REVISTA DEL CLAD

REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA

PUBLICACIÓN CONTINUA | 2026-3

GOBIERNOS LOCALES EN EL MUNDO:

INSTITUCIONES, CAPACIDADES Y GOBERNANZA TERRITORIAL

NÚMERO EN COLABORACIÓN CON:

IPSA AISP
INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

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96

E-ISSN: 2443-4620

REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620



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Editora Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia
https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.N96.a983

Presentación:

Es un placer presentar el número 96 de nuestra *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia*, un dossier dedicado a los gobiernos locales en el mundo, sus instituciones, capacidades y formas de gobernanza territorial. Hemos contado con Daniel Cravacuore como editor invitado, experto en el tema y con quien comparto la certeza de que en el contexto local debemos construir, reconstruir o reforzar nuestras democracias.

Además, este número ha contado con el valioso apoyo del Comité de Investigación RC05 de la Asociación Internacional de Ciencia Política (IPSA) y de la Red Iberoamericana de Universidades y Centros Académicos (RED-UNI), promovida por la Unión Iberoamericana de Municipalistas.

Los objetivos que nos planteamos al convocar este dosier especial dedicado a los gobiernos locales fueron analizar sus transformaciones institucionales, políticas y administrativas en diferentes contextos nacionales y promover el conocimiento comparado sobre autonomía, capacidades estatales, gobernanza territorial y democracia local. Con ello, buscamos incluir perspectivas de distintas regiones del mundo, con énfasis en el Sur Global.

Partimos de la premisa de que los gobiernos locales constituyen el nivel de gobierno más próximo a la ciudadanía y desempeñan un

papel cada vez más relevante en la provisión de servicios públicos, la promoción del desarrollo territorial, la sostenibilidad ambiental y la gestión de problemas complejos que afectan la vida cotidiana. Por ello, comprender el alcance y las limitaciones de su desempeño cotidiano, así como su potencial aún no explorado para hacer efectivos los valores y principios de la democracia, es una tarea inaplazable.

Recibimos más de 30 propuestas de artículos sobre los distintos subtemas de la convocatoria, procedentes de países como Suráfrica, Armenia, Croacia, Indonesia y Jamaica, así como de países latinoamericanos, entre ellos México y Chile. Aunque no todos los documentos recibidos están incluidos en el dossier, agradecemos a todas las personas que hicieron el esfuerzo de compartir sus experiencias desde los gobiernos locales.

Esperamos haber contribuido a una reflexión necesaria e inaplazable. A través de este ejercicio, ratificamos que el camino por recorrer aún es largo y que requiere continuar con nuestros esfuerzos colectivos para hacer realidad democracias más horizontales, colaborativas y locales.

Finalmente, les invito a leer con atención el interesante editorial de Daniel Cravacuore y cada uno de los artículos de este hermoso número.

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Bogotá, 13 de noviembre de 2026

REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a982

Editorial

Local Governments and Their Study in a Changing World: Contemporary Debates and Research Agendas

Los gobiernos locales y su estudio en un mundo en transformación: debates contemporáneos y agendas de investigación

Os governos locais e seu estudo em um mundo em transformação: debates contemporâneos e agendas de pesquisa

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Abstract

The international expansion of local government studies has diversified theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and research agendas, yet this growth has not brought about a comparable integration of academic traditions or a systematic accumulation of comparative knowledge. This tension is particularly relevant in light of contemporary transformations in local government, characterised by expanding responsibilities, limited autonomy, uneven institutional capacities in many countries, and increasingly complex intergovernmental relations. This editorial examines the development of the academic field, inequalities in the production and circulation of knowledge, and the conceptual and methodological challenges of international comparison. Drawing on debates concerning local autonomy, state capacities, territorial power, democracy, innovation, and intermunicipal cooperation, it situates the contributions

published in issue 96 of Reforma y Democracia within a broader reflection on the possibilities and limitations of comparative knowledge. It argues that advancing our understanding of local government requires distinguishing between institutional powers, effective capacities, and power relations, while developing analytical categories capable of identifying regularities without overlooking the diversity of political and territorial contexts. From this perspective, the editorial proposes contextual comparability as an approach to connecting different academic traditions and developing international research agendas.

Keywords: local governments, local government studies, local autonomy, comparative research, knowledge production, contextual comparability.

Resumen

La expansión internacional de los estudios sobre gobiernos locales ha diversificado sus perspectivas teóricas, enfoques metodológicos y agendas de investigación, sin que ello se haya traducido en una integración equivalente de las tradiciones académicas ni en una acumulación sistemática de conocimiento comparado. Esta tensión adquiere particular relevancia frente a las transformaciones contemporáneas de los gobiernos locales, caracterizadas por la ampliación de sus responsabilidades, las limitaciones de su autonomía, las desigualdades en sus capacidades institucionales en numerosos países y la creciente complejidad de las relaciones intergubernamentales. Este editorial examina la construcción del campo académico, las desigualdades en la producción y circulación del conocimiento y los desafíos conceptuales y metodológicos de la comparación internacional. A partir de los debates sobre autonomía, capacidades estatales, poder territorial, democracia, innovación y cooperación intermunicipal, sitúa las contribuciones reunidas en el número 96 de Reforma y Democracia en el marco de una reflexión sobre las posibilidades y los límites del conocimiento comparado. Se sostiene que avanzar en la comprensión de los gobiernos locales exige distinguir entre atribuciones institucionales, capacidades efectivas y relaciones de poder, así como desarrollar categorías analíticas capaces de reconocer regularidades sin desconocer la diversidad de contextos políticos y territoriales. Desde esta perspectiva, se propone la comparabilidad contextual como orientación para articular diferentes tradiciones académicas y contribuir a la construcción de agendas internacionales de investigación.

Palabras clave: gobiernos locales, estudios municipales, autonomía local, investigación comparada, producción de conocimiento, comparabilidad contextual.

Resumo

A expansão internacional dos estudos sobre governos locais diversificou suas perspectivas teóricas, abordagens metodológicas e agendas de pesquisa, sem que esse processo tenha resultado em uma integração equivalente das tradições acadêmicas ou na acumulação sistemática de conhecimento comparado. Essa tensão adquire particular relevância diante das transformações contemporâneas dos governos locais, caracterizadas pela ampliação de suas responsabilidades, pelas limitações de sua autonomia, pelas desigualdades em suas capacidades institucionais em diversos países e pela crescente complexidade das relações intergovernamentais. Este editorial examina a construção do campo acadêmico, as desigualdades na produção e circulação do conhecimento e os desafios conceituais e metodológicos da comparação internacional. A partir dos debates sobre autonomia local, capacidades estatais, poder territorial, democracia, inovação e cooperação intermunicipal, situa as contribuições reunidas no número 96 da revista Reforma y Democracia no âmbito de uma reflexão sobre as possibilidades e os limites do conhecimento comparado. Argumenta-se que avançar na compreensão dos governos locais exige distinguir entre atribuições institucionais, capacidades efetivas e relações de poder, bem como desenvolver categorias analíticas capazes de identificar regularidades sem desconsiderar a diversidade dos contextos políticos e territoriais. Nessa perspectiva, propõe-se a comparabilidade contextual como orientação analítica para articular diferentes tradições acadêmicas e contribuir para a construção de agendas internacionais de pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: governos locais, estudos sobre governos locais, autonomia local, pesquisa comparada, produção de conhecimento, comparabilidade contextual.

Over recent decades, local government studies have expanded and diversified their research agendas, theoretical and methodological perspectives, and international collaboration networks. However, this growth has not led to an equivalent integration of academic traditions or the systematic accumulation of comparative knowledge. Institutional differences, inequalities in the circulation of knowledge, and the persistence of categories developed from particular political experiences hinder the development of shared explanations.

At the same time, local governments have undergone transformations that have broadened the range of issues addressed by local government research. Although they have become increasingly important for democracy and territorial development, their growing responsibilities

coexist, in many contexts, with limited autonomy, uneven institutional capacities, and dependence on other levels of government. Their involvement in public affairs has expanded, but they do not always have the powers, resources, or institutional conditions needed to exercise their responsibilities.

This tension challenges traditional interpretations of decentralisation. Comparative evidence reveals trajectories of local autonomy marked by advances, stagnation, and setbacks between 1990 and 2020, rather than a progressive and uniform distribution of power (Cravacuore, 2026a; Ladner et al., 2025). These differences also expose the limitations of measuring autonomy exclusively through formal powers (Mauri, 2024). Understanding these trajectories requires distinguishing between formal powers, available resources, governmental capacities, and the political relations that condition their exercise.

The complexity of public problems poses new challenges for local government research. Metropolitan dynamics, territorial inequalities, environmental risks, and social demands extend beyond jurisdictional boundaries, requiring attention to how decisions and resources are distributed across different levels of government. International evidence highlights the importance of examining responsibilities, fiscal resources, and intergovernmental coordination together (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022).

The growing range of issues under study has also expanded the field's analytical perspectives. Traditional approaches to the territorial organisation of the state, political representation, and local autonomy have been joined by research on state capacities, intergovernmental relations, innovation, participation, and territorial development. This thematic diversification, however, does not guarantee greater disciplinary integration. Concepts such as autonomy, institutional capacity, and governance acquire different meanings depending on the context, making it difficult to establish equivalences between local government systems with distinct historical trajectories and institutional configurations.

The challenge is to develop explanations that identify regularities while remaining attentive to institutional and territorial specificities. Expanding the information available on local governments is not sufficient. Developing such explanations requires critically examining the categories employed, clarifying their scope, and recognising the institutional and political conditions that shape their meaning. From this perspective, international comparison can contribute both to identifying common problems and to reassessing interpretations developed from particular experiences.

Issue 96 of *Reforma y Democracia*, devoted to Local Governments Around the World, brings together research on institutional organisation, capacities, democracy, innovation, and cooperation across diverse political and territorial contexts. This editorial examines these contributions in light of contemporary debates and considers the challenges facing local government studies as an international academic field, particularly those involved in producing rigorous comparative knowledge and developing shared research agendas.

The Evolution of Local Government Studies: From Decentralisation to New Interdependencies

The historical trajectories of local governments have shaped differences in their institutional recognition, powers, and relations with other levels of the state. These differences are reflected in research traditions concerned with the territorial organisation of power, political representation, public administration, and local autonomy. Institutional diversity constitutes both an object of study and a challenge for international comparison.

A fundamental tension in local government lies in its dual nature as a political institution and an administrative organisation. It represents a territorial community while also forming part of a state structure within which it exercises powers, manages resources, and implements public policies. This duality has encouraged administrative approaches focused on efficiency, services, and management, alongside political studies concerned with representation, participation, and the territorial distribution of power. Both perspectives illuminate different dimensions of local government, although neither is sufficient on its own to explain the relationships between institutional powers, the capacity for public intervention, and the political influence of territorial actors.

The decentralisation reforms of the final decades of the twentieth century considerably broadened the scope of research. Decentralisation was promoted as a means of improving public management, bringing decisions closer to communities, and strengthening democratic representation. However, its outcomes depended on the political and institutional conditions under which reforms took place (Manor, 1999). Comparative research distinguished its political, administrative, and fiscal dimensions, showing that they do not necessarily evolve simultaneously and that their effects depend on reform sequences and institutional contexts (Falleti, 2005). It also highlighted the difficulties of establishing equivalences between forms of decentralisation and measuring their consequences through aggregate indicators (Rodden, 2004). Decentralisation thus emerged as a research problem extending beyond normative interpretations of its benefits.

Subsequent experiences challenged the idea of decentralisation as a uniform and irreversible process (Cravacuore, 2026a). The transfer of powers may coexist with dynamics of political recentralisation, raising questions about the effective distribution of authority in multilevel systems (Trein & Maggetti, 2024). Moreover, multidimensional instruments such as the Local Autonomy Index have enabled comparisons of local autonomy trajectories across countries and periods (Ladner et al., 2025). These advances have broadened the possibilities for distinguishing the institutional recognition of autonomy from the conditions that affect its exercise.

Territorial reorganisation reforms constitute another area of comparative research. Municipal amalgamations, changes to jurisdictional boundaries, and the creation of new entities are often justified on grounds of administrative efficiency or fiscal sustainability, although they also affect political representation, territorial identities, and intergovernmental relations. The analysis of African and European experiences shows that arguments concerning efficiency and territorial identity acquire different degrees of importance depending on political contexts and intergovernmental dynamics (Kössler & Fessha, 2025). These studies show that assessing territorial reforms requires considering their effects on political representation and intergovernmental relations, alongside their administrative and fiscal consequences.

The complexity of public problems has reinforced interdependencies between governments. Metropolitan dynamics, mobility, social protection, and environmental risks require decisions and resources to be coordinated across different institutions. Multilevel governance approaches have contributed to understanding the distribution of authority across different scales and jurisdictions, beyond the traditional hierarchical structures of the state (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). However, coordination does not imply a balanced distribution of authority: asymmetries in resources, powers, and bargaining capacity condition local government action. The challenge is to explain how powers are distributed and how relations of interdependence develop and operate in practice.

Intermunicipal cooperation provides a response to problems that exceed the individual capacities of local governments through shared arrangements for service provision, infrastructure development, or policy coordination. Research has examined it as an alternative to other forms of municipal reform, although it may also be combined with them, and its outcomes depend on incentives, service characteristics, and institutional contexts (Bel et al., 2024). Its study has helped shift attention from individual government structures towards interinstitutional relations and mechanisms of collective action.

Decentralisation, recentralisation, territorial reorganisation, and new governmental interdependencies have broadened the scope of research beyond institutional structures and formal powers. Effective capacities, power relations, and coordination mechanisms now occupy an important place in local government studies. This diversification presents new challenges for bringing together the field's academic traditions and advancing the development of comparative knowledge.

Building an International Academic Field: Traditions, Inequalities, and the Challenges of Comparative Knowledge

Local government studies constitute an internationally established field of research, although its disciplinary boundaries and academic identity are less clearly defined than those of other specialisations within political science and public administration. Its development has incorporated contributions from public economics, political sociology, law, urban studies, geography, and public policy analysis. This plurality has enriched the available perspectives but has also encouraged the coexistence of traditions that do not always share concepts, methods, or criteria for comparison. A shared object of study is insufficient to establish an integrated intellectual field or develop cumulative comparative knowledge that extends beyond particular institutional contexts.

