



**Partecipazione e Conflitto**

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(2) 2024: 368-384

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i2p368

Published 15 July, 2024

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

---

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

---

# Organisational, renowned, and charismatic leaders: three types of resources

**Cecilia Santilli**  
*Lund University*

**Roberto Scaramuzzino**  
*Lund University*

---

**ABSTRACT:** Emerging research on civil society elites has highlighted the presence of elitist tendencies in European civil societies with a growing concentration of political and economic resources in the hands of small groups of major organizations and leaders. Building upon this strand of research, this article aims at studying the power stratification of Italian civil society-third sector through a systematic analysis of the distribution of three specific types of resources, namely organisational resources, reputation, and public visibility. For this purpose, we combine three methodological approaches. The study firstly draws on a large-scale mapping of civil society organizations and leaders at national level and follows the so-called “positional method”. The second approach that we adopt in this study is the reputational analysis, based on a national survey conducted in 2021 which targeted 680 civil society leaders of organisations based on the same mapping of the positional approach. The third approach is the claims-making analysis, which consists in retrieving CS actors’ interventions on a given issue in the public domain drawing from media sources. Through the combination of these three methodological approaches, the study highlights the stratification of Italian civil society and the multi- dimensionality of power and influence among Italian Civil society elites. It also shows how the distribution of power resources lays on three main types of leaders-elites: the organizational leader, the renowned leader and the charismatic leader.

**KEYWORDS:** Civil society; Elites; Italy; Leadership; Third Sector

**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S):** [cecilia.santilli@gmail.com](mailto:cecilia.santilli@gmail.com)

---

## 1. Introduction:

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to hierarchies of power in civil society. A growing literature on the notion of civil society elites has shed light on political and economic stratification undergone by civil society (Johansson and Uhlin 2020; Lindellee and Scaramuzzino, 2020). Based upon classic elite studies, which have rarely focused on civil society, this recent strand of research has shown that civil society, like other sectors, is marked by competition between actors with different interests in gaining and controlling “valuable resources, such as money, information, expertise, and knowledge or ability to mobilise extensive numbers of people to push for policy change” (Johansson and Uhlin, 2020, 83). Increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small group of large civil society organisations (CSOs) and their leaders, such resources allow them to engage in decision-making actions that affect not only civil society, but also other fields; possibly to the same extent as political and business elites (Ibidem).

Following elite theory’s assumptions, most of these studies draw on the so-called ‘positional approach’, commonly used in elite studies and based on the assumption that resources and influence are largely tied to positions of leadership in organisations of national relevance, which tends to equate civil society elites with leaders of structured CSOs (Johansson and Uhlin, 2020). Some scholars, however, suggest that as civil society is often marked by what Cohen and Arato (1992) term “politics of influence”—that is alternative and indirect strategies through which actors enter into relationships with governments and influence decision-making processes—other types of power resources must be considered when analysing power stratification within the field.

This article aims to contribute to this debate by analysing the power stratification of Italian civil society and the uneven distribution of resources which can give rise to civil society elites. We begin with the assumption that civil society is an heterogenous field, made up of many different actors with different aims, and characterised by soft and indirect forms of power, the stratification of which is based on different sources of power—economic, political, organisational, individual, formal, and informal just to name a few. The aim of the article is to explore what kinds of elites different resources give rise to and to understand to what extent they tend to produce the same kinds of elites or different kinds of elites.

To address this aim, we undertook a systematic analysis of three specific types of resources—organisational resources, reputation, and public visibility—and we combine three methodological approaches to elite identification; namely, positional approach, reputational approach, and claims-making analysis in Italy.

Italian civil society can be a context of interest for research on different types of power and resources of civil society elites because of the high degree of informality of its governance (Polizzi, and Bassoli 2011) and the complex relation with the state in its historical development (Biorcio and Vitale, 2016; Borzaga and Fazzi, 2011). Recent studies have shown that the access to arenas for decision-making and positions of power is regulated by complex, opaque, and corporatist structures and procedures (Polizzi and Bassoli 2011; Santilli and Scaramuzzino, 2021). Some of these studies have focused on Italian third sector leaders and have shown how access to top positions (director and president) in this sector at the national level is restricted to individuals who have long career trajectories in the field, generally men, between the ages of 50 and 60 years, and often with clear membership to specific political and cultural groups. Moreover, different from other countries where recruitment of civil society leadership tends to be shaped by leadership training and recruitment companies, this kind of reproduction in Italy is based on informal procedures in which soft forms of influence seem to play a key role. These specificities, on one hand, might make evident the need for alternative methodologies and theories to analyse civil society elites. On the other hand, they allow us to demonstrate the relevance of accounting for the multi-dimensionality of power and resources might in a better understanding of the stratification and hierarchisation of Italian civil society, which, with its long history, has always played an

ambiguous role as both a challenger of the state and a public service provider (Borzaga, 2004; della Porta and Diani, 2006).

Through a combination of the three methodological approaches, this article focuses on the multi-dimensionality of power and influence in Italian civil society elites. Moving from the organisational level to the individual level and from formal sources of power to informal sources of power, it aims to investigate whether the power stratification of Italian civil society is founded on different types of leaders. More specifically, the article aims to analyse the relation between the three forms of power resources considered - organisational resources, reputation, and public visibility- and the type of leaders.

