

WOMEN IN SLOVENIAN LOCAL POLITICS: FEMALE MAYORS 1994–2022

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Men and women who hold public political office differ in their attitudes toward politics, advocate different policies, shape policies in unique ways, create alternative policy outcomes or effects, and choose different ways of leading. These differences are a result of socialization: men are dominated by the values of justice and autonomy and learn to emotionally distance themselves from public policy problems, which enables them to make clear judgments about important decisions. Women are raised to care for others, which sharpens their sense of social service, which they also prioritize in their leadership roles. This study uses an original time series on local elections in all Slovenian municipalities over an extended period (1994–2022) to examine where women run for and win mayoral offices. The analysis of the objective data shows that women are more likely to win in smaller municipalities, but despite some progress in recent local elections, local politics remains in the hands of men.

Key words: women; female mayors; local elections; local (self)government; Slovenia.

1 INTRODUCTION

There is nothing new about gender differences in favour of men, both in the number of candidates and in the number of elected (local) representatives. This topic, however, remains scarcely analysed among researchers in political science and public administration.² The influence of gender on (local) politics thus remains an isolated topic in the political science literature, since the meritocratic approach is highlighted, which assumes that norms in organisations are based on a gender-neutral situation where only results are important (Calas et al. 2014). Calas et al. (2014) explain that this approach is based on abstract individualism,

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² It should be emphasized that there is a wide range of literature dealing with the study of genders in the fields of sociology, organisation, culturology and other sciences. See, for example, Eagly and Carli (2012); Paludi et al. (2014); Northouse (2013) and others.

which focuses solely on numbers when researching gender differences in organisations. This means that, if there are not as many women as men, the solution is very simple, i.e., to "fix" women. Such an approach completely rejects any possibility of the presence of gender substructures. In contrast, Acker (2016, 422) points out that gender processes in organisations operate through four dimensions. The first dimension is the gendered division of labour, in which, according to stereotypes, women are only suitable to perform certain functions that are (usually) found lower down in the hierarchy. The second dimension is based on gendered symbols, in the sense of organisations being "lean and aggressive", which is usually associated with masculinity, while female symbols – such as empathy, kindness and support – are less often associated with the nature of organisations. The third dimension emphasizes gendered interaction, with the author arguing that gender is often "an internal part of the activities that make up the organisation itself". The fourth dimension is the mental work of individuals within the organisation, which focuses on what individuals believe to be the appropriate behaviour of a particular gender. This creates a façade which obscures their true identity. Acker (ibid.) vehemently rejects the idea of gender-neutral organisations, arguing that the evaluation of a work within an organisation is completely unrealistic if the impact of gender is not taken into account. Based on this, it can be concluded that considering the structure of local governments through a gendered perspective is very important, especially when analysing women in leadership positions at the local level (Kukovič 2019).

The relationship between the gender and politics became an important issue many decades ago, particularly in Western Europe, which resulted in extensive research on the effects of various factors contributing to women's political participation at the national, regional and local levels of government. On the contrary, this topic delayed in time in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and although there are some studies on the representation of women at the local level in CEE countries (see for example Gendźvill et al. 2022; Maškarinec 2022), there is still a huge potential to research and analyse various aspects of female participation – from the willingness to run for office to their decision-making process once they are elected.

Gender representation in local bodies in Slovenia is captured by summary statistics published by the State Election Commission³ every four years when local elections are held. On the other hand, an in-depth analysis of these results, focusing primarily on women – both candidates and those who have already been successfully elected to hold a political office – is rarely seen. The above-mentioned shortcoming thus became the main reason and motivating factor for a more detailed analysis of the objective data on women's commitment to the office of the mayor. In this article, we highlight the participation of women in mayoral offices in all eight local elections (1994–2022) that have taken place in the Republic of Slovenia since the local self-government reform.

