



Mayors as local leaders - a systematic literature review on European mayor research

Anni Jäntti, Santeri Lajunen, Arto Haveri & Jenni Airaksinen

To cite this article: Anni Jäntti, Santeri Lajunen, Arto Haveri & Jenni Airaksinen (17 Feb 2026): Mayors as local leaders - a systematic literature review on European mayor research, Local Government Studies, DOI: [10.1080/03003930.2026.2632134](https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2026.2632134)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2026.2632134>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 17 Feb 2026.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 296



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Mayors as local leaders - a systematic literature review on European mayor research

Anni Jäntti^a, Santeri Lajunen^a, Arto Haveri^a and Jenni Airaksinen^b

^aFaculty of Management and Business, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland; ^bFoundation for Municipal Development (KAKS), Finland

ABSTRACT

This article presents a systematic literature review on European research on the mayoral model as a local management system. As our research strategy, we utilised the PRISMA guidelines and researcher triangulation. Through multiple screening phases, a total of 73 articles were chosen and included in the final qualitative analysis to create a thematic synthesis on the predominant themes. The research on European mayors was divided into two main categories: the mayoral model as an institutional system and mayoral governance relations. In addition to these main categories, our analysis identified two cross-cutting themes: the reform perspective and the democracy perspective. Our thematic synthesis provides a multidimensional view of the evolution of mayoral models over the past two decades, revealing a common strategy to address various challenges by strengthening the mayor's role and powers, both institutionally and in leadership capabilities.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 18 December 2024; Accepted 8 February 2026


KEYWORDS Mayors; literature review; local governance; local political leadership; management system; public management

Introduction

This article is a systematic literature review of studies on European mayors. We study how research published in scientific journals perceives the mayor as a key figure of the local government management system, the mayoral model as a local government management system and what kinds of themes appear in this research.

Mayors have a special role as public leaders in local government. Their roles, powers, and positions differ significantly across and within countries, making the concept of a mayor ambiguous. A mayor may be a powerful

CONTACT Anni Jäntti  anni.jantti@tuni.fi  Faculty of Management and Business, 33014 Tampere University, Finland

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2026.2632134>

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

decision-maker or a ceremonial figure, exercise independent authority or lead collectively, serve solely the local community or also carry national responsibilities. They may act as political leaders or resemble municipal CEOs. This wide variation complicates the task of defining, understanding, and comparing mayors internationally. Despite these differences, the mayor plays an important role in local government management, democracy, identity, and development (Bäck, Heinelt, and Magnier 2006).

A reasonable amount of research has been published on European mayors from various perspectives. During the last two decades, numerous articles have focused on the directly elected 'strong mayor', likely reflecting a broader European trend towards strengthening local political leadership (e.g., Copus 2004; Reynaert and Steyvers 2007; Steyvers 2016). Another visible theme is how mayors respond to financial constraints and crisis-like situations (e.g., Eckersley and Timm-Arnold 2014; Jong, Duckers, and van der Velden 2016; Stolzenberg and Getimis 2016).

Beyond these visible trends, it remains unclear what other themes are addressed in European mayoral studies. The situation is more straightforward with books: several, though limited in number, edited volumes have been published on European mayors. These works portray the role of mayors, emphasising their function as political leaders (see Bäck, Heinelt, and Magnier 2006; Heinelt et al. 2018). Common themes in these books include the election of mayors, their leadership styles, and the relationships between elected mayors and councilors, administrators, or citizens.

However, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of mayor research published in scholarly journals. Which topics have been addressed in the research on European mayors from the management system perspective? What are the possible paths for future research? Therefore, in this study we carry out a systematic literature review to identify and analyse how the mayoral model is addressed in European research literature. Our research question is 'What are the predominant themes explored in European research on the mayoral model as a local management system?'

European mayors as figureheads of municipalities and cities

Mayors are prominent figures in local government management worldwide, but their responsibilities and roles vary. For example, while both Europe and North America have weak and strong mayoral models, strong mayors in North America typically possess more power and public visibility than those in Europe. The North American strong mayor model has frequently inspired reforms in Europe (e.g., Hambleton and Sweeting 2004). A significant difference is that European municipalities are almost always led by mayors or other political leaders, while in North America, about half are led by administrators or civil servants.

Due to historical, cultural, institutional, and legal differences across continents, and to enable a deeper understanding of the key characteristics of European research on the mayoral model as a local management system, this study focuses specifically on European mayoral research. We focus on European countries because of the great variety the Continent offers in terms of local government systems, administrative cultures, mayoral models and local leadership styles (see e.g., Bäck, Heinelt, and Magnier 2006; Heinelt et al. 2018). The focus is also justified by historical institutionalism emphasising the significance of regional integration, path-dependency and the harmonisation of local government systems in the examination of European local government systems (see Goldsmith 1993; Loughlin 2001). By narrowing the scope to Europe, the size of the sample was manageable and enabled the analysis to explore the features of European mayoral studies in greater detail without becoming too broad geographically or conceptually. In defining Europe in this review, we took as a starting point the member states of the Council of Europe. The focus on these member states is justified by their commitment to common legal and administrative principles, in particular the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The Charter serves as a common normative framework for local government in the countries, defining its key principles – such as self-government, democratic legitimacy, economic autonomy and subsidiarity.

In the member states of the European Union, there are approximately 86,000 municipalities, nearly all of which are headed by a mayor or an equivalent political leader. Notably, only in Finland, Ireland, and Iceland, the top municipal leaders are usually non-political professional figures appointed based on expertise rather than elected (Heinelt et al. 2018).

The role of mayors in European local government is shaped by political, historical, and cultural factors. In many countries, mayors hold significant authority over daily operations and long-term projects in areas like health, education, policing, environment, and culture. While some, such as in Luxembourg and the Netherlands, are state-appointed, most are elected directly by citizens or by municipal councils (Heinelt et al. 2018).

European mayors operate within decentralised systems where powers are devolved from national to local authorities (Guérin and Kerrouche 2008; Tiebout 1956). This situates the mayor's role within the broader context of local governance theories and highlights the importance of local autonomy in governance.