Early research agendas addressed the territorial organisation of the state, the distribution of power, public finance, municipal administration, political representation, and urbanisation. They subsequently incorporated perspectives on governance, participation, institutional reforms, and new forms of public action (Yi & Qiu, 2025). However, this diversification followed different trajectories. A study of academic research on local government in Argentina reveals a process of consolidation linked to changes in research agendas and local management capacities (Grandinetti, 2023), while an analysis of a specialised Japanese journal identifies a particular emphasis on local finance, accounting, and management (Moteki, 2020). These differences reflect the influence of national contexts on academic agendas and complicate international comparison: similar problems may be analysed through different categories, while shared concepts may refer to different institutional phenomena.

The internationalisation of the field has expanded opportunities for exchange through specialised associations, academic journals, research networks, and comparative projects. However, inequalities in participation and difficulties in developing shared agendas persist. A bibliometric analysis of 1,550 articles published in Local Government Studies between 1974

and 2022 identifies growing international collaboration and highlights the need to broaden geographical representation and strengthen the theoretical and methodological foundations of comparative research (Jing et al., 2024). Internationalisation involves more than bringing together researchers from different countries; it also requires integrating diverse academic traditions into the formulation of research questions, the development of analytical categories, and the construction of comparative explanations. The participation of different academic traditions encourages theoretical renewal by prompting a reassessment of assumptions derived from particular institutional experiences.

These difficulties are embedded in broader inequalities in the production, circulation, and recognition of scientific knowledge. The concentration of academic publishing and the predominance of certain countries and institutions in the most visible political science research (Kaiser et al., 2023), together with geographical asymmetries in the production and legitimation of urban knowledge (Müller et al., 2025), demonstrate that participation in international debates is unequal. In local government studies, these differences are particularly relevant because concepts such as autonomy, decentralisation, governance, and institutional capacity are linked to specific historical configurations. When the most academically visible experiences become general reference points, there is a risk of interpreting other local government systems through categories that do not reflect their particularities. Broadening the geographical scope of the field therefore requires reassessing its analytical assumptions, rather than merely diversifying the cases under study.

These limitations are compounded by fragmented knowledge of the scientific community engaged in local government research. Despite the existence of associations, specialised journals, and international networks, the regional and disciplinary composition of this academic community, its research interests, and the relationships between research traditions remain difficult to determine. The Global Survey on Local Government and Politics, developed within Research Committee 05 on Comparative Studies of Local Government and Politics (RC05) of the International Political Science Association (IPSA), seeks to contribute to this understanding. Its initial findings, presented at the 2025 IPSA World Congress, identified disciplinary, thematic, and methodological differences, as well as regional inequalities in participation in international associations and projects (Navarro & Cravacuore, 2025). This initiative extends the scope of inquiry from local governments themselves to the academic community that produces knowledge about them.

The expansion of the survey during 2026 provided a more detailed picture of research agendas. Its findings highlight local public policies, decentralisation, multilevel governance, and institutional design among the main academic interests, frequently linked to studies of urban, regional, and rural development (Cravacuore, 2026b). This thematic convergence suggests that the diversification of research agendas coexists with shared interests that may encourage dialogue across disciplines and research traditions.

However, thematic convergence does not imply common categories, coordinated research strategies, or integrated international networks of exchange. The survey findings must be interpreted with caution, as the voluntary recruitment of researchers identified through different sources and networks produces neither a census nor a probability sample of the global academic community. Nor can historical trends be established without successive measurements conducted under comparable conditions. Its contribution lies in providing exploratory evidence on the composition and research agendas of the field, identifying potential areas for collaboration, and raising questions about disciplinary specialisation, regional inequalities, and academic cooperation. A deeper understanding of who studies local governments, which problems they investigate, and how they relate to one another is also a condition for consolidating this international academic field.

Strengthening the field requires moving beyond the coexistence of traditions towards their intellectual integration without homogenising them. Comparative research can contribute to this process by contrasting explanations developed in different contexts, reassessing theoretical assumptions, and establishing analytical equivalences while recognising institutional and territorial particularities. The relationships between autonomy, capacities, and territorial power constitute a central theme capable of connecting perspectives that are often treated separately. The aim is not to establish a uniform agenda, but to develop shared research problems that encourage comparable explanations and the accumulation of knowledge sensitive to the diversity of local experiences.

The Challenges of Comparative Local Government Research: Autonomy, Capacities, and Territorial Power

Autonomy is a central category in local government studies, although its meaning is ambiguous. Comparative research has helped move beyond unidimensional interpretations by distinguishing institutional, political, administrative, and fiscal components with varying degrees of development (Ladner et al., 2019, 2025). These advances have facilitated measurement

and comparison but have also highlighted the difficulties of establishing equivalences between institutional systems. The election of local authorities and the formal recognition of powers do not, in themselves, determine the effective scope for decision-making. A municipality may possess extensive powers while simultaneously facing budgetary or regulatory constraints that condition their exercise.

An important conceptual challenge is to distinguish between autonomy, capacities, and territorial power. Although related, these dimensions are not equivalent, and conflating them can weaken explanations of how local governments function. Autonomy refers to the institutional scope for decision-making, encompassing both formally recognised powers and the constraints that condition their exercise. Capacities encompass the institutional and relational abilities to mobilise resources, coordinate organisations, and translate decisions into public action. Territorial power, in turn, refers to the political relations through which different actors influence the definition of priorities, the mobilisation of resources, and collective decision-making, both within the territory and in its relations with other levels of government. This distinction avoids conflating the legal recognition of powers with effective possibilities for intervention, or the latter with the political influence of territorial actors.

Studies of fiscal decentralisation demonstrate the importance of these distinctions. Own-source revenues, intergovernmental transfers, and expenditure restrictions can expand or limit local discretion. Analysis must therefore consider not only the resources administered but also the authority to decide how they are used (Rodden, 2004; Treisman, 2007). Conventional indicators of fiscal decentralisation may overestimate the effective scope for decision-making (Mauri, 2024). These contributions highlight the risks of equating resource availability, decision-making authority, and the political responsibilities of local authorities.

The growing attention to state capacities in local government studies has broadened the analysis of public intervention while also raising conceptual difficulties. Financial resources, specialised personnel, information, and administrative structures are relevant dimensions, but their availability does not guarantee their coordinated and sustained mobilisation. The analysis of state power shows that the possibilities for intervention cannot be inferred solely from formal authority (Mann, 1984). Moreover, capacities are function-specific: an administration may manage routine services effectively while encountering difficulties in formulating development policies, managing risks, or coordinating complex interventions (Grin et al., 2019). This requires specifying which capacities are being analysed and in relation to which municipal functions.

An additional challenge is to distinguish capacities, interventions, and outcomes. Capacities may contribute to local government performance, but their effects depend on the problems addressed, the actions of other actors, and territorial conditions. Inferring capacities from favourable outcomes and then using them to explain those same outcomes constitutes circular reasoning. Local government research must therefore differentiate between available resources, capacities deployed, interventions undertaken, and their observable consequences. This distinction is particularly relevant when comparing digitalisation policies, risk management, and social services, whose outcomes depend on diverse technical, organisational, and territorial conditions.

The growing attention to relational capacities has expanded the range of research questions and units of analysis in local government studies. The possibilities for local action depend partly on resources and decisions external to municipal administrations. Other levels of government, public institutions, social organisations, and economic actors participate in the formulation and implementation of territorial policies. These interorganisational relations may expand the possibilities for municipal intervention, but they may also generate new dependencies. Studying them requires distinguishing between the formal existence of coordination mechanisms and the ability to use them effectively, which are conditioned by resources, technical capacities, and bargaining power.

Intermunicipal cooperation provides an opportunity to examine these challenges. Agreements between local governments may facilitate service provision, access to specialised resources, and policy coordination, but their effects depend on incentives, funding, and the distribution of costs and benefits (Bel et al., 2024). Research must distinguish between the existence of cooperative arrangements, their operation, and their outcomes. The number of agreements signed or networks in which a local government participates does not, in itself, constitute a sufficient measure of relational capacity. Assessing this capacity requires considering the effective possibilities for mobilising resources, influencing decisions, and sustaining joint interventions.

The analysis of territorial power poses new challenges for local government studies, particularly concerning the relationships between institutional autonomy, political influence, and local democracy. Governments with similar powers and resources may occupy different positions in intergovernmental relations or exercise unequal influence over decisions affecting their communities. Explaining these differences requires examining formally recognised powers and available capacities alongside the positions local actors occupy within political relations,

their bargaining power, and their influence over the distribution of resources and the definition of priorities. The distinction between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of mayors' political autonomy allows their relations with other levels of government to be examined separately from the checks and balances operating within their own territories (Došek & Eaton, 2025). For comparative research, this distinction is fundamental: greater autonomy for mayors does not necessarily imply stronger local democracy.

Territorial inequalities also complicate explanations of how local governments function. Demographic, economic, and institutional differences condition the availability of specialised personnel, opportunities for cooperation, and positions within intergovernmental relations. The literature on decentralisation shows that its effects depend on institutional and territorial conditions and warns against establishing linear relationships between autonomy and performance (Faguet, 2014; Smoke, 2015). In this context, greater local discretion may encourage responses adapted to specific needs but may also deepen territorial disparities. Central government equalisation mechanisms may reduce these disparities and ensure common standards, although they may also restrict certain areas of decision-making. The challenge for local government studies is to incorporate these conditions into explanations without treating them as automatic determinants of institutional performance.

The relationships between autonomy, capacities, and territorial power constitute a central research agenda for local government studies. Developing this agenda requires distinguishing formal powers from effective possibilities for decision-making, resources from capacities, and interventions from outcomes, while also examining the political relations that condition them. Rather than proposing a single explanatory model, the aim is to strengthen the conceptual tools needed to understand what shapes local governments' scope for action in different institutional and territorial contexts. These distinctions provide a basis for addressing the tensions between democracy, efficiency, and innovation that run through contemporary debates on local government.

Democracy, Efficiency, and Innovation: Contemporary Tensions in Local Government Studies

The contributions brought together in this issue examine a common problem through different institutional and territorial experiences: the relationship between the objectives attributed to local reforms and the outcomes they actually produce. Democracy, efficiency, administrative capacity, innovation, and territorial equity are not necessarily complementary dimen-

sions. Their relationships depend on institutional configurations, political incentives, available resources, and capacities for coordination. The diversity of experiences allows us to examine the conditions under which particular institutions and policies function, change, or encounter difficulties in achieving their objectives.

Territorial reorganisation reforms constitute a first area of discussion. Municipal amalgamations are often justified by their potential administrative and fiscal benefits, although they also alter the conditions of political representation and the relationships between the localities incorporated into new jurisdictions. The experience of municipal amalgamation in Armenia reveals heterogeneous outcomes in citizen satisfaction with services and local democracy, with no statistically significant differences between the changes observed in amalgamated and non-amalgamated municipalities in the exploratory model considered. The accounts collected describe improvements in administrative access and investment, alongside difficulties concerning representation, consultation, and the territorial distribution of resources (Gasparyan, 2026). Municipal reorganisation therefore raises issues that extend beyond the pursuit of economies of scale and require consideration of its political and territorial consequences.

The relationship between institutional design and actual functioning becomes particularly relevant when administrative reforms take place in contexts of strong political constraints. The South African experience shows that constitutional recognition of local government, the allocation of powers, and the availability of reform programmes can coexist with persistent difficulties in municipal operations. Patronage relations, partisan appointments, rent-seeking, and the instability of political coalitions condition the use of administrative instruments and weaken accountability mechanisms (Tapscott, 2026). These dynamics help explain why administrative reforms may prove insufficient when informal power relations limit the possibilities for institutional action.

Both experiences challenge interpretations that attribute predictable effects to particular institutional reforms. Changing territorial scale, redistributing powers, or introducing new administrative instruments does not necessarily transform the power relations that condition their exercise. Nor can efficiency and democracy be regarded as automatic consequences of a particular form of municipal organisation. Analysing them requires examining how institutional design, resource distribution, conditions of representation, and mechanisms of political accountability interact.

Cooperation between jurisdictions is another area of research concerned with the possibilities for local action. Intermunicipal agreements can address problems that exceed the capacities of individual governments, although the incentives behind their formation differ according to the functions involved. The Mexican experience shows that participation in agreements on urban planning, public works, and joint service provision is conditioned by factors that vary according to the purpose of cooperation. Metropolitan location, economic capacity, urban characteristics, and levels of socioeconomic marginalisation do not show uniform associations with decisions to collaborate. Greater municipal revenue may even reduce incentives to share certain services (Ramírez de la Cruz et al., 2026). Intermunicipal cooperation is therefore not a uniform response to territorial fragmentation, but a set of decisions conditioned by needs, resources, and expected benefits.

Coordination problems also arise when municipal innovations need to be integrated with policies operating at the national level. A home telecare initiative for older people developed in Costa Rica illustrates the possibilities for local action in an area traditionally associated with national social policies. The experimental evaluation identified reductions in loneliness and improvements in mental health, with no observed effects on physical health or hospitalisation. However, favourable outcomes in a municipal initiative do not guarantee its extension to other jurisdictions or its incorporation into a national care system. These possibilities depend on decisions concerning funding, coordination, and the distribution of responsibilities across levels of government (Chaverri-Carvajal & Alvarenga-Fournier, 2026).

These experiences allow us to examine two forms of governmental coordination: horizontal cooperation between municipalities and vertical coordination across different levels of the state. Both may expand the possibilities for local action, although they may also reproduce inequalities in resources and capacities or introduce new institutional dependencies. Intermunicipal agreements and national programmes therefore raise questions about the distribution of initiative, funding, costs, and political responsibilities. The issue is not to establish an opposition between autonomy and coordination, but to understand the conditions under which different combinations of the two contribute to addressing public problems.

The relationships between state capacities and innovation offer another perspective on how local governments function. Research involving 123 Argentine municipalities shows that public innovation does not follow a linear relationship with municipal size and cannot be explained exclusively by the availability of organisational resources. Medium-sized municipalities in the sample display a higher proportion of innovative experiences than large cities, although

only a small proportion of the governments surveyed manage to institutionalise their initiatives. The concept of activation capacity provides a framework for examining the mobilisation of resources through sustained political leadership, strategic orientation, and relationships with external actors (Rodríguez, 2026). From this perspective, innovation is not an automatic consequence of institutional resources, but a process whose continuity depends on political and organisational conditions.