Using statistical data, we analyse the number of female candidates and elected individuals for mayor, deepening the analysis for the last three local elections (2014, 2018, and 2022), when the number of municipalities in Slovenia has remained unchanged. For the last three local elections, we examine the electability of women for the office of mayor depending on the size of the municipality according to the criterion of the number of inhabitants, and therefore test the hypothesis set by Smith, Reingold and Owens (2012) that the probability of women being elected increases with the decline in the prestige of

³ State Election Commission, available at: <https://www.dvk-rs.si/>.

a political office. In this way, we complement the analysis with the knowledge gained so far about women in local structures and highlight the gaps that remain (rather) unexplored.

2 CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN (LOCAL) POLITICS

Literature presents a wide variety of reasons why women are less likely to engage in politics than their male counterparts. Hoyt (2013) cites three explanations for the gender gap. The first reason is human capital, whereby the author tries to explain the differences by claiming that women have less capital in education, work experience, and training. Hoyt further explains that women tend to occupy less prominent positions in organisations, such as job positions in accounting departments or human resources departments (HR departments) and are less often present in management and leadership structures and processes where the most important decisions are formed and made. Another explanation given by the author are the general differences between the two genders. The arguments mainly focus on the basic differences between men and women, and on their psychological traits. Stereotypically, women are less likely to engage in self-promotion and negotiation, while men are more talkative and aggressive. Studies (Fox and Schuhmann 2000; Carli and Eagly 2011) have shown that men are not only more confident and dominant than their female counterparts but are also physically and verbally more aggressive. When it comes to leadership styles, researchers have also detected a juncture, since women are slightly more inclined towards a democratic and transformational leadership style compared to their male colleagues who are slightly more authoritarian and less inclusive (Northouse 2013). Hoyt's (2013) third explanation pertains to prejudice which explains stereotypical expectations for each of the genders. These prejudices are particularly detrimental to women, as the characteristics associated with women do not coincide with those expected for managerial functions. This also contributes to the difficulties faced by women seeking to take up leadership positions; however, if/when women assume masculine traits, they are met with negative reactions (Killeen et al. 2006).

Women are therefore under-represented in leadership positions, be it when it comes to political or administrative functions (Johansson 2006). Duerst-Lahti (2010) even argues that the more important the position or the higher the function, the less likely a woman is to occupy it. This particularly applies to the role of the mayor, who is the most visible actor in terms of competence and the part they play in the creation of local politics (Janas and Jánošková 2022; Ručinská et al. 2023) and development (Melović et al. 2020; Hoffman 2023) (see more in Kukovič 2015). In addition to the three aforementioned generic explanations, other factors also influence women's involvement in local politics. Johansson (2006) explains that the number of women in the highest positions in local structures is also influenced by different types of welfare countries, network resources, political experience, and other individual factors. The share of women in local politics is thus the highest in the countries where gender relations are more equal and not closely related to the concept of family (i.e., in the Scandinavian and liberal types). Women who are involved in local politics are therefore more likely to live in a family where an equal division of roles between women and men can be observed, and where household chores and taking care of children is equally divided between both partners. When it comes to network resources, Johansson explains that women are more likely to have political

support (political parties and organisations), while men are more likely to have community support (NGOs and other local stakeholders). In terms of political experience, Johansson points out that women in the liberal and Eastern European type of welfare countries are more often members of political parties than their male counterparts; on the other hand, in all types of welfare countries, except in the Eastern European type, women members of political parties have less time compared to their male counterparts (Johansson 2006, 104–113; Kukovič 2015, 84). Regarding other factors, Johansson (2006) agrees with the conclusions of Welch (1978, 372–380) who concluded, based on an empirical study, that indirect factors such as the existence of (disguised) discrimination against women, lack of time, energy and networks, frequent family and household care, and difficult political socialization based on the division of labour between the genders, are to blame for the fact that politics still remains (more or less) a man's game.