Mayors manoeuvre at the intersection of politics and administration. Political leadership involves elected officials making decisions, overseeing implementation, and guiding administration (Bentzen, Lo, and Winsvold 2020). Key activities include agenda-setting, problem-solving, and mobilising support to translate political goals into community impact. Kjaer (2013) conceptualises local political leadership as the ability to recycle political

capital – carefully managing political resources to garner public support and advance policies.

Mayors may also function as the chief executive officers of local government. In this role, their responsibilities include preparing and implementing policies, managing administration, and overseeing service delivery. Over the last decades, European mayors, as managers of local government, have often operated within the framework of New Public Management (Hood 1991), emphasising efficiency, accountability, and performance measurement. This has been complemented by the core ideas of New Public Governance: networks, collaboration and partnership as guiding leadership principles (Osborne 2010).

Mayors may also serve as the symbolic head of the local community, representing the municipality at official events and engaging with citizens (e.g., Copus 2004; Jong, Duckers, and van der Velden 2016; Kjaer 2015). They may also collaborate with higher levels of government, advocating for local interests and securing resources for the municipality (e.g., Genieys, Ballart, and Valarié 2004; Headlam and Hepburn 2017; Hillmann 2022).

In Europe, local government systems, local governance and local political leadership are affected by different culture-based governance traditions. To some extent, these traditions also affect the role of mayors varying between countries. European mayors have often been studied as part of the administrative-political system of their own country, or as an organic part of different European governance traditions. The literature on local government traditions offers many country-based typologies (see e.g., Bennett 1989; Goldsmith 1992; Hesse and Sharpe 1991; Page and Goldsmith 1987) to show the main features of and distinctions between different local government system traditions.

Recent research on mayoral leadership increasingly explores how mayors navigate complex governance settings shaped by fragmentation, interdependence, and growing societal expectations and how local leaders are expected to pursue various policies (Hambleton 2020; Heinelt et al. 2018; Sørensen and Torfing 2023). A key focus is how they address major cross-border challenges – like climate change, migration, and crises – through cross-sector and inter-jurisdictional collaboration (e.g., Kuhlmann and Bouckaert 2016; Sabchev 2022). Moreover, the studies highlight administrative reform and changes in leadership styles (e.g., Karsten et al. 2021; Sancino 2021) as well as the effects of institutional design on leadership (Heinelt et al. 2018; Torfing et al. 2022). Previous research also addresses the social profile and representation of mayors, the professionalisation of local political leadership and the institutional arrangements (Heinelt et al. 2018). However, there is currently no overview of the main research topics in mayoral studies that may reflect urgent issues in the field. This study aims to identify those themes in the European context.

Methodology

The thematic synthesis of European research on mayoral model as a local management system was conducted based on a systematic literature review. This method is widely employed to synthesise and comprehend large bodies of information (Petticrew and Roberts 2008). We followed the PRISMA guidelines, visualising the different phases of the review process (Figure 1). The PRISMA statement has been widely applied and modified (e.g., (Moher et al. 2009; Rethlefsen et al. 2021; Sarkis-Onofre et al. 2021).

To enhance the validity, reliability and credibility of categorisation and interpretations (see e.g., Sciberras and Dingli 2023) and to help balance different viewpoints and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the literature, we used researcher triangulation as our research strategy by involving all the authors to independently analyse the same data, helping to minimise individual bias by incorporating diverse perspectives and enhance the quality of the review findings. This ensured that interpretations are cross-validated and discussed to lead to more rigorous conclusions (Bekhet and Zauszniewski 2012).

The first phase of the systematic literature review was the identification of all possible articles that might fulfil the set criteria:

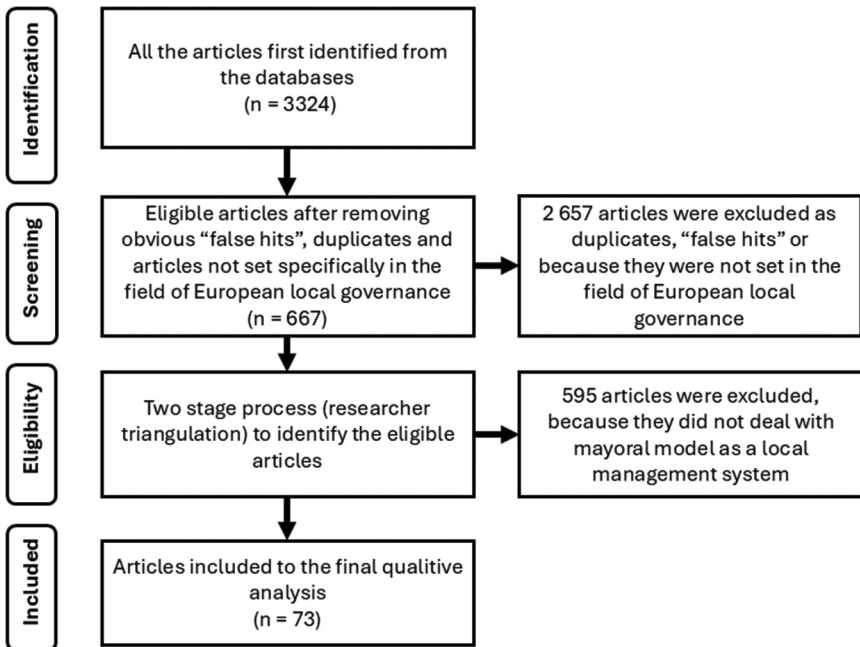


Figure 1. The PRISMA statement figure of the information flow of the literature review.

- (1) articles are published in peer-reviewed academic journals,
- (2) articles are written in English,
- (3) articles are published within this millennium,
- (4) the articles are set in the field of European local governance, and
- (5) the articles deal with mayoral model as a local management system.

To find all possible relevant articles and fit the set criteria, an extensive search was carried out from a total of nine databases (Emerald Insight, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis journals, EBSCO, ScienceDirect.com, JSTOR, ProQuest, SpringerLink and Wiley Online). We used the following terms and their inflectional forms as keywords in the search: mayor, municipal leader, municipal leadership, local leader, local leadership, urban leader, urban leadership, city leader and city leadership. The search terms had to appear in the title of the article, in the abstract and/or in the keywords.