Digital transformation offers another perspective on the relationships between resources, capacities, and outcomes. An analysis of 5,569 Brazilian municipalities from 2004 to 2024 identifies the conditions associated with the provision of informational and transactional digital services. Arrangements combining internal information technology teams with external contracting show positive associations with service availability, particularly for services requiring specific knowledge of local administrative procedures, without demonstrating the superiority of any particular organisational model. At the same time, the expansion of federal platforms coincides with a narrowing of the differences between municipalities with and without specialised teams, particularly in informational services (Avellaneda & Gomes, 2026). These trends raise questions about which capacities can be substituted through shared infrastructure and which continue to depend on the knowledge and organisational processes specific to each administration.

The production and use of information for risk management constitute an additional dimension of municipal capacities. An analysis of contingency plans from 70 municipalities in Rio Grande do Sul that declared a state of public calamity following the floods of May 2024 reveals differences in the availability of risk assessments, instruments for producing and analysing data, mechanisms for intersectoral coordination, and projects for using information. Disaster exposure and conventional bureaucratic attributes have limited explanatory power in accounting for the observed diversity, while external incentives and interinstitutional relations become relevant to understanding the development of informational capacities (Abulatif et al., 2026). The severity of a public problem does not, in itself, guarantee the existence of adequate instruments to address it.

Taken together, these studies broaden our understanding of local state capacities. Financial resources, administrative structures, and the availability of specialised personnel are important but do not, on their own, explain the possibilities for innovation, digitalisation, or risk management. Other relevant dimensions include the ability to mobilise existing resources, continuity of decision-making, access to shared infrastructure, information production, and

relationships with other actors. Nor should these dimensions be confused with the outcomes of interventions. Distinguishing between them makes it possible to examine why governments with similar institutional resources may develop different responses to comparable problems.

Local democracy raises questions about the continuity of participatory mechanisms and the conditions of political representation. Experiences involving the termination of participatory budgeting in five Central European cases show that the creation of participatory institutions does not guarantee their survival. The analysis identifies different configurations of failure, associated with co-optation and institutional hollowing out, fiscal constraints combined with political-bureaucratic disengagement, and discontinuity following electoral changes. In the cases examined, budgetary difficulties alone do not explain the termination of these initiatives (Šaradín et al., 2026). The study brings discontinued initiatives into research on participation, although identifying the conditions that favour their continuity also requires comparison with experiences that have been sustained.

Subnational political representation raises different questions, although they are related to the actual functioning of democratic institutions. The study of the political careers of members of Uruguay's departmental legislatures (*ediles*) from 1984 to 2025 reveals trajectories characterised by limited continuity in office and restricted opportunities to reach higher political positions. Immediate re-election accounts for approximately one-third of incumbents in each electoral cycle, while gender inequalities accumulate throughout political careers (Roel Aspeé & Pandolfo Santurio, 2026). These findings challenge the assumption that subnational representation necessarily constitutes a stage of political professionalisation or a platform for advancement and highlight the importance of party rules, electoral incentives, and unequal opportunities for participation.

Mechanisms of direct participation and channels of political representation constitute different dimensions of local democracy, but both require a distinction between institutional recognition and actual functioning. The existence of participatory mechanisms, representative bodies, and electoral rules provides insufficient information about opportunities for citizen influence, the continuity of democratic experiences, and the trajectories of those holding representative office. These conditions depend on specific political relations, resources, incentives, and institutional arrangements. Territorial proximity does not, in itself, ensure greater participation or more effective representation.

The nine research articles brought together in this issue reveal common problems while reflecting the diversity of their subjects, approaches, and contexts. Territorial and administrative re-

forms raise questions about the relationships between institutional design, efficiency, and political power. Intermunicipal cooperation and coordination across levels of government reveal the conditions necessary to address shared problems. Studies of innovation, digitalisation, and risk management clarify the distinctions between resources, capacities, and outcomes, while research on participation and representation examines the functioning and continuity of democratic institutions. These contributions are complemented by two book reviews that broaden the discussion of the field: one devoted to Ibero-American local government systems and the difficulties of moving from institutional description towards comparative explanations (Nickson, 2026), and another focusing on metropolitan governance, interjurisdictional collaboration, and territorial inequalities in Latin America (Andrew, 2026). Taken together, these works do not offer a single model of local government or findings that can be directly extrapolated across countries. They nevertheless identify shared analytical problems and highlight the political, institutional, and territorial conditions that must be considered to advance comparative knowledge.

The Challenges of International Comparison: Between Regularities and Territorial Differences

The expansion of local government studies and the growing availability of information on local governments have broadened the possibilities for international comparison. It is now easier to identify differences in the distribution of powers, fiscal resources, administrative capacities, or the outcomes of particular policies. However, having more information does not necessarily resolve problems of interpretation. Two local governments may display similar indicators yet function in very different ways, while formally distinct institutions may develop similar responses to particular public problems. Comparison therefore requires identifying which dimensions are genuinely equivalent and which acquire particular meanings depending on institutional and territorial conditions.

These difficulties are particularly evident in the study of local autonomy and municipal capacities. The existence of formally recognised powers does not, in itself, reveal the extent to which they can be exercised, just as the availability of resources does not guarantee their effective use. Nor is observing the outcomes of an intervention sufficient to understand the conditions that made them possible. Differences in intergovernmental relations, bargaining capacities, administrative structures, and territorial conditions can substantially alter the meaning of apparently comparable indicators. The problem is not simply to improve measurement but to prevent the use of common categories from obscuring differences that are relevant to explaining how local governments function.

Comparison also faces difficulties arising from the different scales at which public problems unfold. Local governments have defined jurisdictional boundaries, but many of the dynamics they address extend beyond those territories. Metropolitan areas, mobility systems, environmental risks, and numerous social policies involve decisions and resources distributed across different institutions. Under these conditions, outcomes observed in a municipality cannot always be attributed exclusively to its authorities, just as municipal decisions may have consequences beyond their jurisdiction. Understanding these relationships requires examining the characteristics of each government alongside its position within broader systems of territorial and institutional interdependence.

These issues become particularly important when identifying successful experiences and assessing their potential application in other contexts. An administrative reform, a cooperation mechanism, or a public innovation may produce favourable outcomes under certain conditions and encounter difficulties when those conditions change. Differences in available resources, political relations, institutional capacities, or territorial characteristics limit the possibility of transferring experiences directly. The purpose of comparison should therefore not be restricted to identifying practices regarded as successful but should also involve understanding why they work in particular contexts, what difficulties they face, and which conditions allow them to be sustained.

The research articles brought together in this issue illustrate these difficulties from different perspectives. Territorial reforms and intermunicipal agreements show that similar institutions and mechanisms may respond to different incentives. Studies of innovation, digitalisation, and risk management reveal the differences between available resources, mobilised capacities, and achieved outcomes. Experiences involving care services and participation highlight the importance of political and organisational conditions for sustaining interventions, while the analysis of subnational legislative careers reveals differences in opportunities for representation and political advancement. These contributions do not offer findings that can be directly transferred between countries, but they help identify shared problems and examine the conditions that explain their different manifestations.

Institutional and territorial diversity is not an obstacle that must be eliminated to advance comparative research. Recognising this diversity can instead lead to more precise research questions and a reassessment of explanations developed from particular experiences. International comparison can help identify regularities without assuming that the same institutional arrangements necessarily produce similar outcomes. From this perspective, contextual com-

parability provides an orientation for connecting academic traditions, contrasting explanations, and building shared knowledge while recognising the political, institutional, and territorial differences that characterise local governments.

Final Reflections: Towards an International Research Agenda for Local Government Studies

The international expansion of local government studies has increased the number of research projects, theoretical perspectives, and opportunities for collaboration, but difficulties persist in connecting different academic traditions and building cumulative comparative knowledge. The diversity of institutional experiences offers opportunities to reassess assumptions and broaden the scope of existing explanations, but realising this potential requires overcoming the fragmentation of research and the application of categories developed from a limited range of political systems.

This difficulty becomes particularly relevant in light of transformations affecting local governments. While their responsibilities, agendas, and public visibility have expanded, their effective scope for decision-making has not necessarily increased to the same extent. Growing municipal involvement in social, economic, environmental, and territorial problems coexists with fiscal constraints, unequal institutional capacities, and intergovernmental relations that condition local action. These circumstances challenge interpretations that establish a linear relationship between decentralisation, institutional strengthening, and improved performance and show that formal autonomy is insufficient to understand either the possibilities for local government action or the territorial distribution of power.

Tensions between democracy, efficiency, innovation, and equity cut across different areas of local public action and pose common challenges for research. Studies of territorial reorganisation, political representation, citizen participation, digital transformation, social policies, risk management, and intergovernmental cooperation reveal the limitations of explanations that attribute uniform outcomes to particular institutional arrangements. The effects of these interventions depend on political and territorial conditions, available capacities, the actors involved, and relationships across levels of government. Recognising this diversity helps identify shared problems without overlooking the particularities of the contexts examined.

Advancing this agenda requires developing explanations that can identify common problems while recognising the conditions that make local experiences different. Contextual

comparability provides an orientation for examining these differences and understanding why similar institutions may function in different ways or produce different outcomes. Its contribution is not to establish a general model of local government but to encourage dialogue between research conducted in diverse contexts and broaden the possibilities for building shared knowledge.

Strengthening local government studies internationally also requires reconsidering the conditions under which knowledge is produced and circulated. Broadening the participation of underrepresented academic traditions is not simply a matter of incorporating research from additional countries but of recognising their capacity to formulate questions, challenge established categories, and contribute to shared explanations. Academic networks and comparative research projects can foster this integration when they promote intellectual collaboration that moves beyond the coexistence of national studies and enables different perspectives on common problems to be examined together.

The contributions brought together in this issue help identify several priorities for this agenda. These include examining the relationships between formal rules and institutional practices, distinguishing between available resources, the capacities to mobilise them, and achieved outcomes, and investigating the conditions that favour the continuity or discontinuation of democratic and administrative innovations. Greater attention must also be paid to territorial inequalities and the power relations that condition cooperation, representation, and service provision. These issues do not point towards a universal model of local government but towards research capable of explaining differences without treating them as exceptions to experiences regarded as general.

The central challenge is to translate the international expansion of local government studies into a stronger collective capacity to produce rigorous, comparable, and cumulative knowledge. This requires developing shared research questions without homogenising academic traditions, building categories sensitive to institutional diversity, and strengthening collaboration between scholarly communities. The consolidation of the field will depend on its capacity to compare explanations, reassess its own assumptions, and understand the conditions that make local government experiences similar or different. Increasing the number of studies or countries examined will not be sufficient. The relationship between shared knowledge and institutional diversity offers one of the principal opportunities for consolidating local government studies as an international academic field.

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Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a947

Reelección legislativa subnacional en un país unitario: carreras políticas de los ediles en Uruguay (1984–2025)

Subnational Legislative Reelection in a Unitary Country: Political Careers of *Ediles* in Uruguay (1984–2025)

Reeleição legislativa subnacional em um país unitário: carreiras políticas dos *ediles* no Uruguai (1984–2025)

Recibido: 06/07/2026 - Aceptado: 01/10/2026

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Tipología del artículo: investigación.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la reelección y las carreras políticas de los ediles departamentales en Uruguay entre 1984 y 2025, un nivel de gobierno poco estudiado por la ciencia política nacional. Conviven dos expectativas. El marco de Squire (1988) sugiere que un cargo honorario y marginal debería combinar una baja probabilidad de reelección con una alta propensión al ascenso. En cambio, el sistema electoral subnacional, con listas cerradas y bloqueadas y partidos fraccionalizados y disciplinados, permite esperar una alta probabilidad de reelección, sobre todo entre quienes ya tienen experiencia en el cargo. Para explorar estas expectativas, se construyó un panel de titulares de las diecinueve juntas departamentales en nueve ciclos electorales, depurado mediante técnicas de vinculación de registros y revisión manual, y se cruzó con una base de datos de políticos uruguayos para rastrear transiciones hacia el legislativo nacional, intendencias, ministerios y alcaldías.

Los hallazgos matizan ambas lecturas: la reelección inmediata es minoritaria y estable, cercana a un tercio de los titulares por ciclo, y nueve de cada diez ediles tienen un paso breve por la banca. El acceso a otros cargos también es acotado: solo el 12,6 % alcanza un cargo superior, con una desigualdad de género que se acumula en cada etapa.

Palabras clave: gobierno subnacional, reelección legislativa, ambición progresiva, política subnacional, Uruguay.

Abstract

This article analyzes the reelection and political careers of subnational legislators (“ediles”) in Uruguay between 1984 and 2025, a level of government largely overlooked by national political science. Two expectations coexist. Squire’s (1988) framework suggests that an honorary and marginal office should combine low reelection with a high propensity for advancement. However, the subnational electoral system, with closed and blocked lists and factionalized, disciplined parties, leads us to expect high reelection, especially among those with prior experience in the office. To explore these expectations, we built a panel of incumbents from the nineteen departmental legislatures across nine electoral cycles, refined using record linkage techniques and manual review, and then merged with a database of Uruguayan politicians to trace moves toward the national legislature, departmental executive offices, ministries, and municipal mayoralties. The findings qualify both readings: immediate reelection is uncommon and stable over time, close to one third of incumbents per cycle, and nine out of ten ediles serve only briefly. Access to other offices is also limited: only 12.6% reach a higher office, with a gender inequality that accumulates at each stage.

Keywords: subnational government, legislative reelection, progressive ambition, subnational politics, Uruguay.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a reeleição e as carreiras políticas dos legisladores subnacionais (ediles) no Uruguai entre 1984 e 2025, um nível de governo pouco estudado pela ciência política nacional. Convivem duas expectativas. O marco de Squire (1988) sugere que um cargo honorário e marginal deveria combinar baixa reeleição com uma alta propensão à ascensão. Contudo, o sistema eleitoral subnacional, com listas fechadas e bloqueadas e partidos fracionalizados e disciplinados, permite esperar uma reeleição alta, sobretudo entre quem já tem experiência no cargo. Para explorar essas expectativas, construiu-se um painel de

titulares das dezenove juntas departamentais em nove ciclos eleitorais, depurado mediante técnicas de vinculação de registros com revisão manual, e depois cruzado com uma base de políticos uruguaios para rastrear transições rumo ao legislativo nacional, intendências, ministérios e prefeituras. Os achados matizam ambas as leituras: a reeleição imediata é minoritária e estável, próxima a um terço dos titulares por ciclo, e nove em cada dez ediles têm uma passagem breve pelo cargo. O acesso a outros cargos também é limitado: apenas 12,6 % alcançam um cargo superior, com uma desigualdade de gênero que se acumula em cada etapa.