We find that there are quite a few factors that make it difficult for women to engage in local politics. They can be roughly divided into social factors and institutional factors. Among the *social factors*, we must first mention the political culture and values of a certain country. In Slovenia, we perceive the presence of the so-called transition model (see Brezovšek and Kukovič 2015; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014), where the leadership positions are held by men, while women are still considered as part of the supporting functions and as the guardians of the family. Many factors which emerge from the political culture also influence women's participation and presence in local politics. One such factor is voter reluctance towards women and giving preference to male candidates. The male part of the population is particularly reluctant to leave important positions to women, which is most often reflected in the composition of the lists of candidates, where women either don't hold the leadership position or they are only included for the purpose of complying with the normative framework (such as gender quotas). On the other hand, we must not neglect another factor, i.e., the attitude of women towards politics and their (un)preparedness to run for office, since women consider politics as "dirty" and therefore do not want to enter it. Often, women also don't want to go into politics; they are describing themselves as under-experienced and therefore prefer to give up their seat in favour of their more experienced male colleagues. Undoubtedly, support and incentives also play an important role in their decision to run. As a rule, women who follow the development in the municipality and are therefore familiar with concrete issues, as well as women who have been persuaded to do so by people from the local community, local political actors or a political party, are more likely to get involved in local politics (Antić Gaber et al. 2015; Kukovič 2019). The *institutional factors* regulated by the normative framework include the electoral system, gender quotas, the zipper system, the preferential vote, the size of the constituency, and the like (more in Kukovič 2019).

In addition to these social and institutional factors, political parties/lists should also be mentioned as important actors who play a key role in recruiting and selecting candidates for local elections. Political parties/lists select their candidates based on the influence by external and internal factors. The parties use external factors to determine the voters' perception of their potential candidates to select the candidates who will get the highest number of votes in the elections. If the prevailing opinion in a certain environment is that women do not belong in politics, a political party/list will not put them on the list of candidates, even though it might not think so itself. The internal factor is the pressure within the political party/list, whereby the ideology of political

party/list plays an essential role. At the very beginning of the process, ideology can accelerate or inhibit the participation of women in the process of selecting candidates, since the openness of a political party/list when it comes to the demands of women depends on the ideological orientation. The organisation of women within the political party/list is also one of the internal pressures, with their efficiency being one of the key factors. It is important that women increase their own access to politics, which will make it possible for them to obtain a greater degree of representation, both in the political party/list and in the electable functions. To increase the representation of women, the simultaneous existence of external and internal factors is desirable. In the phase of determining candidates, when political parties/lists are re-evaluated, support and attitude towards gender equality by voters and other political parties/lists are also important. If parties/lists find their voters advocating for gender equality, they put more women on the lists of candidates and present themselves in public as a party/list that is aware of such a problem. In addition to the voters' perceptions of women, the preferences of other parties/lists that compete with each other for voter affection and their votes are also important (Matland and Montgomery 2003, 24–25).

The decentralisation of the candidate selection process also plays an important role. The question is the level at which the selection process takes place. Rahat (2008, 9) states that decentralisation occurs in two forms, namely in a territorial form, where candidates are selected and placed on the candidate lists by local selectors (for example, local political leaders, local political agencies, social groups within a party/list or all members of a party/list of an electoral district), and in a functional form, which involves providing representation to various groups, including women. If candidates are nominated by national selectors (for example, the head of a political party, national party agencies or selectors responsible for determining candidates from across the country), a centralised candidate selection process occurs (Rahat and Hazan 2001, 304–305). Crowder-Meyer (2013) points out that selectors are of a key importance; the findings, based on a study, show that political parties are subjected to "gender-based recruitment" and somehow limit women's engagement. According to Crowder-Meyer, (local) party leaders are mostly men who recruit candidates from networks of their acquaintances, which are also mostly men. This is why a lack of women candidates suitable for assuming certain political functions occurs.

The institutionalisation of the candidate selection process, which refers to the (in)existence of rules within the party/list that are followed by selectors in determining candidates, also contributes to a larger or smaller number of female candidates. In addition, the number of female candidates may also be influenced by the political party/list by the way in which candidates are selected by the party, either on the basis of a voting system or on the basis of a determination system. As stated by Rahat and Hazan (2001, 306), the ranking and position of an individual on the list of candidates is determined exclusively by votes in the voting system. For a candidate voting process to occur, two conditions must be met, namely that the candidates are exclusively selected by the voters and that the results of the vote are made public. Since all candidates are voted or selected on the basis of the sum of individual votes, none of the selectors can change the candidate list (Rahat and Hazan 2001, 306). If these conditions are not met, another system for determining candidates is used, in which the power to select candidates is in the hands of a small group.