The article is structured in the following way. First, we discuss the conceptualisations of three sources of power attributed to elites in the literature. Then we present the methodological approach used for the study. After this follows the analysis, in which we discuss elite actors based on different power resources, and whether there is any correspondence between them. In the last section, the article discusses the possible implications of the findings for identifying specific types of Italian civil society leadership based on the resources they may mobilise.

## **2. Three different types of power resources**

### **2.1 Organisational resources**

In recent years, there has been a growing academic interest in the process of elitisation in civil society, which implies a growing concentration of power and resources among certain civil society actors—major CSOs and leaders—and the notion of civil society elites (Johansson and Uhlin, 2020). This new vein of research has shed light on relationships of power in different European civil societies, identifying the characteristics of powerful leaders, their career trajectories, and the forms of capital held for reaching top positions, and their interactions with other elites. Most of these studies draw on classic elite theory and tend to privilege the positional approach when identifying civil society elites. In this strand of research, there is broad agreement on the assumption that formal leadership positions, or as termed by Mills, command posts (1956), are relevant elements for the identification of elites. In fact, in the last century, the dominant theories on elites have defined and analysed elites as those individuals occupying prestigious and stable positions in both public and private sectors (Michels 2001; Schijf 2013; Wedel 2017).

According to this assumption, resources are largely tied to positions of leadership in organisations of national relevance (Hoffman-Lange, 2017) and elites are those who can exert influence through their strategic positions in powerful organisations (Higley and Burton, 2006; Mills 1956).

### **2.2 Reputation**

Influence and power can also be informal and linked to other elements (indirect forms of influence, personal reputation, centrality in networks, specific or exceptional skills) rather than to formal positions or to organisations or institutions (Wedel, 2017; Scaramuzzino, 2020).

For instance, the coexistence of informal charismatic and formal bureaucratic rules was already highlighted by Weber (1978), but classic elite studies have predominantly focused on formal organisational roles (with the notable exceptions of North, Wallis and Weingast, 2009). Mainly associated with Floyd Hunter's work, (1953), the reputational approach is often used in elite studies for identifying elites. In fact, it relies on experts' representations for defining elites and powerful actors. Some scholars criticised this approach (Dahl 1961; Scott 2004), because it only seems applicable in relatively small communities where everyone knows each

other—for example, within an organisation or a specific policy field (where the approach has been successfully used.) Compared to the positional approach, the reputational approach focuses on individuals more than on organisations, and on a qualitative analysis of individuals’ perceptions.

## 2.3 Public Visibility

The correspondence between formal position, reputation, and the public visibility of leaders in a movement or an arena is a central question in social movement analysis (Malinick and all, 2011; Bassoli, and all, 2014). While within the field of elite studies, as discussed, a formal leadership position is considered to be a sign of elite status (Hoffman-Lange, 2017; Michels 2001), some recent studies have shown that this correspondence is not obvious in social movements (Diani, 2003; Malinick and all, 2011), stressing the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the influence, representativity, and legitimacy of leaders.

In the past few years, there has been a growing research interest in how visibility in the public sphere may contribute to achieving social groups’ and leaders’ authority and legitimacy (Cinalli and Giugni, 2013; Nepstand and Bob, 2006). Studies in the field of social movement have shown that not only is the institutional dimension of political context relevant (structural opportunities) but public discourse (discursive opportunities) are also important when it comes to gaining influence and mobilising social groups (Benford and Snow, 2000; Cinalli and Giugni, 2011). Cinalli and Giugni (2013, 150) in their research about Muslims’ political participation in Europe, showed for instance that these two dimensions—institutional and discursive—are interconnected, and that Muslims political participation stems “not only from the openness or closeness of the institutional settings” but also from access to public debates. That is, visibility matters when it comes to the political prioritisation or de-prioritisation of a specific issue or group.

Departing from this point, we can say that organisational position, reputation, and visibility are simultaneously both signs of and results of power and influence. The individuals who have access to organisational resources, reputation – influence-, and to the public sphere are identifiable as elites by these conditions at the same time that these same conditions grant them more power, influence, and legitimacy. However, there is a lack of systematic analysis of the relationship between visibility, formal leadership positions, and influence in civil society elites’ structure. Analysing civil society leaders’ visibility as an informal and individual form of influence allows us to better understand the stratification of Italian civil society and the multi-dimensionality of power.

## 3 The three methods

The study adopts a multidimensional approach attentive to the different types of resources at formal and informal levels: positional approach, reputational approach, and claims-making analysis. The three approaches allow us to identify which individuals hold organisational resources, reputation and public visibility, hence three types of civil society elites or leaders. Accordingly, it draws from a multi-method design.

### 3.1 Positional approach

The so-called ‘positional method’ in elite research, which we adopt in this thematic study, is based the assumption that resources and influence are largely tied to positions of leadership in organisations of national relevance (Hoffman-Lange, 2017). Following this method, we choose as our point of departure in this study to focus on formal leaders of CSOs of national relevance based on the following criteria:

- The organisations should be non-profit organisations. We have excluded political parties, organisations representing business interests (e.g., employers' associations), public authorities (e.g., associations of municipalities or regions), and trade unions.
- The organisations should be involved in one of the following policy areas: age, culture, disability activism, environmental activism, gender equality, human rights and democracy, migration and ethnic groups, religion, solidarity, or sports and leisure. We also included organisations representing the interests of the non-profit sector.