After the search with the keywords and the publication time limit, there was a total of 3324 articles collected. However, many of these articles did not correspond to the subject area at all or did so only distantly (see [Figure 1](#) on the selection process). All these 'false hits' were excluded from the data as were all the duplicates. The articles were also screened with geographical and thematic criteria. After this screening process, there was a total of 667 articles that dealt to some extent with mayors in European local governance. The fifth criterion focused on the articles that deal with mayoral model as a local management system. This phase, with 667 articles, was conducted through a qualitative screening of the data by reading the abstracts.

All the authors participated in the literature review process to create the thematic synthesis. The 667 articles were divided into four parts, one for each author. Next, all authors independently reviewed one set of data by reading the abstracts of each article in their part of the data set and marked those articles that in their opinion did not fully fit into the subject area. After this first independent review phase, each researcher read the abstracts on another section of the data that was previously screened by another researcher to check the eligibility of each article again to make sure that all suitable articles were included in the analysis. This way each set of the data was reviewed by two individual researchers to make sure that results were not skewed by the subjectivity of a single researcher. After these two rounds, the researchers came together to compare findings, identifying areas of agreement (converging interpretations) and disagreement (diverging interpretations). Any discrepancies were discussed collaboratively to reach a common understanding. With this triangulation process, researchers identified the articles that dealt with mayoral model as a local management system. In the end, there was a total of 73 articles (listed in Appendix 1) that cleared all five criteria and were thus included into the final sample for qualitative analysis to create thematic synthesis. This procedure of building

common understanding was applied in all the phases of the analysis. By this collective approach we wanted to ensure that the final conclusions are not skewed by the subjective lens of a single researcher.

After the final articles were selected, a more detailed analysis of the literature began. We first looked at the sample for descriptive quantitative findings by focusing on the development of the number of journal articles on mayoral model, the geographic dimensions of the sample, and the data and analysis methods used in the studies.

In the qualitative analysis of the sample, we used inductive analysis to categorise the predominant topics. The researchers analysed the articles in three steps utilising researcher triangulation. The creation of the categories in the analysis is illustrated in Table 1, where we use the example of how the main category of ‘Mayoral model as an institutional system’ was created.

In the first step, the articles were divided between the researchers, who carefully read through the articles and summarised the core themes of each article related to the research question: which topics are addressed in research on mayoral model as a management system? A single study would typically include several topics. The aim was not to identify the main topic of each article but rather to capture the variety of topics and then make a synthesis of them. In accordance with triangulation, two other researchers checked the summarisations and made corrections and additions. Some examples of the topics in the sample were: accountability, directly elected mayor, mayor-council relations, mayors as intermediaries, power, representation, roles and powers of leaders, strong mayor. After these rounds, the researchers came together to discuss the findings and themes for reaching a common understanding.

In the second step, the summarised core themes were then discussed and categorised by the whole research team together. In this phase, we searched for similarities, relations and differences between the topics. The aim was to classify which topics belong to a particular group and based on this we

Table 1. Example of the categorisation from identifying topics towards creating categories and main categories.

1. Identifying the topics	2. Creating categories	3. Creating main categories
selection method of the mayor directly elected mayor strong mayor	The mayoral election method	Mayoral model as an institutional system
the competences of mayor mayor’s legal position the role of mayor	The roles, functions and powers of mayors	
mayoral model’s strengths context-specificity of mayoral model mayoral model as an institution	Features of the mayoral model	

grouped together research topics that had similarities in their content. The categories conceptualise recurring topics in the European mayor research.

In the third phase, we identified main categories to make a relevant categorisation to illustrate the predominant topics. The main categories were created by grouping together the categories. The main categories were formulated as general descriptions of the research topics. Thus, we created a thematic synthesis consisting of the main categories and cross-cutting themes on the European research on mayoral model as a local management system.

Results

In the results section, we first present some descriptive quantitative findings of the data. Then we move on to the results of the qualitative inductive analysis on the key research themes on the European mayoral model.

The scholarly interest towards mayoral model as a local management system has been quite stable between 2000–2022 with the average of three articles published per year. The peak years are 2004 and 2008 both with seven journal articles on the topic, while no articles related to this topic were published in 2005 or 2010 (Figure 2).

The studies touch upon mayoral model widely across Europe (Table 2). A total of 21 different European countries have been subject to study in the sample. However, there are great differences with the UK mayor research dominating the field with more than 40% of the publications and several European countries showing up with only one article each.

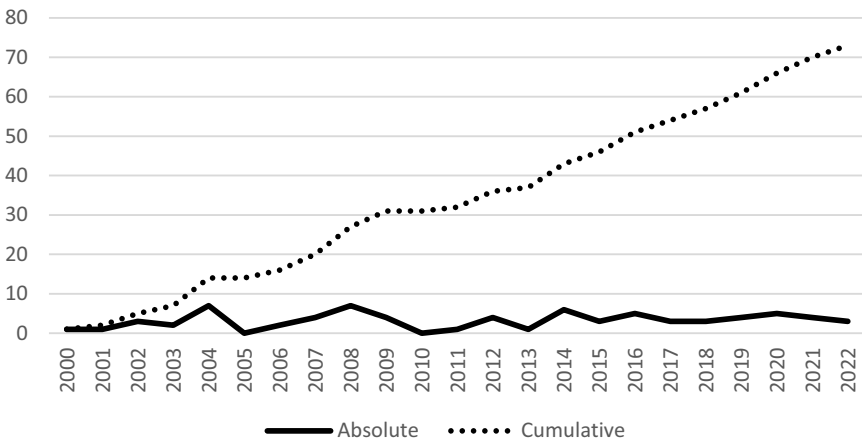


Figure 2. Number of publications in 2000–2022 by year on mayoral model in Europe.

Table 2. Country origins of the study.