Palavras-chave: governo subnacional, reeleição legislativa, ambição progressiva, política subnacional, Uruguai.

Introducción

Este artículo analiza la reelección de los legisladores subnacionales ("*ediles"*) en Uruguay durante el período 1984–2025. En Uruguay, el segundo nivel de gobierno está compuesto por un Poder Ejecutivo, encabezado por el intendente, y un Poder Legislativo, integrado por ediles que ocupan bancas en la Junta Departamental. Los ediles no perciben salario por la tarea que realizan, de acuerdo con lo establecido en el artículo 295 de la Constitución de la República. Además, en un país unitario con un sistema de partidos nacionalizado y regímenes institucionales departamentales fuertemente presidencialistas, las legislaturas departamentales desempeñan un papel marginal (Cardarello & Nieto, 2023; Chasquetti & Micozzi, 2014). Sin embargo, uno de cada cuatro ediles que ocuparon una banca entre 1984 y 2025 fue reelegido de forma inmediata al menos una vez, y la tasa de reelección por ciclo alcanzó su máximo en las elecciones departamentales de 2025.

La literatura sobre la reelección legislativa y la ambición política cuenta con una amplia trayectoria en la ciencia política. En relación con la reelección legislativa, la literatura suele vincular la búsqueda de reelección con los beneficios percibidos por los legisladores (económicos, políticos, sociales) y los potenciales beneficios de otras oportunidades (políticas y laborales) (Matland & Studlar, 2004; Squire, 1988). La literatura sobre ambición política, por otro lado, presenta el concepto de ambición progresiva como el interés de quienes ya ocupan un cargo político por buscar otro de mayor relevancia, en lugar de optar por la opción más segura: mantener su puesto (Matland & Studlar, 2004). Squire (1988) presenta evidencia para los legislativos subnacionales, consistente con los hallazgos nacionales: la reelección inmediata es el resultado de una relación entre los beneficios económicos que perciben los legisladores y las posibilidades de carrera que perciben. Los motivos detrás de la conso-

lidación de una carrera legislativa subnacional en países unitarios, por otro lado, han sido escasamente estudiados. Este artículo busca contribuir a subsanar este vacío en la literatura.

La política subnacional uruguaya ofrece un contexto inédito para estudiar la reelección legislativa y la ambición progresiva de los legisladores. El país tiene una organización unitaria y partidos políticos nacionalizados y altamente disciplinados (Chasquetti & Micozzi, 2014). A nivel subnacional, la organización institucional ha sido calificada de "hiperpresidencialista" (Cardarello & Nieto, 2023) debido a la concentración de poder en el Poder Ejecutivo, que relega a la Junta Departamental a un rol marginal. Todo indica que el cargo de legislador subnacional no tiene relevancia política sustantiva. Tampoco existen beneficios económicos significativos, dado que la Constitución de la República establece que el cargo de edil es honorario. Teniendo esto en cuenta, es esperable encontrar una baja tasa de reelección y una alta tasa de transición hacia cargos políticos más relevantes.

Sin embargo, las condiciones del sistema electoral subnacional permiten anticipar una expectativa opuesta. La elección por listas cerradas y bloqueadas deja el poder de nominación en manos de los líderes del partido (Chasquetti, 2010; Chasquetti & Micozzi, 2014; Moraes, 2008), y en un sistema de partidos fraccionalizados y disciplinados, esa lógica tiende a favorecer la continuidad de quienes ya ocupan la banca. Por esa vía cabría esperar tasas de reelección más bien altas, sobre todo entre quienes ya acumulan experiencia en el cargo.

Este artículo persigue dos objetivos. En primer lugar, realizar una descripción sistemática de la reelección en los legislativos subnacionales de Uruguay. Se analizan los patrones de reelección por ciclo, por partido político, por sexo y por departamento. En segundo lugar, el artículo busca explorar las posibilidades de carrera política de los ediles, como alternativa a la reelección. A través de una comparación con una extensa base de políticos uruguayos para el período 1830–2025, se analiza el salto de la Junta Departamental a cargos políticos de mayor relevancia, como el legislativo nacional o cargos ejecutivos, entre ellos la Presidencia, la Intendencia o el gabinete ministerial. De esta forma, el artículo busca contribuir a la literatura sobre reelección legislativa y ambición política, con evidencia sistemática en un contexto inédito. Finalmente, el artículo constituye un aporte sustantivo a la investigación nacional sobre carreras políticas. A la fecha, no existe en el país ningún estudio que explore la reelección legislativa a nivel subnacional ni las carreras políticas en este ámbito.

Los resultados revelan dos hallazgos principales. Por un lado, la reelección inmediata en las juntas departamentales es baja y estable, cercana a un tercio de los titulares en cada ciclo, y convive con una amplia mayoría de ediles que tienen un único paso por la banca, de

modo que la permanencia prolongada resulta excepcional. Por otro lado, el movimiento hacia cargos de mayor jerarquía en el gobierno también es minoritario, ya que apenas uno de cada ocho ediles alcanza alguna vez el legislativo nacional, una intendencia, un ministerio o una alcaldía. Para quienes sí ascienden, la banca opera como un escalón temprano en la carrera, con la alcaldía como un destino cada vez más frecuente desde su creación en 2010. Ambos patrones están atravesados por una desigualdad de género que se acumula en cada etapa y, en conjunto, matizan la expectativa teórica de que un cargo honorario y marginal debía traducirse en una alta tasa de movilidad hacia posiciones más relevantes.

El artículo se organiza de la siguiente forma. Luego de esta introducción, el apartado teórico presenta los principales antecedentes en los estudios de reelección legislativa a nivel subnacional, y examina los factores asociados con la reelección. La tercera sección presenta el caso de estudio: se describe la conformación de los legislativos subnacionales uruguayos y se presentan los antecedentes nacionales. La cuarta sección presenta el abordaje metodológico y los datos utilizados. La quinta sección presenta los resultados y se compone de dos subapartados. En primer lugar, se analizan los patrones de reelección en los órganos legislativos subnacionales. En segundo lugar, se analizan los saltos en la carrera política hacia cargos de mayor relevancia política. Finalmente, se delinean las principales conclusiones.

Teoría

El análisis de la renovación y reelección legislativa suele limitarse a legislativos nacionales (García Montero et al., 2025; Kouba & Weiss, 2025; Matland & Studlar, 2004). A nivel subnacional, la ambición política y la reelección se han estudiado en relación con los jefes del ejecutivo (Almaraz, 2010; Cardarello, 2011). Un tema menos explorado por la literatura especializada es la reelección en los legislativos subnacionales (Butcher, 2025; Butcher & Demirtas, 2026; Heinsohn, 2014; Heinsohn & Freitag, 2012; Squire, 1988). En particular, es escasa la literatura sobre renovación legislativa subnacional en Estados unitarios donde la política subnacional ocupa un lugar secundario.

Matland y Studlar (2004) estudian la no reelección (*turnover*) en la cámara baja de legislativos nacionales de 25 países industrializados entre 1979 y 1994. Para estudiar la no reelección, los autores distinguen entre la salida voluntaria y la involuntaria de la Cámara. La salida involuntaria más frecuente es la derrota electoral y está condicionada por factores institucionales como el sistema electoral. Esta derrota puede ser intrapartidaria o interpartidaria, es decir, el candidato puede no ser nominado nuevamente por su partido o puede ser derro-

tado en elecciones nacionales. La salida voluntaria, por otro lado, consiste en la decisión del legislador de no buscar la reelección. Para los autores, los legisladores toman una decisión en función de los costos y beneficios de buscar la reelección frente a los de perseguir otras oportunidades. En particular, estas oportunidades pueden consistir en el ascenso a cargos políticos más atractivos, lo que se conoce como "ambición progresiva" (Schlesinger, 1966, citado en Matland & Studlar, 2004).

A través de la encuesta a élites políticas latinoamericanas realizada por la Universidad de Salamanca para el período 2008–2017, García Montero et al. (2025) presentan evidencia de las diferencias en ambición política de las mujeres y varones que ocupan una banca en el legislativo nacional de 18 países de América Latina. Las autoras señalan que las mujeres tienen tanto interés como los varones en mantener una carrera política, aunque sus trayectorias adoptan formas distintas. Mientras las mujeres muestran un mayor deseo de mantener su banca a través de la reelección, los varones muestran mayor interés en perseguir cargos ejecutivos. Además, este interés aumenta cuantas más mujeres pertenezcan al órgano legislativo.

La reelección legislativa y la ambición progresiva han sido escasamente estudiadas a nivel subnacional. Squire (1988) estudia los legislativos subnacionales en Estados Unidos para comprender diferencias en los niveles de estabilidad legislativa. El autor toma como variable dependiente la cantidad de años consecutivos que un legislador subnacional ocupa su banca, y propone que las principales variables explicativas son el nivel salarial y la posibilidad de avance en la carrera política. Cuanto mayor sea el nivel salarial, más incentivos tendrán los políticos para permanecer en su cargo, lo que convierte al legislativo subnacional en un objetivo en sí mismo. Por otro lado, cuando se percibe una alta probabilidad de avance político luego de integrar el legislativo subnacional, disminuyen los incentivos de permanencia, y este ámbito legislativo se convierte en un paso intermedio hacia mejores oportunidades.

En línea con lo propuesto por Squire (1988), Kjøller (2026) estudia los beneficios laborales de ocupar un cargo político *de dedica*ción *parcial* en las juntas municipales de Dinamarca, y encuentra que quienes ocupan un cargo en la junta tienen más probabilidades de obtener posteriormente un cargo directivo en el Ejecutivo municipal. Estos trabajos muestran que, más allá de la organización territorial del país y la relevancia política de los legislativos subnacionales, ocupar una banca en el legislativo subnacional lleva asociado un potencial de desarrollo futuro de la carrera política.

Otro posible paso en la carrera política de los ediles es aspirar al legislativo nacional. Thomsen et al. (2026) estudian la relación entre la efectividad de los legisladores subnacionales y la probabilidad de ocupar un escaño en la Cámara de Representantes nacional, y encuentran un patrón positivo que refleja la ambición progresiva de los legisladores estatales.

Más allá del potencial que puede tener ocupar una banca en el legislativo subnacional en términos de carrera política, es posible que este puesto sea un cargo políticamente relevante en sí mismo. En relación con el nivel de gobierno, una banca legislativa subnacional adquiere mayor relevancia a medida que aumentan las prerrogativas del gobierno subnacional. Este es el caso de países federales, donde los gobiernos subnacionales tienen a su cargo una amplia gama de tareas.

Además de la relevancia política del nivel de gobierno, entendemos por cargo políticamente relevante aquel que ejerce una injerencia real. En sistemas presidencialistas, la capacidad de los órganos legislativos para legislar y controlar al Ejecutivo varía sustancialmente (Cox & Morgenstern, 2001). Es razonable pensar que el valor político de una banca legislativa aumenta en función de las funciones que el organismo puede ejercer. Sin embargo, la caracterización de los países latinoamericanos tiende a privilegiar la función ejecutiva, incluso al comparar el ejecutivo subnacional con el legislativo nacional (Micozzi & Lucardi, 2021).

Legislativos subnacionales en Uruguay

El segundo nivel de gobierno en Uruguay se compone de 19 departamentos, cada uno con un poder ejecutivo encabezado por un intendente y una junta departamental integrada por 31 ediles. La Constitución de la República, en su artículo 295, establece que los ediles, así como los miembros de los concejos municipales y vecinales, no percibirán salario por las funciones que desempeñan. A pesar de esto, múltiples investigaciones periodísticas señalan que los ediles perciben compensaciones que varían ampliamente entre departamentos, incluidas viáticos, partidas de secretaría y gastos de representación (Martínez Muracciole, 2026; Pérez, 2025). Sin embargo, estas partidas no son comparables con los niveles salariales percibidos en otros cargos de mayor relevancia política, tanto en el legislativo nacional como en el ejecutivo nacional y en los ejecutivos subnacionales. De acuerdo con Squire (1988), sería esperable encontrar una baja proporción de políticos reelectos o, en la operacionalización utilizada por el autor, una media de años consecutivos de participación en la banca cercana a los cinco años de duración del período legislativo.

El puesto de edil tampoco constituye un cargo políticamente relevante en sí mismo. Uruguay es un país unitario, donde la política subnacional es, muchas veces, subsidiaria de la política nacional (Chasquetti & Micozzi, 2014). Además, la configuración institucional asigna un papel marginal a los ediles. Cardarello y Nieto (2023) han caracterizado el sistema departamental como un "hiperpresidencialismo", marcado por una fuerte preponderancia de los intendentes sobre la Junta Departamental. El intendente tiene mayoría automática en la Junta Departamental, lo que vuelve prácticamente irrelevantes a los ediles de la oposición. Además, el rol dirigente del ejecutivo departamental es claro incluso en materia legislativa, ya que tiene la iniciativa en gran parte de los proyectos que se aprueban.

La baja relevancia del legislativo departamental se evidencia en la escasa atención que ha recibido por parte de la ciencia política uruguaya. En Uruguay, la ciencia política ha estudiado la reelección y las carreras políticas de los legisladores a nivel nacional (Altman & Chasquetti, 2005; Chasquetti, 2010; Moraes, 2008). Por otro lado, el principal estudio sobre la reelección a nivel subnacional se centra en el Poder Ejecutivo, encabezado por el intendente (Cardarello, 2011). No existen estudios que indaguen en las carreras políticas de los ediles, incluida la decisión inicial de ocupar la banca, la decisión de renovar o la potencial carrera política posterior.

La escasa relevancia política del cargo no disminuye la importancia de comprender las carreras políticas de quienes lo ocupan. Los cargos legislativos subnacionales suman 589 por ciclo electoral, más que todos los cargos políticos nacionales juntos. Además, este cargo puede constituir un espacio de inserción temprana para políticos ambiciosos, en particular para quienes no residen en la capital del país. No considerar a los legisladores subnacionales en los estudios sobre carreras políticas genera un sesgo importante hacia la capital del país y, por lo tanto, hacia el Frente Amplio, un partido con base metropolitana. Por el contrario, el Partido Nacional, segundo partido de mayor tamaño del país, tiene su base electoral en el interior del país, por lo que se espera que una parte importante de su conducción política tenga sus inicios en órganos subnacionales.