The organisations in the study were selected because of their high level of status and recognition in both civil society and by the state. In order to identify them, we used five indicators allowing a broad and complex interpretation of status and recognition in civil society following the Multi-dimensional Measure of Resource Stratification in Civil society (MMRSC) adapted to the Italian context (Scaramuzzino and Lindelle, 2020). The first set of two indicators measured different forms of status and recognition internal to civil society:

1) Organisations that held positions on the board (or similar decision-making bodies) within umbrella organisations in specific policy areas. We looked for national federations that had national organisations as their members, so-called 'networks of the third level'. These third-level networks in fact include national organisations whose members are often local and regional organisations. We found seven of these networks within the following areas (charity; international aid; culture, tourism, and sports; disability activism; and volunteering), and 49 board members that were national organisations. Italian umbrella organisations were mostly organised into areas of activity pertaining to charity, international aid, and volunteering.

2) Organisations that were members of the umbrella organisation representing the civil society sector. In Italy there is a high level of coordination between CSOs at the national level. We found one umbrella organisation that aims to represent the entirety of the 'third sector' at the national level; the Forum del Terzo Settore (FTS) (Ranci et al., 2009). FTS is a so-called 'network of the fourth level', which includes both second- and third-level networks and is therefore at the top of the hierarchy of networks of networks. It has gained a prominent role as the main interlocutor in the formalisation of third sector–state relationships through specific policy processes (Ibidem). FTS has implied state recognition of its role through a specific compact ("agreement") between the Italian centre-left government and the third sector in 1999. Through this agreement, the Forum has gained in status and attained the right to be consulted when public decisions must be made on all themes and issues in the "social field" (see also Antonucci 2014). In total, we found 85 national members that fulfilled our conditions.

The last three indicators measured external status and recognition:

3) Organisations that receive public core funding. In Italy, public funding for civil society is channelled through private donations that are deducted from taxes. We screened the organisations that were included in the register called '5x1000' of the *agenzia delle entrate* (the Italian tax agency). The 5x1000 is a tax scheme that gives the Italian people the opportunity to devolve 0.5% of their taxes to organisations. To be eligible, organisations must be present in regional or national CSO registries. In this registry, we found 44,000 organisations. Using a set of keywords and the location of the headquarters as variables, we were able to identify 227 national organisations

4) Organisations that are included in specific ministries' registries for consultations. The Italian context is characterised by ad-hoc consultation systems (Ranci et al. 2009). We found five ministries that were relevant to our policy areas that had registries of organisations with which they held consultation and/or cooperation agreements. These lists and registries gave us the names of 78 national CSOs.

5) Organisations represented in public committees for relationships between the state and civil society. In Italy, we found 37 CSOs that hold posts in the Council for the Third Sector "Consiglio Nazionale del Terzo

Settore”; a council introduced by a recent reform of the laws pertaining to the third sector (decreto legislativo n. 117 del 2017).

These indicators of resources are understood in this context as conditions for the inclusion of specific organisations among the elite and, accordingly, in our sample, based on including all organisations that fulfilled at least one condition; a total of 293 organisations. Civil society elites would then be identified as the top leaders of the identified CSOs, which could include people in the following positions: top representative leaders such as presidents, chairpersons, and their deputies, as well as directors, secretary generals, and their deputies. Through this inclusive method, we identified a population of 680 leaders.

However, as this method is quite inclusive, it can potentially lead to an overestimation of the number of elites and thus to the inclusion of individuals whose actual power and influence can be called into question (Hoffman-Lange, 2017). We therefore elaborated a method allowing for a more exclusive approach to elite identification. Each indicator in fact shows a dimension of internal or external resources and recognition and the accumulation of these indicators can be interpreted as an ‘elite score’ for an organisation. The organisations with an elite score of 4 or 5 would be at the top of the pyramid, while those with scores of 1 or 2 would be at the base.

**Table 1 - Sampling of peak organisations (scores and number (n) of organisations in the databases)**

Score	Italy (n)
5	3
4	12
3	35
2	133
1	110
<b>Total N</b>	<b>293</b>
<b>Score</b>	<b>Italy (n)</b>

Using this elite score, we used a less inclusive approach and identified a smaller group of high-scoring organisations and a smaller group of leaders comprising the civil society elite. In fact, we ended up with 15 organisations with an elite score of 4 and 5, and 35 leaders who are considered elite in Italy in this study.

### 3.2 Reputational approach

To operationalise the reputational approach and identify power originating from personal reputation, we relied on survey data focused on the perceptions of national Italian leaders. The survey was conducted in 2021 and targeted 680 civil society leaders—presidents, directors, and board members—of CSOs based on the same mapping as in the more inclusive positional approach. The survey received 133 answers (19% response rate).

The survey question used for the reputational approach was the following:

“Which three individuals in civil society do you consider have most power, resources, or influence concerning the issues on which you work? Please state names/positions and organisation”.

The responses produced six variables, two for each individual identified by the respondents, for both name/position and organisation. A few respondents filled in only one of the two spaces for each individual. Only 60 individuals chose to answer this question, and a few did not fill in all the information for all three individuals. For the purpose of our analysis, we consider each individual that the respondents have indicated as an answer, even if they came from the same respondent. To be considered complete, the answers should

contain enough information to be able to identify at least the sector/organisation that the respondent had indicated. After erasing the answers that were not complete, we were left with 149 complete answers.

### **3.3 Visibility approach**

To capture the main civil society actors who take action in the public debate and their characteristics in Italy, we rely on claims-making analysis, which consists in retrieving interventions in the public domain on any given issue drawn from media sources—in this case, newspapers (Cinalli and Giugni, 2011; Koopmans and Statham, 1999).