Country	Freq	%
UK	33	41,3
DE	11	13,8
NL, IT	9	11,3
ES	8	10,0
BE, FR	6	7,5
IE	4	5,0
GR, DK	3	3,8
PL	2	2,5
AT, PT, UA, CZ, IS, SE, HU, SI, FI, CH	1	1,3
Europe (countries not defined)	3	3,8
Total	80	100

Table 3. Data collection methods.

Data Collection Methods	Freq	%
Interview	35	32,1
Survey data	24	22,0
Non-survey-related statistics	11	10,1
Media data	4	3,7
Policy documents	13	11,9
Field study	8	7,3
Only based on reviewing previous literature	12	11,0
Experiment	2	1,8
Total	109	100

Table 4. Analytical methods.

Analytical Methods	Freq	%
A qualitative analytic technique	57	60,0
Univariate: descriptive statistics	23	24,2
Multivariate: multiple regression	5	5,3
Bivariate: measures of association or tests of difference	7	7,4
Multivariate: logistic regression	2	2,1
Multivariate: factor analysis	1	1,1
Total	95	100

Various data collection (Table 3) and analysis methods (Table 4) have been used in the studies on European mayoral research. Almost third of the studies use interview data and more than fifth use survey data. In 36% of the studies more than one data collection method was used. Qualitative research approach is emphasised in the analytical methods.

In the qualitative analysis of the studies, we identified two main categories to illustrate the key research themes on the European mayoral model. The first main category contains research themes that address mayoral model as an institutional system. The second main category focuses on the governance relations of the mayor. Moreover, we identified two cross-cutting themes for both categories: management system reform and development of local democracy (Figure 3).

The mayoral model as a local management system

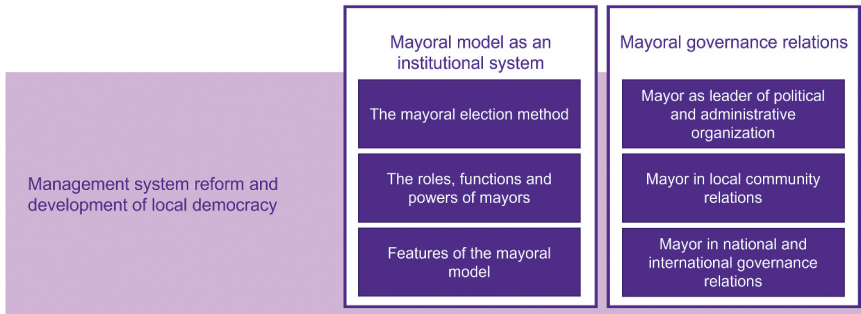


Figure 3. Themes of studies on mayoral model as a local management system.

Mayoral model as an institutional system

The first main category focuses on the mayoral model as an institutional system. 67 articles address this perspective dealing with the formal and informal rules associated with the mayoral model. This main category has three sub-categories. The first sub-category focuses on the impacts and significance of the mayoral election method and the second one on the roles, functions and powers of the mayor. The third sub-category deals with the characteristics of the institution of directly elected mayor (DEM) and the relation between the mayoral position and the functionality of the local government as a management system.

DEM is a subject of great interest in Europe and the articles draw a diverse picture particularly of the profound revision of the mayoral election method, the strengths and weaknesses related to mayoral position, and the impact of this institution on many governance issues such as local democracy, the role of the council, policy outcomes and national politics and governance. The institution of DEM is considered to support strong individualised leadership, and mayors are often seen to be in control of both administrative and political processes of local government leaving less space for local council.

The mayoral election method

One of the most prominent themes of literature concerning mayors was the mayoral election method. 33 articles deal with DEM, its background and the arguments for and against such election method. Many of the articles point out that DEM is a relatively new institutional arrangement, that has been introduced in many Western European countries since the 1990s (Sandford 2004; Fenwick & Elcock 2014; Magre & Bertrana 2007; Fabbrini 2001). Literature suggests that new wave of European DEMs originates from transatlantic exchange with the US (Elcock 2008).

The articles often have somewhat evaluative approaches. In many cases, articles take a critical look on the achievements of the implementation of this new kind of 'presidential' arrangement (Copus 2004). The articles analyse the political motives and arguments for and against DEM. Advocates for the direct election often emphasise mayoral legitimacy. A popular claim was that DEM would be more closely linked with the citizens, and thus, the mayor would be more responsive to the interests of the local electorate. DEM was seen giving a face to the local community, local government and its political processes (e.g., Reynaert and Steyvers 2007). This better linkage between mayor and citizens was seen to give better legitimacy to the institution and leadership of the mayor. Another common argument was that DEMs can establish stronger leadership, make decision making quicker and bring unity in the local politics (Elcock & Fenwick 2007).

Arguments against the direct election of mayors often centre around concerns related to majoritarian election methods. Numerous articles highlight the drawbacks of this approach, particularly its perceived negative impact on the representation of women and minorities in local politics. Critics argue that majoritarian systems may disadvantage these groups, potentially limiting their opportunities to secure mayoral positions (e.g., Reynaert and Steyvers 2007). In addition, there is a possibility of different forms of authoritarian rule and leadership that the directly elected individual political executive enables (Reynaert and Steyvers 2007). The literature also examines how DEM impacts the role of the local council and laymen councillors, that are easily overshadowed by the strong mayor (Bussu 2015; Gendzwill 2012; Sidor et al. 2020).

The roles, functions and powers of mayors

Second prominent theme concerns the diverse roles, functions and powers of mayors in different institutional arrangements (38 articles in this sub-category). In some articles they are analysed in local or national framework as part of the new institutional approach (e.g., Steyvers 2016, Sweeting 2002; Hambleton and Sweeting 2004). The norms can be, for example, the rules around the appointment and removal of the mayor, the composition of the cabinet, the role of the local council, the mayors' legal powers and the role of the mayor in the municipality (Sweeting 2009; Devroe 2013). One argument posits that mayors with limited formal powers must collaborate with other institutions to be effective in local governance (Sweeting, 2002). Furthermore, literature delves into international comparisons, examining diverse systems of local governments and roles of mayors (e.g., Elcock & Fenwick, 2007; Steyvers et al. 2008; Ramírez Pérez et al. 2008).