Finalmente, el sistema electoral en Uruguay se basa en listas cerradas y bloqueadas, lo que deja el poder de postulación de los candidatos en manos de los líderes del partido (Chasquetti, 2010; Chasquetti & Micozzi, 2014; Moraes, 2008). Chasquetti y Micozzi (2014) plantean que los diputados nacionales tienden a mantener su banca en la Cámara de Representantes, salvo cuando obtienen una banca en la Cámara de Senadores o son designados para ocupar cargos ejecutivos no electivos. Dado que el sistema electoral subnacional

presenta condiciones institucionales similares (elección por lista cerrada y bloqueada y la presencia de los mismos partidos fraccionalizados), es esperable que quienes ocupen una banca en la Junta Departamental tengan altas probabilidades de ser reelegidos. La no reelección parece deberse más a una decisión del político que a un resultado electoral. La pregunta es si la no reelección es el resultado de un abandono de la arena política o de un movimiento hacia cargos políticos más relevantes.

Metodología y datos

Para responder a la pregunta de investigación, construimos un panel de los ediles titulares de las diecinueve juntas departamentales de Uruguay a lo largo de las nueve elecciones departamentales celebradas entre 1984 y 2025 (1984, 1989, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020 y 2025). El trabajo empírico tiene dos componentes. El primero mide la reelección inmediata de los ediles y describe sus carreras en el ámbito legislativo subnacional. El segundo cruza la identidad de cada edil con una base de políticos nacionales para detectar si esa banca funcionó como un escalón hacia cargos de mayor relevancia, lo que permite poner a prueba la hipótesis de la progresión en la carrera política de los individuos derivada de Squire (1988). Se incluyen los cargos de legislador nacional, ministro, intendente, presidente, vicepresidente y alcalde para todo el período estudiado[1].

La unidad de análisis del primer componente es la persona-ciclo: cada fila es un edil titular en una elección departamental determinada. Trabajamos solo con titulares y no con suplentes, y como las suplencias no son observables de forma sistemática, las tasas de reelección que reportamos deben leerse como un piso de la continuidad real de las carreras. Cada Junta Departamental tiene 31 bancas desde 1984, de modo que el universo teórico es de 31 titulares por departamento y por ciclo. La nómina base se construyó con datos de la Enciclopedia Electoral Uruguaya (1984–2010), publicada por Factum; del Banco de Datos del Área de Política y Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad de la República; y de la Corte Electoral, como las actas departamentales de proclamación. Para cada registro disponemos del nombre, el departamento, el ciclo electoral, el partido y el sexo.

Medir la reelección implica decidir, para cada titular del ciclo t, si es la misma persona que ocupó una banca en t − 1. Esa decisión no es trivial porque la fuente registra los nombres con variantes, errores de tipeo, errores de digitalización, diferencias de grafía, apodos, nom-

1 Los datos necesarios para replicar los resultados de este trabajo están disponibles en el repositorio Harvard Dataverse a través del siguiente enlace: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GXS1J2

bres truncados y, sobre todo, el contraste entre las formas cortas usadas en años previos y el nombre legal completo registrado en 2025. Un emparejamiento por coincidencia exacta de texto subestima la reelección: por ejemplo, no reconoce que “Pablo González” y “Pablo Damián González Carballo” son la misma persona, mientras que un emparejamiento demasiado laxo comete el error opuesto y fusiona homónimos que son personas distintas. Se trata de un problema de vinculación de registros y desambiguación de entidades, que resolvemos construyendo un panel corregido en el que cada persona recibe un identificador estable que la sigue a través de los ciclos.

Primero convertimos los nombres a minúsculas, sin acentos ni puntuación, y descartamos las iniciales, de modo que “José H. Gómez” y “José Gómez” quedan idénticos. Luego, calculamos los vínculos posibles entre registros mediante tres mecanismos. El enlace difuso fastLink, basado en el modelo de Fellegi-Sunter, compara nombre, apellido, resto del nombre y sexo, con umbral de fusión de 0,90 y banda de revisión entre 0,50 y 0,90. La contención posicional une un nombre corto con uno largo que lo contiene solo si también coincide el primer nombre o apellido, lo que evita confundir “Carlos Peña” con “Álvaro Carlos Hernández Peña”. Posteriormente, se generaron listas depuradas de *coincide*nci*as* que incluyeron pares confirmados, pares prohibidos y decisiones, a partir de una revisión manual. Con esos vínculos construimos un grafo, eliminamos las aristas prohibidas y tomamos sus componentes conexos, donde cada componente conexo representa a una persona. El identificador de cada persona se construye a partir del departamento y del componente conexo al que pertenece, por lo que un edil que cambia de departamento se considera una persona nueva en el segundo.

El panel se somete a un control de calidad en dos frentes. En el enlace, una auditoría independiente con Jaro-Winkler, conjuntos de tokens, contención difusa y apodos recupera vínculos perdidos y separa fusiones incorrectas. En la integración de titulares por departamento y ciclo, el cotejo con la Enciclopedia Electoral y el listado de la Corte Electoral motiva correcciones originadas en nombres en los que el procesador había omitido la “ñ”, en bancas espejo, en las que se imputa el primer suplente, y en vacíos de las propias fuentes[2].

Como control externo de la reconstrucción del padrón y del enlace de registros, recurrimos a dos estudios de Salvat sobre carreras legislativas en gobiernos departamentales, uno sobre Montevideo (2012) y otro sobre Florida (2009), ambos basados en datos de la Corte

2 La nómina de Tacuarembó 2000 exige reconstrucción completa, porque la fuente contiene una copia errónea de la nómina de 1994, y lo hacemos con las hojas de votación y D’Hondt anidado por lema, sublema y hoja, verificando el reparto contra los votos oficiales de la Corte Electoral del 15 de mayo de 2000.

Electoral. En Montevideo, la cantidad de titulares reelectos por ciclo coincide exactamente con la suya en cuatro de los cinco períodos comparables, con una única diferencia de un caso en 2010. En Florida, la composición por partido reproduce exactamente la del antecedente en todos los ciclos, de modo que reconstruimos el mismo cuerpo de ediles, aunque las cifras de reelección quedan sistemáticamente uno o dos casos por debajo. Esa brecha no responde a un error de enlace, sino a una diferencia de definición vinculada a la escala de cada trabajo. Salvat estudia un solo departamento y un período acotado, lo que le permite seguir, caso por caso, la trayectoria de cada banca y contar, como edil del período, a quien la ocupó de hecho, incluido el suplente que asume cuando el titular renuncia. Nuestro diseño cubre los 19 departamentos y nueve ciclos entre 1984 y 2025, y ese alcance hace inviable rastrear individualmente las renuncias y suplencias en cada junta, por lo que trabajamos con las nóminas de titulares electos, que son la única información homogénea y comparable para todo el universo.

Una persona es reelegida en t si fue titular en el ciclo inmediatamente anterior en el mismo departamento. Distinguimos también entre los retornados, que vuelven tras omitir al menos un ciclo, y los novatos, y codificamos cada racha de ciclos consecutivos[3]. Sobre el panel, medimos la tasa agregada por ciclo y la desagregamos por la composición de la Junta, el partido, el sexo y el departamento. Describimos las carreras mediante la distribución de los ciclos desempeñados, la supervivencia de las rachas y la experiencia media de cada Junta. Medimos también los cambios de partido registrados por un mismo edil, siempre entre ciclos consecutivos, mediante una matriz de transición.

El segundo componente de este trabajo buscó cruzar la identidad de cada edil, ya resuelta en el panel corregido, con la base de políticos uruguayos del paquete puy (Schmidt et al., 2021), que reconstruye la trayectoria de quienes ocuparon la Presidencia, la Vicepresidencia, ministerios, bancas legislativas, intendencias y alcaldías entre 1830 y 2020. Para el período más reciente, aún no cubierto por la versión publicada del paquete, se agregaron manualmente los nombres del gobierno que asumió en 2025, los intendentes electos ese año, los integrantes de la legislatura 2025–2030 y la nómina de alcaldes de los ciclos municipales celebrados desde 2015 (para estos últimos se tomaron los datos de Cardarello et al. [2025] y de Cardarello y Freigedo [2021]). De esa base se retienen las cinco categorías de cargos

3 Cuando falta la nómina de t − 1, la reelección no es observable y se codifica como faltante, no como no reelección.

de interés: presidente o vicepresidente, legislador4, ministro de Estado, intendente y alcalde; y se excluyen categorías ajenas como concejales, candidaturas no electas o los ministros de la Corte Electoral. La alcaldía, creada en 2010 con la instalación del tercer nivel de gobierno, se incorpora como el escalón de menor jerarquía.

La identificación del edil en esta base utiliza la misma normalización de nombres que la reelección, pero cambia el criterio de agrupación para el enlace. Como un legislador o un ministro no está vinculado a un departamento, el bloqueo ya no se hace por departamento, sino por el primer nombre de pila, y dentro de ese bloque se exige que el apellido paterno del político, extraído de su registro con formato apellidos y nombre y depurado de partículas como “de”, “del” o “van”, aparezca entre los tokens del nombre del edil. Además de la coincidencia exacta, se admite una coincidencia difusa del apellido paterno con una distancia de edición normalizada de hasta 0,20, lo que permite recuperar variantes con errores de tipeo o de OCR. Cada par candidato que no proviene de una lista ya confirmada pasa por tres filtros de plausibilidad: coincidencia de sexo, compatibilidad de época y ausencia de conflicto en el segundo nombre de pila. El par en el que falla alguno de ellos no se descarta automáticamente: se envía a una cola de revisión manual que se resuelve mediante una aplicación interactiva; las decisiones se incorporan en la siguiente ejecución.

La unidad de análisis de este componente es la persona, y no la persona-ciclo del primero. Cada vínculo aceptado entre un edil y un cargo se registra en una tabla de detalle, y esos vínculos se agregan luego en una tabla por persona con cinco indicadores binarios que señalan si la persona llegó a ser legislador, ministro, intendente, alcalde o presidente o vicepresidente. Se considera que hubo un salto cuando la persona alcanzó al menos una de esas categorías. Para las descripciones que requieren un único cargo por persona se utiliza el escalón más alto alcanzado, un ordenamiento que ubica a la alcaldía en la base y a la fórmula presidencial en la cima. Comparando el primer año de cualquiera de esos cargos con el primer ciclo de la persona como edil, se clasifica la trayectoria como ascendente cuando el cargo es posterior, previa cuando lo antecede o simultánea cuando coinciden.

Conviene señalar algunos límites del ejercicio. La medición abarca únicamente a los titulares, por lo que la continuidad de una carrera política que transita por la suplencia no queda registrada. La homonimia, aunque se atenuó con la regla de contención y la revisión manual,

4 La categoría de legislador nacional computa tanto a los titulares como a los suplentes que la base registra con banca. Este criterio difiere del aplicado a los ediles, restringido a titulares, y eleva el conteo de ascensos hacia el legislativo nacional.

no se elimina del todo en apellidos frecuentes, y un número reducido de casos conserva cierto margen de error. En algún caso, la revisión permitió además descartar un vínculo espurio con un cargo de alta jerarquía, como una fórmula presidencial atribuida por homonimia a un edil reciente.

El cruce con cargos de gobierno, por su parte, solo capta lo que figura en la base de datos de políticos utilizada y, a diferencia del análisis de la reelección entre ediles, no cuenta con un contraste externo equivalente al de Salvat, de modo que su enlace queda validado únicamente por los filtros de plausibilidad y la revisión manual descritos más arriba. Además, los ediles cuyo primer ciclo se ubica en los años más recientes, 2015 en adelante, disponen de menos tiempo para alcanzar un cargo de gobierno que sus pares de décadas anteriores, lo que introduce un truncamiento a la derecha que conviene tener presente al leer la sección de resultados.

Finalmente, como se señaló más arriba en esta sección, en la base de políticos no se incluyeron concejales, candidaturas no electas ni ministros de la Corte Electoral. A su vez, tampoco se incluyeron cargos ejecutivos de jerarquía media, como los de directores generales de ministerios e intendencias. Estos cargos se consideran de “particular confianza” y su designación responde a motivos políticos. En línea con lo planteado por Kjøller (2026) para el caso de Dinamarca, sería esperable que el salto de los ediles fuera hacia puestos jerárquicos en el ejecutivo departamental. Por las limitaciones expuestas, las tasas presentadas deben leerse como un piso de la persistencia real.

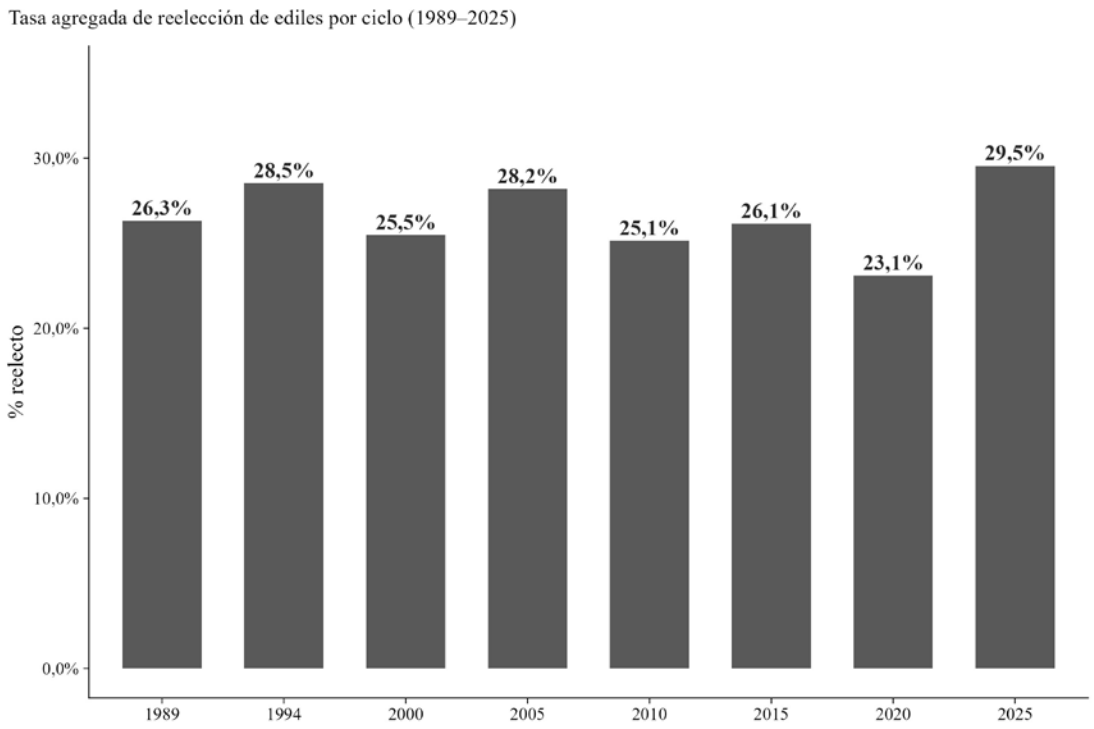
Resultados

Reelección de ediles

A lo largo de los ciclos observados, la tasa agregada de reelección se mantiene dentro de un rango relativamente estable, que va del 23,1 % en 2020 al 29,5 % en 2025, sin una tendencia definida desde 1989, como muestra la figura 1. Esa estabilidad de cuatro décadas resulta llamativa si se considera que, en el período, hubo reformas electorales de peso, se sucedieron gobiernos de distintos partidos y se produjeron cambios sustanciales en la estructura gubernamental, como la incorporación del tercer nivel de gobierno. Cualquiera de estos factores podría haber alterado la tasa de forma apreciable, pero en el agregado no lo hicieron. El máximo de la serie corresponde precisamente al ciclo más reciente, el de 2025, lo que sugiere que el fenómeno de la reelección no se debilita con el paso del tiempo.