Data were gathered following the two-step procedure normally used in claims-making analysis. In the first step, we selected three most relevant national newspapers (available online through Factiva): *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Giornale* and *La Repubblica*. The choice of newspapers should ensure a sample that is as representative and unbiased as possible. *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano* are the most relevant newspapers in Italy; the first historically represents the moderate Italian bourgeoisie, the second has a progressive centre-left orientation, and the third, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, is a relatively recent newspaper that has a liberal orientation. *Il Giornale* is a conservative newspaper.

The articles were harvested following relevant keywords (such as *terzo settore*, *società civile*, *elite*) for 2019–2021, the period during which we also collected data using the other two approaches, in order to have the same leaders for the entire study, avoiding the risk of new elections.

Following this method, we departed from a single claim of an intervention made by any actor in the media linked to the issues of third sector and civil society—one article may have more than one claim. A total of 400 claims were coded by a random sampling of 701 claims selected from the newspapers. For each claim we identified the claimant, the form, the addressee, the content, the object, and the framing. This methodology has allowed us to analyse which actors, as claimants, have more visibility in the public domain. For this study, we focused on the visibility of civil society individuals, and we excluded institutional and political leaders in the analysis. When relevant information was available in the articles, we also identified their organisation.

## **4 The distribution of three types of resources among civil society actors**

### **4.1 The organisational elite**

With the positional approach normally used in classic elite studies and our system of elite scoring, we found 15 organisations that have the highest level of status and recognition in both civil society and by the state.

Following this theoretical and methodological approach, the 35 leaders selected from these organisations might be considered the positional civil society elite in the Italian context. The influence of those leaders is derived from their formal leadership positions in structured national organisations and therefore depends on the resources of their organisations.

However, this approach has some pitfalls. As it is linked to formal and institutionalised organisational roles, the approach restricts the analysis to the third sector, leaving social movements and other civil society actors out of the analysis. Moreover, as shown by other studies on Italian third sector leaders, the overlap between formal positions and leaders' influence is not always obvious, and this kind of power might disappear once the mandate ends (Santilli and Scaramuzzino, 2024). This means that the positional approach doesn't allow us to clarify the boundaries between individual and organisational influence. However, it is useful for identifying a specific kind of resource; one derived from leading a powerful organisation which we can term organisational

power and influence. Such power has been analysed by other studies that highlight how leading a national and historical organisation is both the sign and the result of being recognised as influential by other third sector actors (Santilli, 2022).

**Table 2. CSOs with score 5 and 4 with CSO-type\***

Italy score 5 and 4	Type
ACLI— <i>Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani</i>	Social promotion
Ai.Bi.— <i>Associazione amici dei bambini</i>	Solidarity
ARCI	Solidarity
ActionAid International <i>Italia Onlus</i>	Solidarity
AISM— <i>Associazione Italiana Sclerosi Multipla</i>	Interest: disability
ANOLF— <i>Associazione Nazionale Oltre Le Frontiere</i>	Interest: immigrants
ANPAS— <i>Associazione Nazionale Pubbliche Assistenze</i>	Volunteering

\*The peak organisations with the highest scores represent the following CSO types: environment (1), special interest organisations (2), international cooperation (3), social promotion (1), solidarity (3), sports (1), tourism and culture (1), and volunteering (2).

## 4.2 The reputational elite

In the reputational study, the respondents were asked to name three individuals in civil society they considered to have the most power, resources, or influence within their field. The question clearly points to individuals within civil society, although it was left open to interpretation by the respondent. It is clear from the respondents' answers that many chose to mention individuals belonging to other sectors (from our understanding of it). A sectoral analysis of the individuals in civil society deemed by the respondents as having the most power, resources, or influence concerning within their fields of interest shows the following distribution:

Following a similar definition of the sector as we used in the positional method, around 60% of the individuals identified belong to the civil society sector. It is clear, however, that 40% of the individuals identified by our respondents did not fall into our definition of organised civil society used in the positional method. In a broader understanding of civil society, we however find the trade unions (n =3). We also find a hybrid organisation—Equo Garantito—that organises and represents fair-trade producers and retailers that are both non-profit and for-profit. We also have the Catholic Church, which was mentioned often (n =8) and doesn't fit the categorisation used in the positional approach. Finally, we also find individuals (n =3) engaged in civil society with no clear strong organisational affiliation. One is a university physics professor who has been engaged in mobilisation and movements for world peace and the environment. Another is a former member of parliament who is engaged in many organisations working on issues of civil society and welfare. Both of these individuals can be considered to be examples of charismatic leaders whose roles transcend their organisational affiliation. The third individual is unnamed but has a coordinating role within a consultative body for CSOs engaged in social promotion.



**Table 3. Sectoral analysis of civil society elites by reputational approach**

<i>Sector</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>(%)</i>
CSO	90	60
Public sector	41	28
Business sector	5	3
Civil Society (not organisational)	4	3
Trade Unions	3	2
Media	2	1
Universities/Research Institutes	2	1
Hybrid (private/civil society)	1	1
Hybrid (public/private)	1	1
	149	100
Total (N)		

The second-largest sector (27%) that is identified as an affiliation for the individuals is the public sector. Here we find both political and administrative positions at all levels of administration: local, regional, national, and EU level. A small number of individuals identified by the respondents (n =5) we categorised as belonging to the business sector. It is interesting to note that these individuals tend to represent either representative bodies for the business sector; for instance, employers' organisations (and hence formal associations of employers) or parts of the business sector that are close to the civil society sector, being characterised by elements of idealism and a strong value base, such as the fairtrade movement. Close to this sector we find also one individual representing an umbrella organisation for public and private for-profit landlords. Other smaller categories that could belong to different sectors include the media (n =2) and universities/research institutes (n =2). These categories might include public organisations, businesses, or CSOs.