Mayors play various roles and functions in local government. One of the main roles is to be the executive leader of the local government (Salvador & Pano 2018; Schnee 2019). As such, the mayor has a double role strengthening

the administrative leadership of the local government and enhancing its political accountability to citizens (Wollmann 2004). Mayors are expected to deliver a range of beneficial outcomes (Headlam & Hepburn 2017).

The mayoral model also seems to provide more space for the expansion of political agency, because of the concentration of power for the mayor (Sweeting & Hambleton 2020). Their political function is to formulate the development goals of municipalities, to be initiative and affect political decision-making (Torfing et al. 2019; Čopík et al. 2021). Even though mayors do not have strong legislative positions, they still might play a key role as political initiators and promoters (Čopík et al. 2021). Moreover, mayors have a bridging role in local politics and in building political consensus (Karsten & Heniks 2017).

Literature also addresses the role of the mayor as a representative of the community and its political system (e.g., Kjaer 2015; Headlam & Hepburn 2017). The representative role is particularly strong on the national and international political stage (Headlam & Hepburn 2017; Hillmann 2022; Schnee 2019). It is linked with the executive role of the mayor, as mayors are seen to be able to enhance local interest by being in interaction with other levels of government (multilevel political leadership) (Sabchev 2022). Mayors typically function also as local figureheads and personifications of local government and decision-making (Reynaert and Steyvers 2007; Dunne 2000).

Features of the mayoral model

Third sub-category (36 articles) deals with the characteristics of the institution of DEM, and the relation between the mayoral position and the functionality of the local government as a management and political system.

Most articles on the characteristics of the mayoral model examine mayoral model as an administrative and political institution, its strengths and problems, arguments for and against the model, as well as outright failures of the mayoral model (e.g., Asquith 2008; Leach & Norris 2002). In this context, DEM is usually worded as ‘concentrated, individualised leadership’, where power and visibility are handed on the individual (see Sweeting 2012; Magnier 2004; Steyvers et al. 2008). This individual leadership emphasis is also mirrored in relation to a more decentralised and council-oriented model, and it is considered how DEM usually weakens the power of the council or the parties (e.g., Magnier 2004). On the other hand, in Germany the DEM seems to have strengthened the administrative leadership and enhanced political accountability (Wollmann 2004).

Several articles state the importance of the context and the person: ‘institutional form matters, but is highly contingent upon leadership context and characteristics’ (e.g., Steyvers 2016). Mayors’ experience, expertise and management training may be insufficient in relation to the requirements of

the task (e.g., Fenwick et al. 2006). As strong individual leaders, mayors often challenge the traditional division of tasks and power, the local ways and conditions of management.

The mayoral model and mayors are also examined in relation to the change of governance. For example, a Belgian study shows that mayors have a rather conservative attitude in relation to the different dimensions of governance (Steyvers et al. 2006). The DEM model is generally seen to broadly affect on the change of governance. For instance, the popularisation of DEM in southern and central parts of Europe is seen to strengthen the differences between the south and the north in the ways of governance (Kukovič 2018).

Mayoral governance relations

The second main category highlights the governance relations of the mayor. 43 articles address this perspective, focusing on mayor's leadership in different kinds of intra-organisational and extra-organisational governance relations. These articles provide an insight into the network of multiple internal and external governance relationships in which mayors operate. This main category is divided into three sub-categories. First, the mayor is seen as the leader of the politico-administrative organisation highlighting the importance of internal governance relations inside the local government organisation. Second, the mayor is seen as the leader of the local community emphasising the importance of local governance relations, especially between the mayor and the local community: local residents, NGOs and businesses. The third aspect shows mayor as an actor in external governance relations at national and international levels.

Mayor as leader of political and administrative organisation

This sub-category (31 articles) examines internal governance relations, namely the mayor's role as a leader of political and administrative organisation.

Eleven articles examine the mayor's relationship with the political and administrative organisation of the municipality. The main message is that mayors do not operate in a political nor administrative vacuum (Sidor et al. 2020) and the mayoral model can strengthen the relations between political and administrative leadership (Fenwick et al. 2006). Mayors are seen to be place-based leaders (Hambleton & Sweeting 2014), project leaders (Genieys, Ballart, and Valarié 2004), governors of urban security (Devroe 2013), innovative strategic leaders (Fenwick & Johnston 2020), guardians of democracy (Karsten & Heniks 2017) as well as collective, holistic and executive leaders (Torfing et al. 2019). They are expected to enhance decision-making capacity (Eckersley and

Timm-Arnold 2014) and bring transparency, effectiveness (Galanti 2014) and accountability (Copus 2004) to local government actions. The overarching theme underscores the imperative for mayors to enhance local leadership by fostering a more seamless integration of administrative functions and political strategies. The emphasis is on establishing robust connections between governance and politics, thereby empowering mayors to navigate and address local challenges with a holistic and effective approach.

The second theme in the articles is mayor's relation to councilors and party politics. Mayors are increasingly distancing themselves from party politics, and power is shifting from political parties to individuals, despite the perception that parties still dominate the mayoral office (Bottom & Reiser 2014). Mayoral governance has encouraged the adoption of leadership styles associated with the depoliticisation of urban politics in cities. (Sweeting & Hambleton 2020). The analysis highlights how mayors influence the urban political landscape by incorporating elements that seek to minimise political considerations, emphasising a more neutral and pragmatic approach to governance.

The introduction of the DEMs seems to change the dynamics of local political leadership (Copus 2004) and the relationship between mayor and councilors (Sidor et al. 2020). This has often been translated into a weakened role of the councils (Bussu 2015).

Some articles emphasise the importance of consensus-building in mayoral leadership (Karsten & Heniks 2017). Overcoming resistance and avoiding conflicts is seen crucial in the leadership behaviour of a mayor (Galanti 2014). The patterns of interaction are highlighted in the success of mayoral governance (Baekgaard 2011). The consensus-driven approach is also critically scrutinised suggesting that when mayors rely on council support to stay in office, consensus-driven leadership can make them hesitant to act as strong moral leaders (Karsten 2019).