Figura 1

Tasa de reelección de ediles departamentales por ciclo electoral (1989–2025)

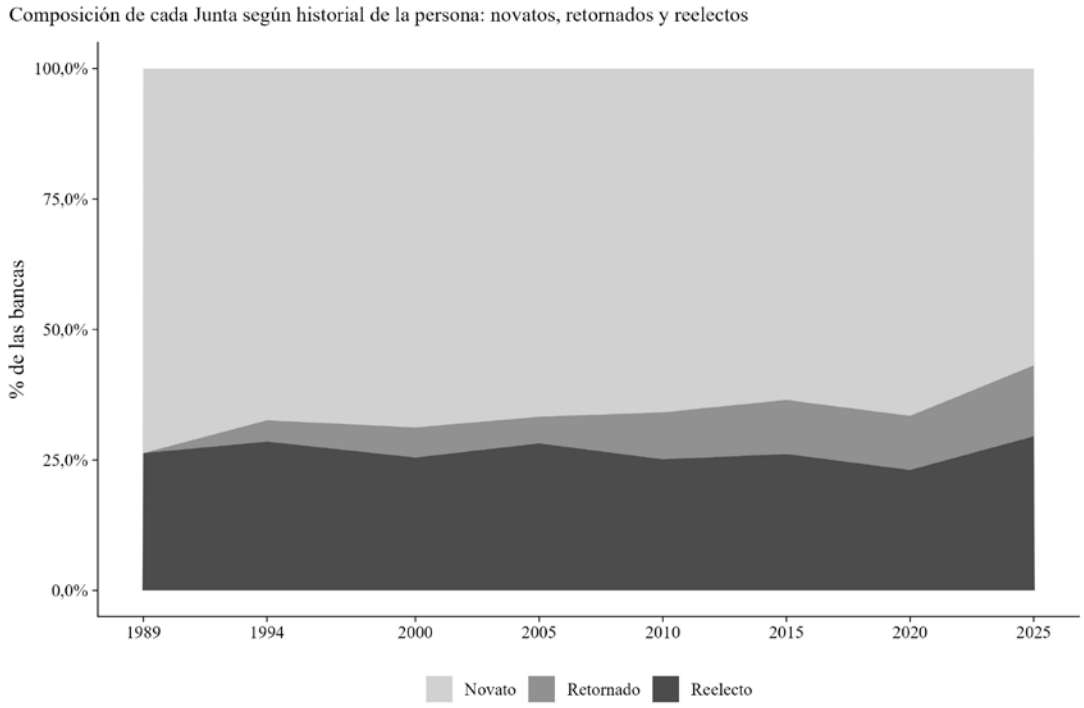


Nota. Elaboración propia con la base de ediles.

La descomposición de cada Junta Departamental según el historial de sus integrantes profundiza esa lectura. La figura 2 muestra que la proporción de ediles sin experiencia previa desciende de forma gradual, de alrededor de tres cuartos de las bancas en 1989 a poco menos del 60 % en 2025, pero ese descenso no se traduce en un aumento equivalente de los reelectos, cuya proporción se mantiene relativamente plana entre el 23 % y el 30 % a lo largo de toda la serie. El componente que efectivamente crece es el de los retornados, personas que vuelven a la Junta después de haber omitido al menos un ciclo, que pasa de una presencia casi nula en 1989 a cerca del 13 % en 2025. Por tanto, la renovación de las juntas departamentales muestra una circulación compleja en la que, además de los reelectos, aparece un número creciente de personas que entran, salen y regresan.

Figura 2

Composición de cada Junta Departamental según el historial de la persona: novatos, retornados y reelectos (1989–2025)

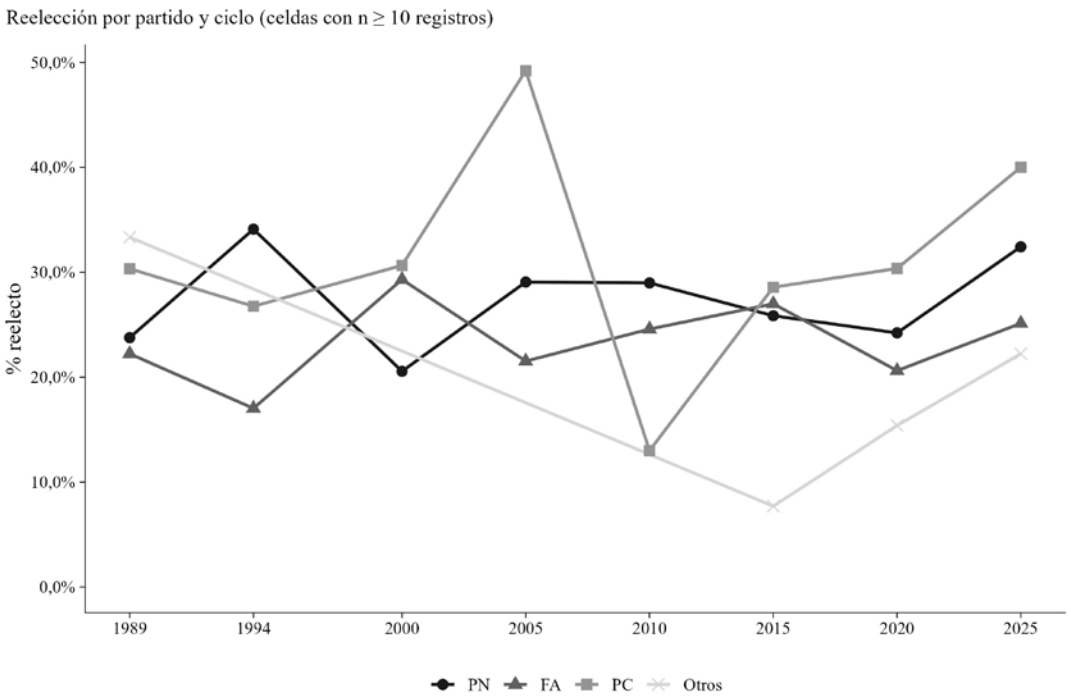


Nota. Elaboración propia con la base de ediles.

La figura 3 muestra la reelección por partido político. El Partido Colorado exhibe la mayor volatilidad de la serie, con un pico de casi un 50 % en 2005 seguido de una caída al 13 % en 2010, el vaivén más pronunciado de cualquier lema entre dos ciclos consecutivos. Este cambio se corresponde con la caída de votos que sufrió el partido a nivel nacional. El Partido Nacional, en cambio, es el más estable, pues oscila en un rango comparativamente estrecho entre 20 % y 34 % en los ocho ciclos. El Frente Amplio fluctúa entre el 17 % y el 29 % sin una dirección definida. La categoría residual de otros partidos, dominada por fuerzas y coaliciones con representación departamental acotada, cae del 33 % en 1989 a menos del 8 % en 2015, antes de recuperarse hasta el 22 % en 2025, aunque conviene leer esa serie con cautela porque agrupa las celdas de menor tamaño muestral.

Figura 3

Reelección por partido y por ciclo electoral (1989–2025)

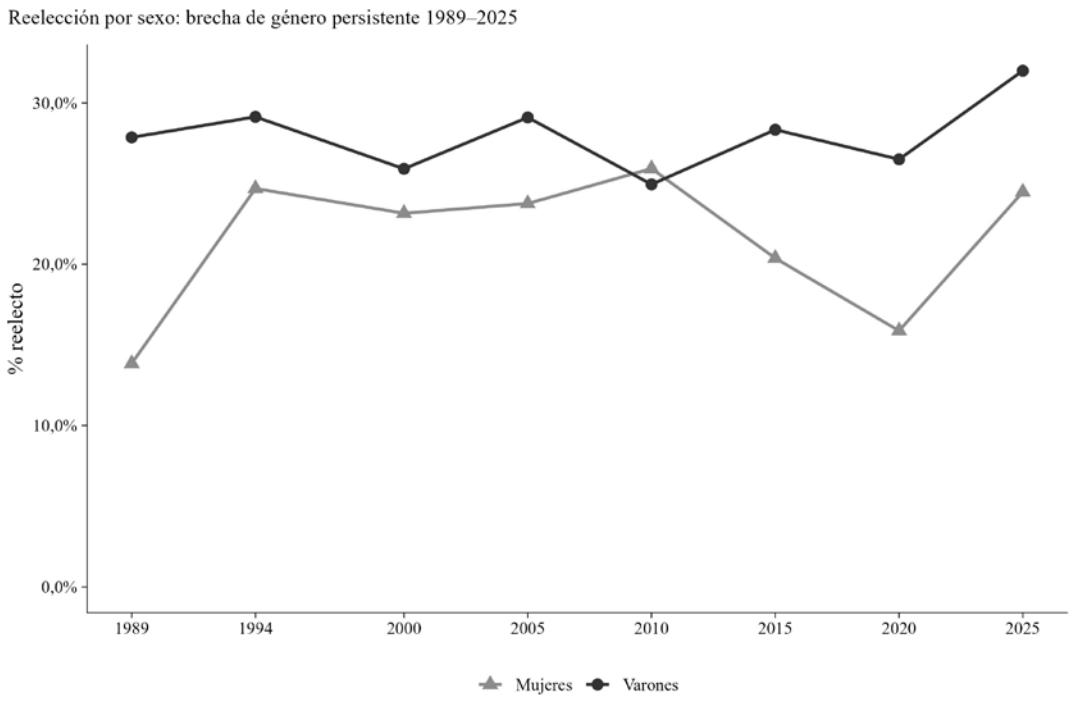


Nota. Elaboración propia con la base de ediles.

La figura 4 presenta la tasa de reelección por sexo para el período considerado, y muestra una brecha de género persistente que contribuye a la baja proporción de mujeres en las juntas departamentales del país (Roel & González, 2025). Los varones superan a las mujeres en siete de los ocho ciclos, con la única excepción de 2010, cuando ambas tasas se cruzan brevemente en torno al 25 %. Fuera de ese cruce, la diferencia oscila entre 3 y 14 puntos porcentuales, y en el ciclo más reciente, 2025, los varones alcanzan cerca del 32 % frente al 24 % de las mujeres. Como la tasa se calcula entre quienes ya han sido titulares, esta brecha no depende de la menor presencia inicial de mujeres en las juntas. Revela, además, una desventaja adicional en la probabilidad de ser reelegidas una vez que ya ocupan la banca. Estos resultados son particularmente relevantes a la luz de la evidencia presentada por García Montero et al. (2025) para América Latina, la cual muestra que las mujeres legisladoras nacionales presentan mayores deseos de renovar sus bancas en el marco de reelecciones inmediatas.

Figura 4

Reelección de ediles por sexo (1989–2025)

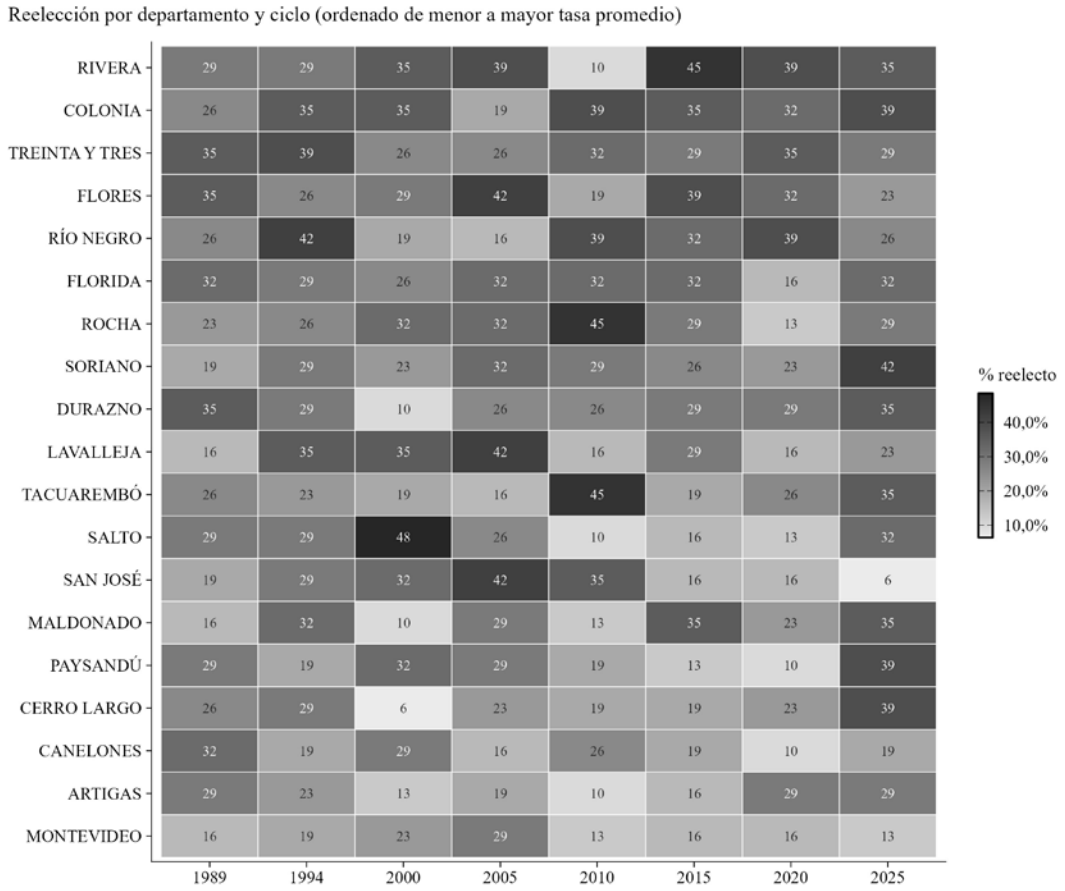


Nota. Elaboración propia con la base de ediles.