The largest group is, however, individuals holding positions in CSOs. There are 89 individuals who we were able to link to a specific organisation, as two individuals were only stated as belonging to a type of organisation without specification as to which organisation. Some CSOs tend to turn up more than once, leaving 56 CSOs whose representatives were deemed influential. As in the positional method, in the reputational method the number of mentions can be seen to be a token of accumulation of reputational resources. If we look closer at the organisations that received at least two mentions, we find the following CSOs. In the last column, we state to what extent the CSOs have been identified in the positional method.

Among the 56 organisations identified by the reputational method, 24 organisations were also identified through the positional method, which means there is a 43% overlap between the positional and reputational methods. However, among the 12 CSOs mentioned more than once in the reputational method, the overlap is much larger. In fact, 8 CSOs were also identified through the positional method, with an overlap of 67%.

A few CSOs (n =6) that were identified through the reputational method could not have been included in the positional method due to the fact that the positional method was targeting CSOs active at the national level, while these organisations were local or EU-based (e.g., Gruppo Abele and ILGA Europe). The other CSOs (n =26) could have been included in the positional method but were not; supposedly because they did not fulfil any of the conditions determined by the organisational resource indicators. Among these a large category were

banking foundations (n =8), whose influence on civil society is mostly based on their control over the funding. In this sense, they tend to function in a similar way as public funding, even though they are themselves civil society actors.

**Table 4. CSOs mentioned at least twice by reputational method**

<i>CSO</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Positional method</i>
<i>Forum Nazionale Terzo Settore</i>	13	Yes
AOI	5	Yes
Caritas	3	Yes
ASVIS	3	No
<i>Compagnia di San Paolo</i>	3	No
<i>Fondazione Cariplo</i>	2	No
Arcigay	2	Yes
Legacoop	2	Yes
CSVNet	2	Yes
FISH	2	Yes
Emergency	2	Yes

The fact that 60% of civil society actors identified through the reputational approach overlap with the leaders of more resourceful organisations identified through the positional approach highlights that there is an overlap between organisational resources and reputational resources in certain organisations which seem to be able to pull both types of resources. Moreover, the reputational analysis suggests a strong correspondence between the individual level and the organisational level; in the sense that the reputational method does not provide us with elites that are non-organisational or informal (with few exceptions). Of course, such results depend on the fact that our respondents hold a key position in the organisations selected through the positional approach. As we are aware of this limit, what is interesting for our study of the distribution of power resources in Italian civil society is that—compared to the positional approach—the reputational approach to civil society elites allows for a less sector-centric definition of civil society and hence the inclusion of individuals—'civil society elites'—from other sectors and from organisations that we didn't consider in our analysis to be organised civil society actors, such as trade unions and bank foundations. This aspect also highlights the relevance of local and supra-national organisations, which again were not part of our sample. The reputational approach therefore allows for a more inclusive understanding of both civil society and civil society elites.

### 4.3 The visible elite

The claims-making analysis for this study is driven by the question: which civil society actors are more visible in public arenas? The most common type of actors in the claims during 2019 to 2021 were civil society actors (CSOs, informal actors, civil society not organised, trade unions, civil society not specified), amounting to 64% of all claims. The second-most relevant actors were state actors and political actors, with 33% of the claims. The third-most relevant group present in the sample were international public actors, with 2%, and business actors, with 1% of the claims. These results cohere to the keywords used in the selection of the claims, which was focused on third sector-civil society. It also shows that civil society elites tend to appear in the

public sphere in dialogue and interaction (more or less contentious) with public authorities. Table 5 presents the claims of civil society actors.

**Table 5. Number of claims by type civil society actors**

<i>Sector</i>	<i>Collective actors</i>		<i>Individual actors</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
CSO	49	50	34	36
CSO not specified	31	32	52	55
Citizens informal groups	10	10		
Trade Unions	8	8	8	9
Total	98	100	94	100

As shown in Table 5, we found 98 claims by collective actors (51%) and 94 claims by individuals (49%). Among the group of collective actors, the main actors were CSOs (n =49) 50%; followed by not specified actors (e.g., “a group of citizens” or “civil society”) at 32%; specified citizens groups at 10%; and trade unions at 8%. In 94 claims, the main claimant is an individual. Analysing this group, we can see that some individuals represent a specific organisation or citizens’ group in the claim. In this case, the name of the person is followed by the name of the organisation she or he represents. This is the case in 34 claims of a total of 94 (36%).

Hence, in 52 claims we found as main actors individuals without any reference to their organisations. Of these claims, we have 32 claims of individuals who do not belong to a specific CSOs, and 20 claims of individuals clearly belonging to a one or more organisations.

In order to see the differences between visibility, organisational resources, and reputational resources, we examined the CSOs that are present at least in one claim. This analysis includes the organisations mentioned in the claims, the individuals mentioned in the claims with an organisational affiliation, and the individuals for whom we have been able to identify an organisational affiliation though a web search. We identified 50 CSOs through the claims-making analysis. Of these, 28 were also identified by the positional approach, with an overlap of 56%. The overlap with the reputational method is 9 CSOs, corresponding to 21%.