As we can see, there are many points of view through which we can describe the role of political parties/lists in the recruitment and selection of candidates, but we also want to highlight the element of the electoral districts, which means that the political party/list supports the female candidate for mayor in an environment where it has a stable and strong electoral base, which therefore increases the possibility of a woman being elected. However, political parties/lists also differ from one another; in particular, consolidation and the strength of a particular political party/list are at the forefront. Especially smaller, younger and politically weaker political parties/lists do not have many already established politicians, which means that women therefore have a greater chance of competing, compared to well consolidated parties/lists that strive to maintain the trust of their voters by presenting already established politicians who are (usually) men.

The consequences of the under-representation of women in local politics may surface in various ways. Men and women namely favour different policies, formulate policies in a unique manner, and create alternative political results (effects). These differences arise as a result of patterns of sexual socialization, i.e., with socially learned gender roles, where women are socialized in the direction of caring for others and eliminating poverty, and also have a sharper sense of social services, which they also prioritise in their leadership (Holman 2017). Gilligan (1982) even explains that there are two voices, namely the *voice of men*, in which the values of justice and autonomy prevail, and the *voice of women*, where the values of concern and integration in terms of responsibility and response to the needs of others are at the forefront. According to this inner voice, men solve problems by mediating between the rights of individuals, while women focus on helping others (Gilligan 1982, 19–21). This paper further presents an analysis of the existing literature on how gender influences policy thinking, how policies are formed, and the content of political results.

Attitude towards public policies

Existing research has shown that women and men have different attitudes towards public policies, as well as to the leadership of the local community itself. According to Kathlene (2001), two ways of leading were formed, namely the male (instrumental) mode and the female (contextual) mode. Male (instrumental) leadership is characterised by a separation between the private and public spheres. Interpersonal relations are competitive, and the solution of problems takes place in the direction of the protection of the voters' rights, which are limited by righteousness. On the other hand, women perceive the leadership of the local community as the leadership of the family, i.e., a process in which mutual relations, caring for others and connecting the public and the private sphere are essential. What's more, women are also subject to the "personal is political" rule (Kathlene 2005).

The impact of gender on the political process

The differences between genders in the conceptualisation of public policy problems and the search for their solutions are interesting. Men perceive public policy problems through experts or political actors with specialised knowledge who they value and trust, which allows them to distance themselves from the problem and the subjectivity. When perceiving problems, however, women usually take a slightly different approach; they pay attention to the problems based on general information, consider the opinions of individuals and their direct experience, and allow for an emotional inclusion. Women thus cooperate more with voters, consider their opinions and attitudes, and use more inclusive

approaches in policymaking (Tilly and Gurin 1992; Holman 2017). Holman (2017) even notes that in municipalities led by women, more citizens participate in public meetings that are highly inclusive and based on good community relations.

When it comes to genders, differences in the sources of information that are crucial for policymakers in the policy-making process also exist. Men rely on fewer politically legitimate and objective sources of information, which allows them to distinguish between important and insignificant sources, as they are convinced that select traditional sources bring them reliable information, which they do not need to verify with the public or for which they do not need to obtain additional information. Women need to integrate as much information as possible from different sources, since they want to hear every side of the story. They want to involve all interested stakeholders in the topic, to bring non-traditional sources of information into the political arena (Kathlene 2005).