Mayors are also examined from the viewpoint of organisational leadership, as the highest-ranking officers in municipalities. These articles contemplate a tension between ideological and pragmatic considerations (Kovarek et al. 2017) and the effect of different organisational models on the interaction between politicians and administrators (Baekgaard 2011).

Mayor in local community relations

The second sub-category highlights mayor's role in local community relations, including residents, local businesses and NGOs. 22 papers in the data bring up this aspect. The studies addressing the local community relations aspect are characterised through three sub-themes.

First, these studies underline the relationship between the mayor and the residents (e.g., Reynaert and Steyvers 2007; Fenwick et al. 2006) as well as

other local actors, such as businesses (e.g., Steyvers 2016). This dynamic relationship enhances the mayor's engagement with the community and fosters a more robust and interconnected bond between local community and local government (Copus 2004). Consequently, this relationship is closely related to the legitimacy of local government (Bussu 2015; Reynaert and Steyvers 2007).

Second, mayors are seen as important intermediaries (Hillmann 2022) between different actors in society and different levels of government. Mayors are connecting the territory, its people and local issues (Genieys, Ballart, and Valarié 2004). The intermediary role may also be concretised as mayors being 'glocal bureaucrats' mediating between global, national and local needs (Hillmann 2022). This aspect highlights the increasing coordination role of mayors concerning 'the efforts of external partners in the wider governance of the area' (Fenwick et al. 2006). The intermediary approach calls for interactive, multi-level leadership using interaction as a tool to enhance mayor's strategic policy objectives (Sabchev 2022).

The third theme emphasises mayor's role as a key member of the local community, as a leader standing with other community members in good and in bad times. Mayors often are 'expected to speak at memorials and attend community activities' (Jong, Duckers, and van der Velden 2016) and act as ceremony masters (Kjaer 2015). In times of crises, mayors are expected to go closer to residents, visit them 'with a listening ear in the privacy of their homes, demonstrating the role mayors can fulfil as mourners-in-chief in local communities' (Jong, Duckers, and van der Velden 2016).

Mayor in national and international governance relations

Eight of the articles deal with mayors and their actions in national and international governance relations. The connection of mayors to national and international level is a multidimensional question. Mayoral office is seen as a route to national level posts (Schnee 2019) but at the same time city representation is seen crucial on the national and international political stages (Headlam & Hepburn 2017).

The mayor's relation to national level is scrutinised also from the point of view of the effects of federal and constitution level settlements on responses to, e.g., urban security issues (Devroe 2013). One dimension is the mayor's ability to obtain resources from central government through their political connections (Genieys, Ballart, and Valarié 2004). In the UK, a special question is the relation to the central-state from the point of view of economic dependency (lack of fiscal autonomy) and the central-state involvement in the details of local decision-making (Hambleton and Sweeting 2004).

European mayor research through a reform lens

The reform perspective is strongly present in the sample. In 34 articles, the mayoral model is discussed either as a reform of the local management system (e.g., Sandford 2004; Asquith 2008; Hambleton 2020) or the reform perspective is included in the research as a side plot or framing element (e.g., Genieys, Ballart, and Valarié 2004).

Studies including the reform perspective have primarily focused on the impact of the DEM model on local political leadership (e.g., Copus 2008; Pasotti 2007). The examined articles delve into various dimensions of this model, exploring its effects on the mayor's leadership style (Steyvers 2016) and leadership effectiveness (Hambleton et al. 2022). The method of mayoral election is widely acknowledged as a key factor influencing these aspects, although sometimes the consequences have been found to be different than anticipated. For example, direct election reduced the business orientation of mayors, even though a 'strong mayor' was hoped to stimulate the development of livelihoods (Steyvers 2016).

European reforms of local leadership have also been described as the march of individual leadership (Steyvers et al. 2008) or moving towards a local 'presidential' leadership (Wollmann 2008). This includes also the question of DEMs and their detachment from party politics with the expectation that it paves the way for substantial advancements in accountability, activism, and ambition among mayors (Magnier 2004). There is also discussion on the recognised need to reform the role of councils and councillors in general. Mayoral reforms are perceived as crucial opportunities for councillors to fortify their roles in steering and scrutiny, fostering re-engagement with the local community (Bussu 2015).

European mayor research from the perspective of development of democracy

Democracy is another cross-cutting theme in European studies on mayor model as a management system. Democracy is an explicit research theme in 19 of the articles in the dataset. We identified three sub-themes related to democracy.

First, many of the articles scrutinise the democratic aspects of DEMs. These articles are interested in the democracy impacts of introducing DEMs (e.g., Sandford 2004; Reynaert and Steyvers 2007) or examine the referendums as a form of democracy related to the introduction of DEMs (e.g., Hambleton & Sweeting 2014; Hambleton et al. 2022).

The second sub-theme consists of articles dealing with the relationship between mayoral model, representative democracy and democratic political leadership. These articles analyse changes to local politics (e.g., Galanti 2014)

and political behaviour and organisation (Copus 2004). Mayoral model is explored as a vehicle for local democratic leadership (Hambleton 2020) and as a radical transformation of the party system (Torikai 2021). The articles consider the role of council (Sweeting 2009) and councilors (Bussu 2015) in mayoral model as well as power between mayors and political parties (Pasotti 2007).

Third sub-theme concerning democracy focuses on political participation, citizen participation and participatory democracy. The mayoral model, especially the DEM, is seen as a potential means of strengthening local democracy (Sweeting & Hambleton 2020). Moreover, these articles highlight the decline of conventional measures of political participation (Borraz & John 2004), as a background for the need to improve and revitalise democracy and political participation.

Discussion

Our analysis categorised the research on European mayors into two primary areas: the *Mayoral Model as an Institutional System* and *Mayoral Governance Relations*.

The first discusses the mayor's election method, the mayor's roles, functions and powers, and the characteristics of the institution of DEM. This literature is concerned with the constitutive aspect of mayoral leadership and it often focuses on the change of formal institutions of office, particularly the spread of the DEM model.