In the next table (Table 6) we present the list of 18 CSOs that have been involved in at least three claims. Organisations with an asterisk (\*) are those whose leaders have been mentioned more than once individually without reference to their organisations.

These CSOs have higher levels of visibility, according to our claims-making analysis. Compared to the CSOs with organisational resources we find a larger overlap among these highly-visible CSOs. The overlap is of 61 % (n =11) for the positional method, and of 33% (n =6) for the reputational method.

Although there is a certain degree of correspondence between the three analyses, the results of the claims-making analysis show the relevance of local organisations in the public debate, which is open for a less organisational understanding of civil society elites. It is interesting to highlight that, as in the reputational analysis, the Catholic Church—and more specifically Pope Francesco—has a high level of visibility, with 18 claims. Moreover, the power resource linked to public visibility seems to be mainly linked to individual influence. This is evident both in terms of identifying individual leaders making claims without mentioning which CSOs they represent, and individuals who are not immediately linkable to a specific CSO.

In fact, looking at those organisations with the highest number of claims in Table 6, it is interesting to note that these claims refer to an individual member who has been mentioned without a direct reference to her/his organisation. The 30 claims of Gruppo Abele and Libera refer to Don Ciotti, a Catholic priest involved in the

fight against organised crime and the defence of migrants; the 24 claims pertaining to “Emergency” refer to Gino Strada, the founder of this organisation involved in humanitarian activities. The only exception is the FTS—Forum Terzo Settore—for which we have 10 claims referring to the president; but with a clear link to the organisation.

**Table 6. CSOs with at least two claims**

CSO	Claims (visibility)	Positional	Reputational
<i>Gruppo Abele*</i>	30	Yes	Yes
<i>Libera*</i>	30	Yes	No
<i>Forum disuglianza e diversità</i>	13	No	No
Emergency*	24	Yes	Yes
CARITAS	14	Yes	Yes
FTS*	10	Yes	Yes
MSF	8	Yes	No
ANPI	7	Yes	No
ANCI	6	Yes	No
ACLI	6	Yes	Yes
Croce Rossa	6	Yes	Yes
Centro Astalli	5	No	No
Mediterranea	4	No	No
Action Aid	3	Yes	No
Baobab	3	No	No
Comunità Sant’Egidio	7	No	No
Seawatch*	4	No	No
Amnesty International	3	Yes	No

Moreover, moving from the organisational level to the individual level, we can see that the majority of individuals who appear in the public arena belong to one or more CSOs. However, not all individuals are directly linked to a specific CSO. The individuals who have made more than one claim without any reference or clear affiliation to an organisation are all public figures that have been visible in the debate but do not have a clear sectoral position. As mentioned, there is Pope Francesco (n =18); Roberto Saviano (n =9), a famous journalist and writer; Mattia Santori (n =10) one of the founders of the Sardine movement; Mimmo Lucano (n =8), a former politician at the local level and ex-mayor of a small town in Southern Italy; and Soumhaoro (n =6), an activist for migrants’ labour rights and member of Parliament.

#### 4.4 Three resources, three types of elites

Looking at our results regarding organisations, the study shows the presence of inner-core organisations which have all three types of resources. We can argue that the five CSOs that are able to hoard all three types of resources, together with their leaders, are the ones that can be considered ‘elite’ in Italian civil society.

**Table 7. The inner-core elite organisations**

CSO	Organisational resources (1–5)	Reputational resources (1–13)	Visibility resources (1–30)
Caritas	3	3	8
Croce Rossa	3	1	6
Emergency	2	2	14
Forum Terzo Settore	3	13	8
Gruppo Abele	2	1	30

Some of the CSOs tended to score high on all three types of resources, like Forum Terzo Settore and Caritas. The first (FTS) is the largest umbrella organisation, which can claim a representative role for the whole third sector, as confirmed by law. Caritas is a traditional solidarity organisation and part of the Catholic Church. Most of the other organisations tend to be particularly strong with regard to some resources. The Red Cross tends to have strong organisational and visibility resources but less reputational resources. Both Gruppo Abele and Emergency, for instance, are CSOs that work actively with people in need and are very visible although they do not score as high when it comes to organisational resources or reputation.

Looking at this distribution of resources and moving from the organisational level to the individual level, it is also possible to identify the type of individual elites linked to these organisations. For this, a claims-making analysis is particularly useful, because it allows us to see which individuals are more visible than others and whether they are visible because they are associated with an organisation. Moreover, the combination of the approaches and of resources allows to identify three different types of leaders and to better understand the types of power they hold: organisational leaders; renowned leaders and charismatic leaders. Each of these types relates to a specific power resource: organisational resources; reputation and public visibility.

During the period of 2019–2021, the presidents of Forum Terzo Settore and Caritas—Claudia Fiaschi and Mons Carlo Roberto Maria Rodaelli—are always cited both in the claims and in the reputational study in reference to their organisations. This leads us to the hypothesis that they mainly represent organisational leaders-elites, that is they are recognised internally and externally to the sector as leaders of a specific organisation. The president of Croce Rossa, Francesco Rocca, is cited both in reference to the organisation and without this reference in the claims, which indicates a mixed organisational - charismatic leader-elite. Having a low level of reputational resources, that is internal recognition, he doesn't fit the type of renowned leader-elite. Don Ciotti and Gino Strada are often cited without references to organisations in the claims and have a lower level of reputational resources compared to the other leaders. This allows us to consider these two leaders as charismatic leaders-elites, with a power mainly coming from a recognition external to the sector.