The differentiation in the conceptualisation of public policy problems consequently results in a different approach to solving these problems. According to Kathlene (2005), men are narrowly focused on the problem, perceiving it in the light of abstract rights and disregarding the circumstances of the situation (Swers 2002). They only support being attached to a problem as long as they can emotionally distance themselves from it; according to them, a clouding of political rational judgment can otherwise occur. They reject and dismiss unsuccessful proposals to focus on new ones. When it comes to women, the objectives of public policies are inherently motivational, with the aim of motivating as many stakeholders as possible and hearing their proposals for solutions. They are persistent and diligent in finding innovative solutions to problems; if one of their proposals is rejected, they resubmit it, since they are convinced that they will (eventually) succeed. Before they resubmit the proposal for a solution, they collect supporters and try to attract as many people as possible, because – as they say – it is necessary to believe in the solution and invest time and effort in developing it (Kathlene 2005).

Differences between men and women also exist when it comes to making decisions; we could say that they counterbalance each other (Kathlene 2001). Women bring new dimensions to the decision-making process, as they involve citizens as much as possible, thus promoting a greater openness of the democratic process. Unlike their male counterparts, they spend more time identifying the needs of citizens and listening to the electoral body, which is how they achieve the common goals of the local community (Reingold 2006). Because of the latter, men often describe them as too emotionally involved in the problems of the local community, which prevents them from being analytical enough (Beck 1991). Women strive to act differently in politics, and they want the political process to be based on consultation, inclusion, dialogue, consensus-seeking and compromise, as well as reducing aggression. Female local leaders are more accessible, respond more intensely to community needs, are persistent, understanding, humane, patient, and able to compromise, and they also shape a more constructive and less conflicting process (Lovenduski 1997). During discussions, men repeatedly interrupt their (co)speakers and intensely impose their way of thinking on them, while women encourage and invite discussion based on personal experience (Kathlene 2005; Chaney 2006). Although the method employed by women is less time-efficient, the predominance of a soft tone in political debates and political decisions help to make politics humane and civilized, which gives it a completely different overtones while also avoiding conflict (Childs 2004).

Gender and the impact of local politics

The representation of women in local government bodies also brings different results and effects of local politics. It is typical for men to be somewhat bolder in the implementation of local politics; furthermore, they also involve various stakeholders in the process in the form of public-private partnerships, and various commissions and working bodies are also used. For women, such an approach represents an additional cost, which is why they prefer to use various financial transfers that provide benefits for all social groups and, in particular, direct assistance to people. Kathlene (2001) even says that women are more responsible (and frugal) in distributing financial resources because they have a different, more caring approach towards money compared to their male counterparts.

Gender also plays a key role in the impact of local politics. Women devote most of their resources to so-called "soft politics" (Holman 2015; Smith 2014),⁴ which mainly involve children, young people and elderly citizens, while the views of men are more focused on the areas of construction, environment, economy, and agriculture (Holman 2013). Ferreira and Gyourko (2014) point out another interesting finding: female local leaders increase the employment of women in municipal administrations and local services and encourage women to start their own local businesses.

The review of the existing literature suggests that, despite some positive discrimination measures, women⁵ face several obstacles on their way to occupying political offices at the local level, which is especially true for occupying the most prominent political functions, such as the mayor's office. Bullock and MacManus (1991) even explain that, compared to their male colleagues, women are less likely to be elected to the mayor's office in direct elections, although according to Steyvers and Reynaert (2006, 46) it is precisely this central executive function of the mayor that represents the (in)balance of the existing involvement of women in politics. In the continuation of the article, we analyse the engagement of women in the most prominent function at the local level in Slovenia. The statistics of local elections are analysed in a longitudinal perspective.

3 DATA AND ANALYSIS

Slovenia consists of 212 municipalities, which were gradually established between the time of the re-establishment of local self-government in Slovenia, from 1994⁶ to 2014, when the youngest municipality first elected their local representatives. Local elections, in which mayors, municipal councillors and representatives of the sublocal units are elected directly, are held every four

⁴ Soft or compassionate policies apply to children, family, education, health, social care, care for elderly citizens, social housing, culture and the like (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986, 45).

⁵ Positive discrimination measures are measures that allow sub-represented groups in politics to reach the threshold of minimum representation needed to make their voices heard at all (such as quotas, pre-reserved places in political bodies, etc.).