El desglose por departamento (figura 5) muestra una dispersión considerable tanto entre departamentos como entre ciclos dentro de un mismo departamento. Rivera y Colonia comparten el promedio más alto de la serie, seguidos de cerca por Treinta y Tres, mientras que Montevideo y Artigas se ubican en el extremo opuesto. Dos de los valores extremos del mapa completo, el 48 % de Salto y el 6 % de Cerro Largo, corresponden además al mismo ciclo, el año 2000, lo que ilustra cuánta heterogeneidad esconde una tasa agregada nacional que, para ese mismo ciclo, se ubicó en un 25,5 %. Ningún departamento muestra una tendencia monótona a lo largo de los ocho ciclos, lo que sugiere que la dinámica política local, la composición de las listas y las escisiones partidarias en cada elección pesan más que una cultura departamental estable de reelección.

Figura 5

Reelección por departamento y por ciclo electoral, ordenados de menor a mayor según la tasa promedio (1989–2025)



Nota. Elaboración propia con la base de ediles.

Por otro lado, la distribución del número de ciclos realizados por persona confirma que la persistencia prolongada es excepcional (véase la figura 10 del anexo). De las 3.707 personas del panel, 2.588 (69,8 %) ejercieron un único ciclo como titulares y 768 (20,7 %) ejercieron dos, de modo que nueve de cada diez ediles de la historia reciente del país tuvieron un paso breve por la Junta Departamental. Apenas 79 personas, poco más del 2 %, alcanzaron cuatro ciclos o más, y una sola persona llegó a siete, el máximo observado en toda la serie. De todos modos, tanto ese 2 % como el caso del edil que lleva siete ciclos en la Junta ilustran que algunos políticos efectivamente encuentran incentivos para una estrategia de permanencia en ese órgano, aunque esto no sea generalizado.

Carreras políticas de los ediles uruguayos

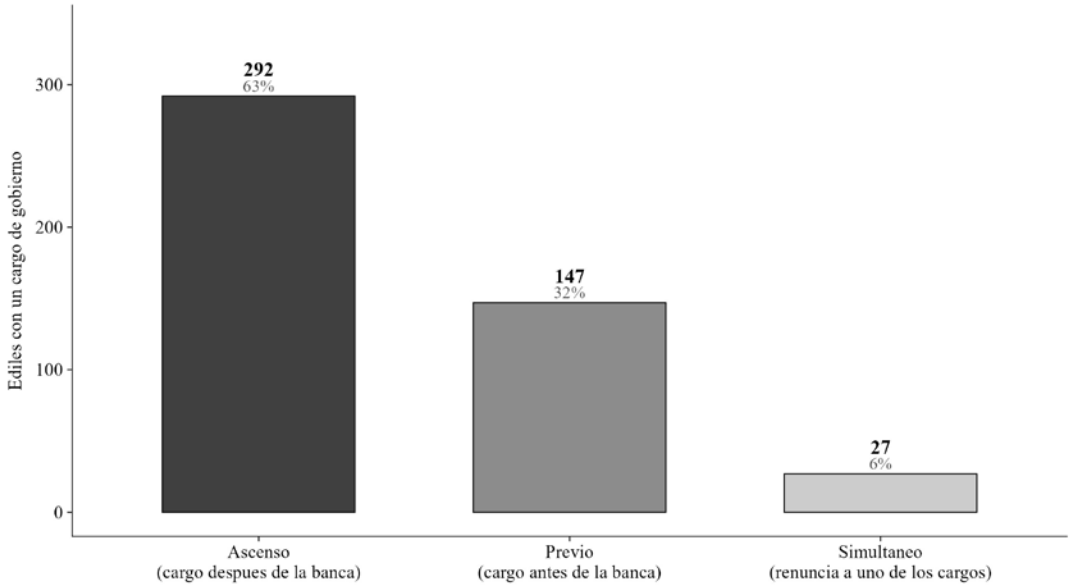
La reelección inmediata es solo una de las formas que puede adoptar la continuidad de una carrera política. Una banca en la Junta Departamental también puede operar como un escalón hacia otros cargos de gobierno, lo que refleja la ambición progresiva anticipada en la sección teórica. Conviene, entonces, ubicarlo dentro del panorama general de las trayectorias. De las 3.707 personas que ocuparon una banca como titulares entre 1984 y 2025, 466 (12,6 %) alcanzaron además otro cargo de gobierno, ya sea en el legislativo nacional, en una intendencia, en un ministerio o en una alcaldía. Frente a la reelección, que la sección anterior analiza como el eje de este trabajo, el salto a otros cargos es la trayectoria de una minoría, y este apartado lo aborda como su complemento. Vale una aclaración de vocabulario: al hablar de legislador, nos referimos siempre al legislador nacional, diputado o senador, aunque los ediles también son legisladores en el plano departamental.

Antes de describir esas carreras, conviene distinguir dos situaciones que la figura 6 pone de manifiesto. Entre los 466 que alcanzaron un cargo de gobierno, 147 (31,5 %) lo ocuparon antes de llegar a la Junta, y, de esos, 100 (68 %) habían ocupado previamente un cargo de diputación. En estos casos, la banca subnacional funciona menos como un punto de partida y más como un espacio de retorno o de acumulación paralela para figuras con inserción previa, un fenómeno que responde a una lógica distinta de la ambición progresiva. Otras 27 personas (5,8 %) alcanzaron el cargo en el mismo ciclo de su banca subnacional[5]. Las 292 restantes (62,7 %) sí llegaron al cargo de gobierno tras su primer ciclo como edil, lo que traza el patrón de ascenso que interesa a esta sección.

5 Muchos candidatos a intendente, exintendentes y otras figuras de peso encabezan las listas a la Junta sin intención de ocupar la banca, porque comparten hoja de votación con la candidatura a intendente y traccionan votos para toda la lista. Como los cargos nacionales y ejecutivos son incompatibles con el edilato, quien accede a uno de mayor jerarquía cede la banca a su suplente, pero la Corte Electoral lo proclama titular de todos modos aunque posteriormente no ejerza. Esto ayuda a explicar por qué parte de los ediles aparece ligada a cargos de gobierno previos o simultáneos.

Figura 6

Ediles y edilas con otro cargo de gobierno, según el orden respecto del edilato (1984–2025)



Nota. Elaboración propia con el cruce entre la base de políticos y la base de ediles.

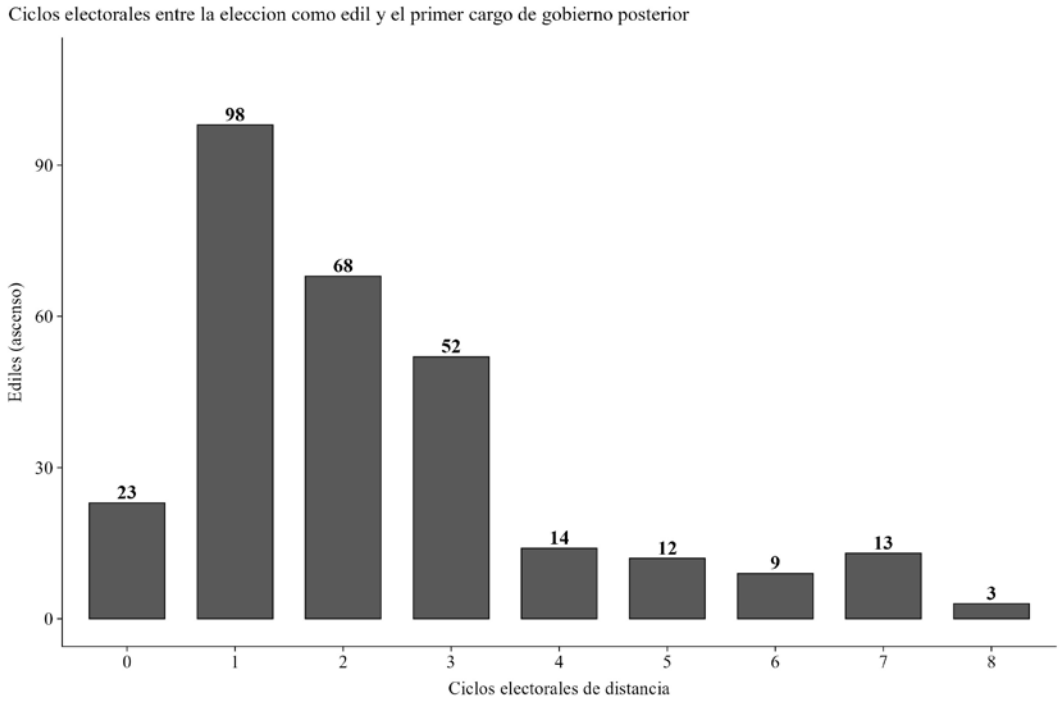
El primer rasgo de esas carreras de ascenso es su rapidez. La figura 7 mide, para cada persona, cuántos ciclos electorales transcurren entre su primera banca como edil y el primer cargo de gobierno que alcanza después. Contar en ciclos, y no en años calendario, es más informativo porque descuenta el contexto histórico y expresa la distancia dentro de la propia carrera. En 98 casos, ese cargo llega un ciclo después del edilato y, en otros 68, dos ciclos más tarde. A esos casos se suman 23 personas que alcanzan el cargo en el mismo ciclo de debut, en un año posterior a la banca. Los tres grupos reúnen 189 de los 292 ascensos, casi dos tercios, concentrados en la primera década de carrera[6]. El edilato tiende así a funcionar como un escalón temprano, y no como una posición de larga permanencia.

El destino de esos ascensos es, sobre todo, el legislativo nacional, al que llegan 207 de las 292 personas. La alcaldía aparece como el segundo destino más frecuente, con 60 casos, por encima de la intendencia, con 53, y del ministerio, con 10; varias personas combinan más de un cargo a lo largo de su carrera. Ninguna alcanzó la Presidencia ni la Vicepresidencia, ni por esta vía ni por ninguna otra, en toda la base.

6 La distancia se mide en ciclos y no en años calendario. Un valor de cero ciclos corresponde a quienes alcanzan el cargo en un año posterior al de su primera banca, pero dentro del mismo período electoral, y no debe confundirse con los casos simultáneos, en los que el cargo nacional comienza en el mismo año que el edilato y que por definición quedan fuera del ascenso.

Figura 7

Ciclos electorales entre la elección como edil y el primer cargo de gobierno posterior (1984–2025)



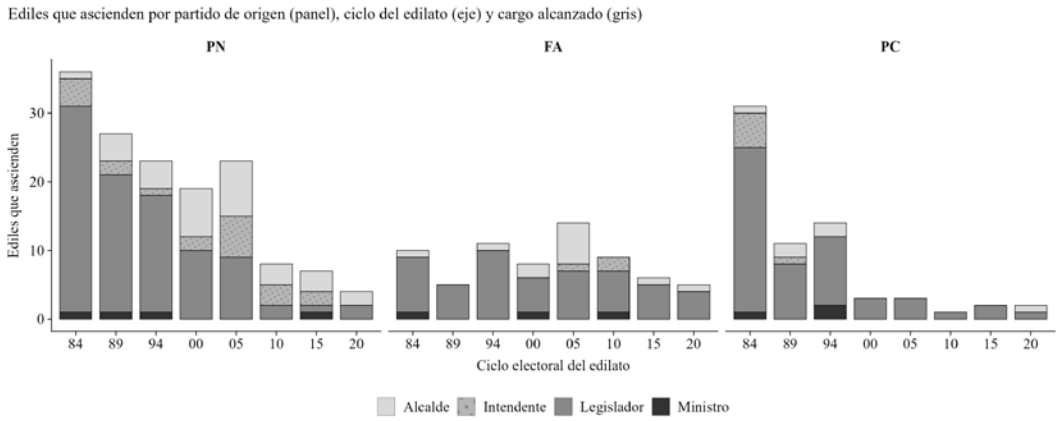
Nota. Elaboración propia con el cruce entre la base de políticos y la base de ediles.

La figura 8 desglosa los 292 ascensos según el partido de origen del edil, el ciclo en que ocupó la banca y el cargo de gobierno más alto que alcanzó[7]. Dos rasgos ordenan la lectura. El primero es el predominio del Partido Nacional, que concentra 149 de los ascensos, frente a 69 del Frente Amplio y 67 del Partido Colorado, y exhibe las barras más altas en casi todos los ciclos. El segundo es la marcada asimetría temporal entre los partidos. El Partido Colorado muestra un perfil fuertemente concentrado en las cohortes más antiguas, con un pico en 1984 y una caída casi total a partir de 2000, un patrón consistente con el declive del partido a nivel nacional. El Partido Nacional también concentra más ascensos en las primeras cohortes y menos en las recientes, mientras que el Frente Amplio mantiene un flujo más parejo y modesto a lo largo de toda la serie. En los tres casos, las barras disminuyen en los ciclos finales, en parte debido al truncamiento a la derecha, ya que quienes ocuparon la banca en 2010 o después disponen de menos tiempo para alcanzar un cargo gubernamental.

7 A diferencia de la figura 7, que cuenta cada destino alcanzado, aquí cada persona se computa una vez en su escalón más alto (asumiendo un orden donde la intendencia queda por debajo del legislador nacional).

Figura 8

Cantidad de ediles que ascendieron por partido de origen (panel), ciclo del edilato (eje horizontal) y cargo alcanzado (escala de grises) (1984–2025)[8]



Nota. Elaboración propia con el cruce entre la base de políticos y la base de ediles.