## 5 Conclusions

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of power dynamics within Italian civil society, drawing on three methodological approaches: positional analysis, reputational assessment, and claims-making analysis. Through this interdisciplinary lens, we have unpacked the intricate web of power relations that shape the landscape of institutionalised civil society in Italy.

At the heart of this analysis lies the intersection between resource distribution and elite formation within civil society. Grounded in elite theory, our study navigates the complexities of power stratification by

identifying three distinct types of civil society elites - organisational leaders, renowned leaders, and charismatic leaders – related to three different power resources – organisational resources, reputation and public visibility.

The comparison between three different approaches allows us to identify the distribution of three types of power resources and the elites that tend to appear based on each of them.

Each of the approaches used in the study has specific pitfalls and challenges, such as drawing the line delimitating the civil society sector which identifies the boundaries between individual and organisational levels (Santilli and Scaramuzino, 2024).

One of these challenges in fact is the definition of civil society and the extent to which it is applied a priori, as in the positional method; or a posteriori, as in the reputational and claims-making approaches. It is clear that the positional approach subordinates the identification of individuals to the identification of organisations, and that it limits the analysis to organised and institutionalised civil society actors—that is, the Italian third sector. The reputational and claims-making approaches allow for more flexibility when it comes to what type of actor can be identified, including individuals with no clear organisational affiliation. The claims-making analysis provides the research with a large variety of resourceful actors, and where to draw the line for the civil society sector is a methodological challenge common to positional approaches. The reputational approach leaves the definition of civil society up to the respondents, who, in this case, have identified politicians and representatives of the state as civil society elites.

However, the combination of the three approaches serves as a robust foundation for our analysis, enabling us to capture the nuances of power dynamics from multiple vantage points. The positional approach provides a structural framework for identifying organizational elites, emphasizing formal leadership roles within established civil society organizations. Complementing this, the reputational approach delves into subjective perceptions of power, tapping into the symbolic capital attributed to individuals within the sector. Finally, the claims-making analysis illuminates the public visibility of civil society actors, offering insights into their role in shaping discourse and policy agendas.

Moreover, such methodological combination allows us to highlight the limits of the positional approach usually used in classic elite studies and in research on civil society elites, showing how, focusing on different types of power we might end up with different actors; not all of whom will be linked to a resourceful organization. In fact, of the 15 organizations identified with the highest elite score (elite score 5–4), no one is also present in the lists of organizations elaborated through the other two approaches. However, we can see that most of individual actors stood up through the reputational approach and the claims-making analysis have a formal position in an organization; whether active at local or national levels. This means that the organizational level has an impact on the power of individual actors.

Our findings underscore the importance of adopting a nuanced understanding of power, one that transcends traditional binary distinctions between formal and informal sources of influence. Instead, we recognize the fluidity and contingent nature of power relations, which are shaped by a myriad of factors including organizational resources, reputational capital, and public visibility.

The study sheds light on the fact that power resources in Italian civil society are unequally distributed. This confirms the relevance of research on the hierarchisation of civil society and the notion of civil society elites, here understood as groups of people holding different kinds of valuable resources—be they the access to decision-making arenas, public arenas, or legitimacy inside the sector. Contributing to this debate about the power stratification of civil society, this study suggests a possible identification of specific types of Italian civil society leaders-elites based on the identification and the distribution of their resources. On the two poles we find the organizational elites - leaders with a power dependent to their organization and position, and the charismatic elites – leaders who are not necessarily linked to an organization but have a high degree of public recognition. In between, there are renowned elites, that is leaders who have a high level of recognition –

reputation- inside the sector. Hence, they seem to be quite influential in the sector. This internal recognition might derive from their formal position, organization or/and public and external recognition. Leaders holding these power resources are a small minority, which implies a high stratification of the Italian institutionalized civil society sector.

The implications of this stratification are multifaceted and can be observed in various aspects of Italian civil society, including inequality and power dynamics, stability of elites, influence of traditional institutions, and impact on governance. It influences the access to decision-making arenas, public arenas, and legitimacy inside the sector and contributes to the perpetuation of power dynamics, with a small minority of leaders holding significant resources. Moreover, the legitimacy of the Italian civil society is still connected to traditional institutions such as the Church, the state, and the political parties (Santilli and Scaramuzzino, 2021). This influence of traditional institutions is intertwined with the stratification of the sector, shaping the distribution of power resources and the recognition of civil society leaders. The stratification of the civil society sector might also have implications for governance, and social change in the sector. It influences the dynamics of power relations, the representation of different groups within civil society, and the potential for social and political transformation.

Following this line of reasoning, the study invites further inquiry into the evolving dynamics of civil society elites, particularly in the context of shifting political landscapes and socio-economic transformations. By refining our theoretical frameworks and methodological tools, we can continue to unravel the complexities of power within civil society, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of governance and social change.