⁶ The 1994 reform of local self-government, which brought substantive, organisational and territorial changes, established 147 municipalities. Four years later, local representatives were elected in 191 municipalities (and, additionally, in one more few months later); in 2002, local representatives were elected in 193 municipalities. During the next local elections (2006), 17 municipalities were additionally established; in 2010 and in 2014, another municipality was established. For the first time, the 2018 local elections were only held in the existing number of municipalities, without further fragmentation.

years and are not related to any other elections in the country (more in Haček 2007; Haček 2023, 80–81). The local level represents an important level of government, as it is still considered as the most appropriate entry point into the political arena and the beginning of the construction of a political career.

In the Slovenian local self-government system, the mayor is the central and most important actor, in terms of both the role and its competences (Kukovič 2018). The mayor is elected in direct and secret elections for a term of four years. The mayor is elected by citizens with the right to vote in the municipality, as well as by foreigners with a permanent residence in the municipality. An adult citizen of the Republic of Slovenia who has a permanent residence or voting rights in the municipality may run for mayor. Every citizen who has the right to vote in the municipal council elections has the right to vote for and be elected as the mayor. The mayor may be nominated either by political parties or by citizens who show their support by collecting signatures. The candidate who receives the majority of the votes cast is elected mayor. If no candidate receives the majority of votes in the first round, a second round of elections is held between the candidates who received the most votes in the first round. The mayor is therefore elected directly, through a two-round majority system (Kukovič 2015, 121).

The data in Table 1 show the number of all candidates who ran for mayors in individual local elections, and the number of female candidates, whereby the latter were divided into two groups, namely those who ran in urban municipalities⁷ and those who ran in ordinary rural municipalities. The table also includes data on the number of elected female mayors.

The data show that the absolute number of mayoral candidates increased constantly from 1994 to 2010; in the 2014, 2018 and especially in the 2022 local elections, the number slightly decreased, and we also notice a decrease in the number of all candidates who ran for the office of mayor. The largest number of women (absolutely and relatively speaking) ran for mayor in the 2022 local elections in the largest Slovenian municipalities. From the data collected from all eight local elections, we can conclude that most mayoral candidates are still men, and that female candidates have never even represented one fifth of all mayoral candidates.

The data about the elected candidates for the mayor's office are even more telling. We can see that, in the first local elections after the reform of the local self-government in Slovenia in 1994, only two women (i.e., 6.5% of candidates) were elected, which amounted to 1.4% of municipalities with a female mayor. In the second local elections in 1998, the number of female mayors increased to eight (4.2% of municipalities), while the participation of female candidates increased to 15.4%. In 2002, the number of elected female mayors stopped at eleven (5.7% of municipalities), and the success of female candidates dropped by a solid percentage point compared to the previous elections. Local elections in 2006 were a disappointment in terms of the participation of women, as after two consecutive positive trends, the number of female mayors dropped to seven

⁷ From 1994 onwards, 11 Slovenian municipalities held the title of urban municipalities until the last local elections, when the number increased to 12. An urban municipality is defined by law as a compact, dense settlement or several settlements connected into a single spatial organism and urban environment, which is connected by the daily population migration. By law, a municipality can be granted the status of an urban municipality if it has a city with at least 20,000 inhabitants and 15,000 jobs in its territory, and is the economic, cultural and administrative center of the wider area (Local Self-Government Act 2007, Article 16). Local Self-Government Act, available at: <http://pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO307>.

(which represents a 6.8% success of the female candidates); the 2010⁸ local elections also failed to repeat the best result so far from 2002. After this decadence, a positive turnaround occurred in 2014, as the success of the female candidates rose above 14%, which meant that 16 municipalities were headed by women. The 2018 local elections were the first surprise, as 22 female mayors were elected; for the first time in the history of independent Slovenia, more than 10% of municipalities were led by women. During the last local elections in 2022, we witnessed a renewed success of women, with more than 27% of female candidates elected. Today, 29 of the 212 municipalities (13.7%) are run by women.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF FEMALE CANDIDATES AND ELECTED MAYORS FROM 1994 TO 2022

