege within Italian society, yet the ideological orientations of these elite individuals often diverge from traditional elite norms, aligning more closely with progressive values and causes (Chap. 5).

This paradox encapsulates the broader tension between civil society's emancipatory ideals and the realities of stratification and power disparities within its ranks. By integrating civil society studies and elite studies, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of civil society's role in shaping societal discourse, influencing policy agendas, and negotiating its position within broader power structures (Ruzza, 2007; Trenz, 2009) as well as the understanding of its development.

Moreover, our comparative approach, which examines civil society elites across contexts such as those of the UK, Sweden, and the EU level, further enriches the contribution of the volume. By contrasting the professionalisation trajectories of Italian and British civil society elites (Chap. 6) and by exploring the transnational dynamics and boundary-crossing career paths of Italian and EU-level leaders (Chap. 7), we have uncovered the diverse manifestations of elitisation processes and the interplay between national, regional, and supranational dynamics (Kröger & Friedrich, 2012; Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020).

Through this integration of civil society studies and elite studies, we are not only challenging the compartmentalisation of knowledge but also highlighting the need for a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach to understanding power structures, decision-making processes, and the role of civil society in shaping societal transformations (Ellersgaard et al., 2013; Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). The contours of Italian civil society elites that emerge from this investigation, while echoing broader transnational patterns, illuminate distinct nuances shaped by the nation's historical trajectories and institutional frameworks. The resilience of grassroots engagement and the prevalence of unpaid leadership positions within Italian CSOs stand as a testament to the enduring spirit of civic volunteerism and the sector's roots in social movements. However, this traditionalism coexists with emerging trends towards professionalisation,

hinting at potential tensions between organisational efficacy and the preservation of civil society's emancipatory ethos.

As we chart the path forward, this volume serves as a clarion call for a renewed commitment to civil society's democratic ideals, while embracing the complexities inherent within its ranks. It challenges us to confront the paradoxes that arise when the rhetoric of inclusivity collides with stratified realities, prompting a critical re-examination of theoretical frameworks and a reinvigoration of civil society's role as a bulwark against entrenched power structures. By bridging the gap between civil society studies and elite studies we can shed light on the complex interplay between grassroots mobilisation, stratification of resources and power, professionalisation, and the permeability of societal spheres to each other. Ultimately these issues are crucial for the future role of civil society in modern democracy in times of increasing challenges to social cohesion, democratic participation, and international peace and solidarity.

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