Mayoral Governance Relations, in turn, examines how mayors fulfil their responsibilities through various relationships. These include interactions with the municipal council and administration, residents, businesses, NGOs, the state, and international entities. This category investigates how mayors lead municipal organisations, foster community engagement, and manage external governance relations. The significant role of governance relations shows that mayor's influence is a mixture of formal institutional and informal powers. As such, the governance relations of mayors are essential source of competencies.

In addition to these two main categories, our analysis identified two cross-cutting themes: the *Reform Perspective* and the *Democracy Perspective*.

From a reform standpoint, the election, role, and duties of the mayor – and the changes therein – are central to the reform of administration and politics. The democracy dimension is also prevalent, either as a central theme or a secondary consideration, reflecting the mayor's role as the personification of local political leadership. Both perspectives underscore the transformation paths of the mayoral system as a crucial factor influencing the municipal management system. Reforms that alter the dynamics of leadership can have

significant impacts on the efficiency of governance and the state of democracy.

In conclusion, the European mayoral research literature offers a multidimensional analysis of the transformation of municipalities, local leadership, and democracy over the past two decades. This transformation is characterised by the increasing complexity, fragmentation, and networked nature of governance, presenting significant challenges to local leadership and management. In response, a common strategy has been to strengthen the role and powers of the mayor, both institutionally and in terms of leadership capabilities. This has often been pursued through two key institutional approaches: the direct election of mayors and the consolidation of executive powers in their hands. Empowered mayors are viewed as central figures unifying fragmented local communities, streamlining decision-making processes, acting as entrepreneurial developers in collaboration with stakeholders, and serving as symbolic representatives of their municipalities.

Based on the research discussed in the articles, it remains uncertain whether the goals of enhancing democracy and strengthening local leadership have been fully realised. While mayoral power has undoubtedly increased, it has also become more individualised, raising concerns about potential drawbacks. These shifts may undermine the role of local councils and lay councilors, potentially leading to diminished representation of minorities in local politics. Consequently, the evolving dynamics of mayoral authority are not without complications, and they may inadvertently weaken the broader local democratic framework.

Our study provides a comprehensive overview of research on European mayors in the early 2000s, highlighting key trends and topics. Despite the mayor's significant societal importance as a central figure in municipal and city leadership, no systematic review of research published in academic journals on this topic has previously been conducted. Our results indicate that mayors are generally examined from two main perspectives: the institutional framework on the one hand, and the governance relationship perspective on the other. This dual approach not only reflects the ongoing changes in local governance but also suggests that neither perspective alone provides a holistic understanding of the mayoral model.

While our study offers a broad overview, it inevitably has its limitations. For instance, it does not sufficiently account for differences in research emphases between countries or administrative traditions, let alone explore how these variations could illuminate diverging research trends and areas of interest. Moreover, there may be some degree of publication bias in our analyses. In a qualitative review, the prominence of certain themes does not necessarily reflect their actual frequency or prevalence. For example, the identification of the chief executive role as one of the key functions of a mayor does not imply that this role is common across all European

countries. Similarly, if published research has focused heavily on cases where the shift to a strong mayor model has led to significant changes in local governance, it may overlook what could be a more common pattern – cases where such a shift has resulted in little or no change. Our review has showed what and how has been studied and which research interests can be found in mayor research. However, this kind of research cannot give a full picture of what happens in practice and which are the relevant topics from the practitioners' viewpoint. Thus, there is a need for empirical research in different contexts scrutinising these aspects.

There is a pressing need for further institutional and comparative research on mayors, particularly studies that examine the trajectories of local government systems within different governance traditions. Choosing to focus on member states of the Council of Europe allowed for a comprehensive and wide-ranging scope to cover a great variety of countries and thus, a rich data to identify the predominant topics from different contexts. Focusing only on e.g., EU countries would have probably resulted in a less heterogenous sample that might have narrowed the results. With the European focus, it has not been able to cover the global scope nor comparisons on mayor research between different continents. The results of this study on the predominant themes of European mayor research could be used as an analytical framework in further studies to broaden the geographical scope to gain understanding on the topic in different contexts and allows for comparative research. During the screening process, we noticed that the overall spectrum of research on mayors is enormously diverse. Further research is needed to identify and analyse this disciplinary and thematic diversity of mayor research.

The role of mayors is far from static, as it continues to adapt to the complexities of modern governance. Whether through shifting institutional structures or evolving governance relationships, the mayoral office stands at a crossroads of tradition and transformation. To truly understand this pivotal role, scholars must continue to explore these diverse dynamics with an open, comparative lens.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Bäck, H., H. Heinelt, and A. Magnier. 2006. *The European Mayor: Political Leaders in the Changing Context of Local Democracy*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