	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
Number of municipalities	147	191	193	210	211	212	212	212
Number of all candidates for the position of mayor	635	739	724	991	926	811	800	618
Number of female candidates	31	52	77	103	109	108	102	107
<i>Percentage of female candidates</i>	4.9	7.0	10.6	10.4	11.8	13.3	12.8	17.3
Number of female candidates in urban municipalities	3	2	15	8	13	18	11	14
Number of female candidates in rural municipalities	28	50	62	95	96	90	91	93
Number of elected female mayors	2	8	11	7	10	16	22	29
<i>Percentage of elected female candidates to mayoral office</i>	6.5	15.4	14.3	6.8	9.2	14.8	21.6	27.1
Number of elected female mayors in urban municipalities	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
Number of elected female mayors in rural municipalities	2	7	10	7	10	16	21	28

Source: data of the State Election Commission, data capture June 2023.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that the mayoral function in urban municipalities remains firmly under the auspices of men. So far, only three women have been elected as mayors of the urban municipalities: one in the 1998 local elections, one in the 2002 local elections, and one in the 2018 local elections (she was re-elected in the 2022 local elections). The performance of female candidates in urban municipalities is therefore extremely low, except for the local elections in 1998, when only two women ran in urban municipalities and one of them won.

During the last three local elections (in 2014, 2018 and 2022), a total of 43 candidates (or an average of 1.3 candidates per urban municipality) were nominated in urban municipalities, while only one candidate has successfully won the local elections in 2018 and 2022 (which represents a 6% success rate). Meanwhile, during the last three local elections in rural municipalities, a total of 274 female candidates (or an average of 0.4 candidates per rural municipality) were nominated, while 65 candidates were successful (which represents a 10% success rate).

Table 2 shows the absolute numbers of mayors by groups of municipalities according to the criterion of population. We note that the majority of female mayors in the last three terms lead municipalities of up to 5,000 inhabitants, while only a few individuals are at the head of larger municipalities. If we consider the internationally established urban criterion (i.e., 10,000 inhabitants) for the analysis of the size of municipalities, this number is even higher.

⁸ In 2010, 9.2% of female candidates were successful, which means that 10 mayors were elected.

TABLE 2: FEMALE MAYORS AND SIZE OF THE MUNICIPALITY

	2014–2018	2018–2022	2022–2026	<i>Number of municipalities</i>
Less than 1,000 inhabitants	2	2	3	7
More than 1,000 up to 2,000 inhabitants	1	1	2	21
More than 2,000 up to 5,000 inhabitants	9	12	15	82
More than 5,000 up to 10,000 inhabitants	1	4	5	48
More than 10,000 up to 20,000 inhabitants	3	2	2	36
More than 20,000 inhabitants	0	1	2	18
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>212</i>

Source: own calculations according to the State Election Commission data.

A longitudinal study reveals some interesting facts. Of the 29 current female mayors, 12 are newcomers, while 17 have entered a new term of office with mayoral experience. Eight incumbent female mayors have started their second term, six female mayors have already defeated the competition in the elections for the third time, and three female mayors have started their fourth term.⁹ The longest seniority in history was held by two mayors who led their municipalities for a full twenty years (five terms) since 2002; during the last local elections in 2022, however, neither of them decided to run again.

4 CONCLUSION

In Slovenia, there are more than 3,600 political functions in 212 executive and legislative bodies at the local level. All these functions are directly elected by voters, which means that the citizens who decide who will lead their local community. In the paper, we focused our analysis on women who ran for the mayor's office in the time perspective of 32 years. We find that local politics, despite slightly more encouraging results regarding the election of women to the mayoral office compared to previous local elections, is still dominated by men, and that voters primarily see female mayors at the head of smaller municipalities (of up to 5,000 inhabitants), while larger municipalities, especially urban ones, are still entrusted to men.