## References

- Antonucci M. C. (2014), *Lobbying e terzo settore: un binomio possibile?* Edizioni Nuova Cultura, Roma, 2014, pp. 156
- Bassoli M., M. Cinalli, and M. Giugni (2014), Who Are the Powerful Actors? An Analysis of Brokerage in the Networks of Organizations Dealing with Unemployment and Precariousness, In S. Baglioni, and M. Giugni (eds.), *Civil Society Organizations, Unemployment, and Precarity in Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 157–175.
- Benford R. and D. Snow (2000), “Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26: 611–639.
- Biorcio R. and T. Vitale (2016), *Italia Civile. Associazionismo, partecipazione e politica*. Donzelli Editore, Roma.
- Borzaga, C. (2004), From Suffocation to Re-emergence: The Evolution of the Italian Third Sector, in A. Evers, and J.-L. Laville (eds), *The Third Sector in Europe* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).
- Borzaga, C., and L. Fazzi (2011), “Processes of institutionalisation and differentiation in the Italian third sector”, *Voluntas*, 22 (3), 409 - 427.
- Cinalli M., and M. Giugni (2011), Institutional opportunities, discursive opportunities, and the political participation of migrants in European cities, In L. Morales and M. Giugni (eds.) *Social Capital, Political Participation and Migration in Europe: Making Multicultural Democracy Work?*, Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, pp. 43–62.
- Cinalli M., and M. Giugni (2013), “Public discourses about Islam and Muslims in Europe”, *Ethnicities*, 13(2): 131-146.
- Cohen J. L., and A. Arato (1992), *Civil Society and Political Theory*. The MIT Press.
- Dahl R. (1961), *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Diani M. (2003), Leaders' or brokers? Positions and influence in social movement networks, In M. Diani and D. McAdam (eds.), *Social movements and Social Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 105-122.
- Higley J., and M. G. Burton (2006), *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hoffman-Lange U. (2017), *Methods of Elite Identification*, in H. Best and J. Higley (eds.) *The Palgrave handbook of political elites*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hunter F. (1953), *Community power structure: A study of decision makers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Johansson, H. and A. Uhlin (2020), Civil society elites: a research Agenda, *Politics and Governance* 8(3): 82–5.
- Koopmans R. and P. Statham (1999), "Political claims analysis: integrating protest event and political discourse approaches", *Mobilization*, 4: 203–221.
- Lindellee J. and R. Scaramuzzino (2020), "Can EU Civil Society Elites Burst the Brussels Bubble? Civil Society Leaders' Career Trajectories", *Politics and Governance*, 8(3), 86-96.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i3.2995>
- Malinick T. E., D. B. Tindall, and M. Diani (2011), "Network centrality and social movement media coverage: A two-mode network analytic approach", *Social Networks*, 35(2): 148-158.
- Michels R. (2001), *Political parties a sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*, Kitchener, Ont.: Batoche.
- Mills C. W. (1956), *The Power Elite*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nepstad S. E. and C. Bob (2006), "When do leaders matter? Hypotheses on leadership dynamics in social movements", *Mobilization*, 11(1), 1–22.
- North D. C., J. J. Wallis, and B. R. Weingast (2009), *Violence and Social Orders*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; trad. it. *Violenza e ordini sociali*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2012.
- Polizzi E., and M. Bassoli (2011), *La governance all'Italiana*, In E. Polizzi, and M. Bassoli (Eds.), *La governance del territorio. Partecipazione e rappresentanza della società civile nelle politiche locali*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Della Porta D. and M. Diani (2006), *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ranci C., M. Pellegrino, and E. Pavolini (2009), *The third sector and the policy process in Italy: between mutual accomodation and new forms of (blurred) partnership*. In J. Kendall (ed.), *Handbook on third sector policy in Europe: multi-level processes and organized civil society*, Edward Elgar.
- Santilli, C. (2022), "Researching elites in the Italian third sector: how formal position and substantial influence interact". *Voluntary sector Review*.
- Santilli C. and R. Scaramuzzino (2021), "Trajectories of Civil Society Leaders in Italy: Individual Careers, Organizational Structures, and Ideological Affiliations", *Sage Open*, 11(4).  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211061559>
- Santilli C. and R. Scaramuzzino (2022), "Reshaping Alliances and Redrawing Boundaries: How International Migration Affected Italian Civil Society", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 27(3), 353–370. <https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-27-3-353>
- Santilli C. and R. Scaramuzzino (2024), *Organisational, Reputational, and Visible Leaders: A Comparison of Three Approaches to Civil Society Elite Identification*. In: Johansson H. and A. Meeuwisse (eds) *Civil Society Elites*. Palgrave Studies in Third Sector Research. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40150-3\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40150-3_4)
- Scaramuzzino R. (2020), "Perception of Societal Influence Among Civil Society Leaders—An Elite Perspective", *Journal of Civil Society*, 16(2), 174–190.
- Scaramuzzino R. and J. Lindellee (2020), *In Search for Civil Society Elites: Multi-dimensional Measure of Resource Stratification in Civil society (MMRSC)*. Paper presented at the ESA 6th Interim Conference (online).



- Schjif H. (2013), *Researching Elites: Old and New Perspectives*, In Abbink, J. and T. Salverda (eds.) *The Anthropology of Elites: Power, Culture, and the Complexities of Distinction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 29-44.
- Scott J. (2004), *Studying Power*, In K. Nash, and A. Scott (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology*, Malden: Blackwell, pp. 82–91.
- Weber M. (1997), *Democracy and the countervailing powers of bureaucracy, charisma, and parliament*, In E. Etzioni-Halévy (Ed.), *Classes and Elites in Democracy and Democratization*, New York: Garland, pp. 62–70.
- Wedel J. R. (2017), “From Power Elites to Influence Elites: Resetting Elite Studies for the 21st Century”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34(5–6): 153–178.