- Bekhet, A. K., and J. A. Zauszniewski. 2012. "Methodological Triangulation: An Approach to Understanding Data." *Nurse Researcher* 20 (2): 40–43. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2012.11.20.2.40.c9442>.
- Bennett, R. J. 1989. *Territory and Administration in Europe*. London: Frances Pinter.
- Bentzen, T. Ø., C. Lo, and M. Winsvold. 2020. "Strengthening Local Political Leadership Through Institutional Design: How and Why." *Local Government Studies* 46 (3): 483–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2019.1690994>.
- Bussu, S. 2015. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Councillor's Dilemma Between Strong Mayors and Citizens' Needs." *Local Government Studies* 41 (6): 841–860. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2015.1030013>.
- Copus, C. 2004. "Directly Elected Mayors: A Tonic for Local Governance or Old Wine in New Bottles?" *Local Government Studies* 30 (4): 576–588. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0300393042000318003>.
- Copus, C. 2008. "English Councillors and Mayoral Governance: Developing a New Dynamic for Political Accountability." *The Political Quarterly* 79 (4): 590–604. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2008.00961.x>.
- Eckersley, P., and P. Timm-Arnold. 2014. "Directly-Elected Mayors and the Austerity Agenda: Lessons from the German Experience." *Public Money & Management* 34 (5): 347–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2014.945803>.
- Genieys, W., X. Ballart, and P. Valarié. 2004. "From "Great" Leaders to Building Networks: The Emergence of a New Urban Leadership in Southern Europe?" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28 (1): 183–199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0309-1317.2004.00510.x>.
- Goldsmith, M. 1992. "Local Government." *Urban Studies* 29 (3/4): 393–410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420989220080501>.
- Goldsmith, M. 1993. "The Europeanisation of Local Government." *Urban Studies* 30 (4–5): 683–699. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420989320081871>.
- Guérin, É., and É. Kerrouche. 2008. "From Amateurs to Professionals: The Changing Face of Local Elected Representatives in Europe." *Local Government Studies* 34 (2): 179–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930701852260>.
- Hambleton, R. 2020. *Cities and Communities Beyond COVID-19: How Local Leadership Can Change Our Future for the Better*. Bristol University Press.
- Hambleton, R., and D. Sweeting. 2004. "U.S.-Style Leadership for English Local Government." *Public Administration Review* 64 (4): 474–488. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2004.00393.x>.
- Heinelt, H., A. Magnier, M. Cabria, and H. Reynaert. 2018. *Political Leaders and Changing Local Democracy*. The European Mayor. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hesse, J. J., and L. J. Sharpe. 1991. "Local Government in International Perspective: Some Comparative Observations." In *Local Government and Urban Affairs in International Perspective. Analyses of Twenty Western Industrialised Countries*, edited by Hesse, J.J, 603–621. Nomos.
- Hillmann, F. 2022. "Becoming Glocal Bureaucrats: Mayors, Institutions and Civil Society in Smaller Cities in Brandenburg During the 'Migration Crisis', 2015-17." *Territory, Politics, Governance* 10 (3): 327–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.1936147>.
- Hood, C. 1991. "Public Management for All Seasons?" *Public Administration* 69 (1): 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.1991.tb00779.x>.
- Jong, W., M. L. Duckers, and P. G. van der Velden. 2016. "Crisis Leadership by Mayors: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Newspapers and Social Media on the MH17

- Disaster." *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 24 (4): 286–295. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12124>.
- Karsten, N., D. Sweeting, U. Kjær, and S. Kukovič. 2021. "Leadership at the Subnational Level: Mayoral and Executive Models." In *A Research Agenda for Regional and Local Government*, edited by Callanan, M., & Loughlin, J., 163–176. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Kjaer, U. 2013. "Local Political Leadership: The Art of Circulating Political Capital." *Local Government Studies* 39 (2): 253–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2012.751022>.
- Kjaer, U. 2015. "Urban Political Leadership and Political Representation: The Multifaceted Representational Role of Danish Mayors." *Urban Affairs Review* 51 (4): 563–577. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087414537610>.
- Kuhlmann, S., and G. Bouckaert. 2016. *Local Public Sector Reforms in Times of Crisis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Loughlin, J. 2001. *Subnational Democracy in the European Union: Challenges and Opportunities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moher, D., A. Liberati, J. Tetzlaff, and D. G. Altman. 2009. "Reprint—Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement." *Physical Therapy* 89 (9): 873–880. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ptj/89.9.873>.
- Osborne, S. 2010. *The New Public Governance? Emerging Perspectives on the Theory and Practice of Public Governance*. New York: Routledge.
- Page, E., and M. Goldsmith. 1987. *Central and Local Government Relation*. Sage.
- Petticrew, M., and H. Roberts. 2008. *Systematic Reviews in the Social Sciences: A Practical Guide*. 1st ed. Malden: Wiley.
- Rethlefsen, M. L., S. Kirtley, S. Waffenschmidt, A. P. Ayala, D. Moher, M. J. Page, and J. B. Koffel. 2021. "PRISMA-S: An Extension to the PRISMA Statement for Reporting Literature Searches in Systematic Reviews." *Systematic Reviews* 10 (1): 39–39. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01542-z>.
- Reynaert, H., and K. Steyvers. 2007. "Towards a Direct Election of Mayors in Belgium: Giving Up Representation or Giving in to Political Renewal?" *Representation (McDougall Trust)* 43 (2): 123–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890701363359>.
- Sabchev, T. 2022. "The Role of Local Political Leadership in the Reception of Forced Migrants: Evidence from Greece." *Territory, Politics, Governance* 10 (3): 306–326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.1927815>.
- Sancino, A. 2021. "Local Political Leadership: From Managerial Performances to Leaders-Hip Hop on Social Media?" *International Journal of Public Leadership* 17 (3): 283–297. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-01-2021-0001>.
- Sarkis-Onofre, R., F. Catalá-López, E. Aromataris, and C. Lockwood. 2021. "How to Properly Use the PRISMA Statement." *Systematic Reviews* 10 (1): 117. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-021-01671-z>.
- Schnee, C. 2019. "Conceptualizing the Executive Mayoralty as a Pseudo-Event: A Comparative Investigation of a New Trend in Municipal Leadership." *Contemporary Politics* 25 (4): 479–497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2018.1563853>.
- Sciberras, M., and A. Dingli. 2023. "Research Analysis—Triangulation Approach." In *Investigating AI Readiness in the Maltese Public Administration. Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems*, edited by M. Sciberras and A. Dingli, 31–32. Vol. 568. Cham: Springer.
- Sørensen, E., and J. Torfing. 2023. "Enhancing City Vitality by Building Platforms for Interactive Political Leadership: Experiences and Results from a Longitudinal Design Experiment." *Cities* 133:104149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.104149>.

- Steyvers, K. 2016. "A Knight in White Satin Armour? New Institutionalism and Mayoral Leadership in the Era of Governance." *European Urban and Regional Studies* 23 (3): 289–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776413508419>.
- Stolzenberg, P., and P. Getimis. 2016. "Fiscal Consolidation in German and Greek Municipalities: The Interplay of Leadership and Legitimacy." *Lex Localis - Journal of Local Self-Government* 14 (4): 893–916. <https://doi.org/10.4335/14.4.893-916> (2016).
- Tiebout, C. M. 1956. "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures." *Journal of Political Economy* 64 (5): 416–424. <https://doi.org/10.1086/257839>.
- Torfinn, J., T. Ø. Bentzen, and M. S. Winsvold. 2022. "How Institutional Designs Condition Perceived Local Political Leadership." *Local Government Studies* 48 (3): 341–366. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2020.1821664>.