If we want to understand the patterns and specifics that occur in a particular municipality, it is necessary to understand the local leaders and their way of leading, whereby gender is not a negligible variable. However, such an understanding of political leadership needs to be studied both substantively and in depth, which (especially for political scientists) represents a gap that will need more attention in the future. Nevertheless, we can form some patterns that we have already discovered by analysing objective data and reviewing literature. Firstly, women in local political functions remain in the minority. Secondly, we realised that social, legislative and institutional frameworks play an important role in the participation, engagement, recruitment and selection of female candidates for local political functions. Thirdly, although leadership positions are traditionally coloured by masculine values and virtues, women bring important innovations into the political arena and contribute to a more humane overtones of politics. Fourthly, women and men can be compatible partners when it comes to leading and developing the local community. And fifthly, it is clear that there is no simple answer to the question of how to increase women's participation in local politics, nor are there any quick solutions to (naturally) increase their

⁹ In the past, one female mayor led a municipality for full four terms (from 1994 to 2010), while two female mayors led a municipality for three terms each (from 1998 to 2010).

chances of being elected, especially in direct elections, where the power to vote is in the hands of voters.

And why (if at all) is the presence of women in the local political arena so important? We see the importance of the presence of both genders especially in the leading (executive) function due to differences in perception and attitude towards public policies and problems of local communities that are brought into the public (local) sphere by men and women through socialisation. The lack of (or the under-representation of) a particular gender means that voices and views (whether of women or men) are lost in key processes – from perceiving problems in the local community, deciding on public policies or solutions to problems, and finally, to implementing these decisions. At the same time, we do not in any way argue that someone *should only be* elected for office on the grounds of gender; we do believe, however, that based on objective criteria, a candidate *can be* elected regardless of their gender. Since the (vast) majority of local political officials in Slovenia are (still) men, the presence of women is crucial for shining a light on soft policies, which is also true due to the different manner of leadership that women bring to the political sphere with their nature, characteristics, and behavioural patterns. In addition, we must also put the topic into a broader context. The under-representation of women at a local level can lead to a chain reaction, causing the under-representation of women at higher levels of power (regional, national, European). It is the local level that is best suited for entering the political arena, accumulating experience, establishing (and expanding) an electoral base, and building the foundations for a subsequent political career. Understanding local leaders is therefore extremely important, especially if they have progressive ambitions.

We conclude with a thought about the countries where women have already broken through the "glass ceiling"¹⁰, occupying the key functions both at the local and at higher levels of government. This was certainly due to the context and a wide range of different factors, from the culture of society, the mentality, the political tradition, the legislation, the welfare states, the dynamics of life and, in particular, the empowerment of women which makes them believe that they can change something in politics, and then actually do it.

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¹⁰ The metaphor "glass ceiling" is used to describe invisible structural barriers that hinder the professional and political development of women (Klenke 1996).

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ŽENSKÉ V SLOVENSKI LOKALNI POLITIKI: ŽUPANJE 1994–2022

Moški in ženske, ki opravljajo javne politične funkcije, se razlikujejo v svojem odnosu do politike, zagovarjajo različne politike, oblikujejo politike na edinstvene načine, ustvarjajo alternativne politične rezultate ali učinke in izbirajo različne načine vodenja. Te razlike so posledica socializacije: pri moških prevladujeta vrednoti pravičnosti in avtonomije, naučijo se čustveno distancirati od javnopolitičnih problemov, kar jim omogoča jasno presojo pomembnih odločitev. Ženske so vzgojene tako, da skrbijo za druge, kar izostri njihov čut za socialne storitve, čemur dajejo prednost tudi pri svojem vodenju. Ta študija prikazuje časovno primerjavo lokalnih volitev v vseh slovenskih občinah v obdobju od 1994 do 2022, in analizira kje ženske kandidirajo in osvojijo županske funkcije. Analiza objektivnih podatkov kaže, da imajo ženske več možnosti za zmago v manjših občinah, a kljub določenemu napredku na zadnjih lokalnih volitvah lokalna politika ostaja v rokah moških.

Ključne besede: ženske; županje; lokalne volitve; lokalna (samo)uprava; Slovenija.