El color de los segmentos indica el cargo más alto que alcanzó cada persona. El legislativo nacional es el destino dominante en todos los partidos y en casi todos los ciclos, con 199 de los 292 ascensos, y explica por sí solo la mayor parte de la altura de cada columna. Los demás escalones ocupan franjas mucho más finas. La intendencia, marcada con puntos, aporta apenas 29 casos y aparece sobre todo en el Partido Nacional, mientras que el ministerio, en negro, se reduce a 10 casos concentrados en las cohortes más antiguas. El cambio más nítido lo introduce la alcaldía, que no existía antes de 2010 y por eso es escasa en las cohortes tempranas, pero gana peso en las cohortes de 2000 en adelante hasta volverse el segundo destino más frecuente del período, con 54 casos. Ese giro es más visible en el Partido Nacional, donde la franja clara de la alcaldía llega a acercarse a la del legislativo en las cohortes intermedias, lo que sugiere que la creación del tercer nivel de gobierno abrió una vía de carrera nueva que absorbe parte de la ambición que antes se canalizaba hacia otros cargos.

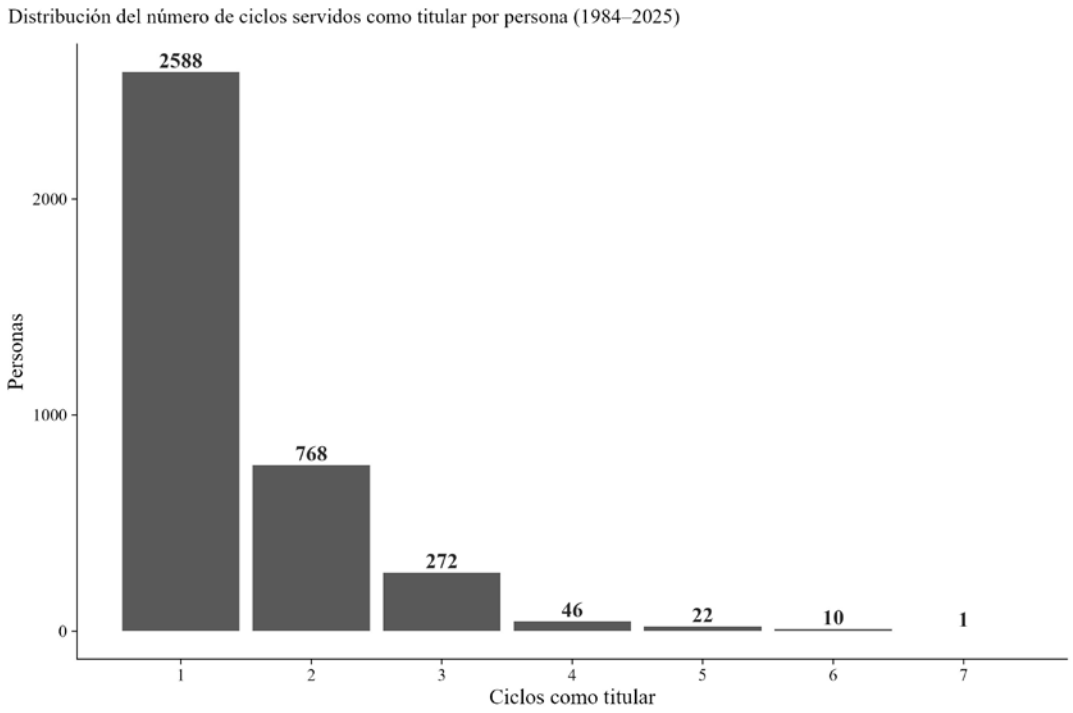
Finalmente, la desigualdad de género que ya aparecía en la reelección se profundiza en el ascenso. La figura 9 compara la tasa de reelección y la de ascenso de varones y mujeres, ambas calculadas sobre el total de ediles de cada sexo. En la reelección, la brecha es acotada: 25,8 % de los varones frente a 22,0 % de las mujeres. En el ascenso, se ensancha la

8 El eje horizontal de la figura 8 no es el año en que la persona llegó al cargo, sino el ciclo en que fue edil (el "ciclo del edilato", como dice el propio título). Aunque no existía la alcaldía antes de 2010, un edil de la cohorte 2000 o 2005 pudo llegar a alcalde en 2010, 2015, 2020 o 2025.

brecha: 8,9 % de los varones frente a 3,8 % de las mujeres, de modo que la tasa masculina más que duplica a la femenina. Roel y González (2025) encuentran una incorporación tardía y desigual de las mujeres, con marcadas diferencias regionales y partidarias, y subrayan que, incluso con la Ley de Cuotas de 2009, su presencia se estanca en torno a un tercio, cumpliendo la norma sin avanzar hacia una igualdad real. El aumento de la brecha de género en el ascenso a otros cargos es consistente con la evidencia presentada por García Montero et al. (2025), que muestra que los varones tienen un mayor interés en perseguir cargos ejecutivos después de ocupar una banca legislativa.

Figura 9

Reelección y ascenso por sexo, sobre el total de ediles de cada sexo (1984–2025)



Nota. Elaboración propia con el cruce entre la base de políticos y la base de ediles.

Conclusiones

Este artículo ofreció la primera descripción sistemática de la reelección y de las carreras políticas de los ediles en Uruguay entre 1984 y 2025. El punto de partida teórico, derivado de Squire (1988), anticipaba que un cargo sin remuneración y con un rol institucional marginal debía combinar una baja tasa de reelección con una alta propensión al movimiento hacia cargos más relevantes. La evidencia matiza esa expectativa. La reelección inmediata

existe, pero es minoritaria y estable en el tiempo, y convive con una circulación intensa de personas que entran, salen y, en algunos casos, regresan a la Junta Departamental. Nueve de cada diez ediles tuvieron un paso breve, de uno o dos ciclos, y la permanencia prolongada resultó excepcional.

La expectativa opuesta, que anticipaba una reelección alta a partir del control partidario de las listas cerradas y bloqueadas, tampoco se confirma. La continuidad inmediata existe y es estable, pero se sostiene en torno a un tercio de los titulares y no en los niveles elevados que ese razonamiento preveía. Las dos lecturas, entonces, resultan matizadas por la evidencia. Ni el carácter honorario y marginal del cargo deriva en un movimiento masivo hacia posiciones de mayor jerarquía, ni la disciplina de listas produce una reelección dominante.

La segunda parte del trabajo mostró que el paso por la Junta rara vez conduce a un cargo de gobierno de mayor jerarquía. Solo 466 de las 3.707 personas del panel, un 12,6 %, alcanzaron alguna vez el legislativo nacional, una intendencia, un ministerio o una alcaldía, de modo que el salto es la trayectoria de una minoría. Dentro de ese grupo conviven dos lógicas diferentes. Una parte considerable ya ocupaba un cargo de gobierno antes de llegar a la Junta, y para la mayoría de esas personas ese cargo previo había sido una diputación, lo que sugiere que la banca subnacional también funciona como espacio de retorno o de acumulación paralela para figuras con inserción previa. Las 292 personas restantes ascendieron después del edilato, y en ellas la Junta operó como un escalón temprano, con la mayoría de los ascensos concentrados en la primera década de carrera. El destino dominante fue el legislativo nacional.

La incorporación de las alcaldías, creadas en 2010, aportó un hallazgo específico. La alcaldía se convirtió en el segundo destino más frecuente del ascenso y ganó peso en las cohortes recientes, sobre todo en el Partido Nacional, cuya base territorial en el interior del país explica buena parte de su predominio entre quienes ascienden. La creación del tercer nivel de gobierno abrió así una vía de carrera nueva que absorbe parte de la ambición que antes se canalizaba hacia otros cargos. El resultado es consistente con la evidencia de Kjøller (2026) sobre las Juntas Municipales danesas, donde el paso por un cargo local de dedicación parcial incrementa las probabilidades de acceder posteriormente a un cargo ejecutivo subnacional.

Un tercer resultado atraviesa todo el análisis. La desigualdad de género se acumula a lo largo de la carrera en lugar de concentrarse en un único punto. Las mujeres ingresan en menor proporción a las juntas departamentales, se reeligen en menor proporción que los varones y ascienden a otros cargos a una tasa inferior a la mitad de la masculina.

El trabajo deja abiertas varias líneas para investigaciones futuras. La más inmediata es ampliar la base de cargos con jerarquías intermedias todavía no consideradas, en particular los gabinetes ejecutivos nacionales y, sobre todo, subnacionales, donde sería esperable encontrar una proporción mayor de exediles. Queda pendiente también incorporar la trayectoria que transita por la suplencia, hoy no observable, por lo que las cifras presentadas constituyen un piso de la persistencia real. Finalmente, futuros trabajos deben indagar en las razones detrás de la no reelección, distinguiendo la salida voluntaria de la involuntaria. Con esas salvedades, el artículo aporta evidencia sistemática sobre un nivel de gobierno hasta ahora ignorado por la ciencia política uruguaya y contribuye a corregir el sesgo hacia el análisis de los cargos nacionales identificado en los estudios de reelección de políticos.

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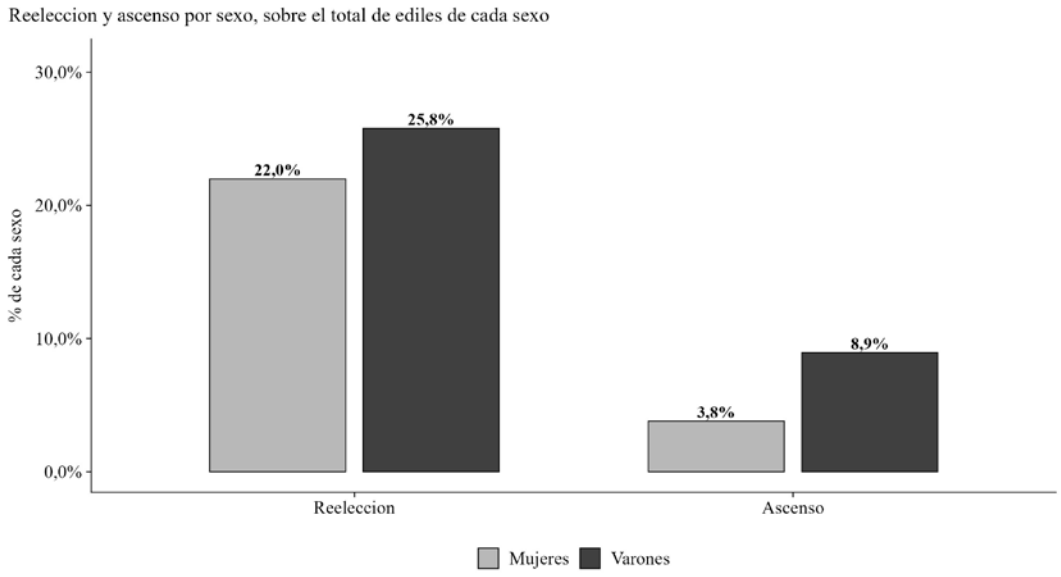
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Anexo

Figura 10

Distribución del número de ciclos desempeñados como titular por persona (1984–2025)



Nota. Elaboración propia con la base de ediles.

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Cómo citar:
Roel Aspeé, N., & Pandolfo Santurio, S. (2026). Reelección legislativa subnacional en un país unitario: carreras políticas de los ediles en Uruguay (1984–2025). *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 26-53. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a947

REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a934

Understanding the Failure of Participatory Budgeting

Comprendiendo el fracaso del presupuesto participativo

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Research Article

Abstract

Participatory budgeting (PB) has become the most widespread democratic innovation in the world, yet research has long focused on successful cases rather than on failures. This study addresses the gap with a configurational analysis of PB termination in Central Europe. Drawing on the literature, we identify five types of factors that contribute to PB failure and consolidate them into three conditions: political-bureaucratic (POL), procedural-technical (PRO), and fiscal (FISC). Using fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), we examine five cases of failed PB: Mława (Poland); Bratislava, Bratislava–Petržalka, and Ružomberok (Slovakia); and Prague 7 (Czech Republic). Political-bureaucratic failure is present in all five cases, and together with procedural-technical failure it describes four of them. The cases fall into three empirical types of failure: (A) co-optation and hollowing out, (B) fiscal constraints under conditions of political-bureaucratic disengagement, and (C) post-electoral discontinuity. Fiscal constraints did not end PB on their own in any of the cases. We suggest that they reinforce political-bureaucratic failure rather than trigger it, a hypothesis that future large-N studies should test on samples that also include cases where PB continued.

Keywords: democratic innovations, institutional discontinuation, fsQCA, political-bureaucratic conditions, fiscal constraints.

Resumen

El presupuesto participativo (PP) se ha convertido en la innovación democrática más extendida en el mundo; sin embargo, la investigación se ha centrado durante mucho tiempo en los casos exitosos más que en los fracasos. Este estudio aborda esta brecha mediante un análisis configuracional de la interrupción del PP en Europa Central. Basándonos en la literatura, identificamos cinco tipos de factores que contribuyen al fracaso del PP y los agrupamos en tres condiciones: político-burocrática (POL), procedimental-técnica (PRO) y fiscal (FISC). Mediante el Análisis Comparativo Cualitativo de Conjuntos Difusos (fsQCA), examinamos cinco casos de PB fallidos: Mława (Polonia); Bratislava, Bratislava–Petržalka y Ružomberok (Eslovaquia); y Praga 7 (República Checa). El fracaso político-burocrático está presente en los cinco casos y, junto con el fracaso procedimental-técnico, explica cuatro de ellos. Los casos se clasifican en tres tipos empíricos de fracaso: (A) cooptación y vaciamiento, (B) restricciones fiscales en condiciones de desvinculación político-burocrática, y (C) discontinuidad postelectoral. Las restricciones fiscales no pusieron fin por sí solas a la PB en ninguno de los casos. Sugerimos que estas restricciones refuerzan el fracaso político-burocrático en lugar de desencadenarlo, una hipótesis que futuros estudios con un gran número de casos deberían comprobar en muestras que también incluyan casos en los que la PB continuó.

Palabras clave: *innovaciones* democráticas, discontinuidad institucional, fsQCA, condiciones político-burocráticas, restricciones fiscales.

Resumo

O orçamento participativo (OP) tornou-se a inovação democrática mais difundida no mundo; no entanto, as pesquisas têm se concentrado, há muito tempo, em casos de sucesso, em vez de nos fracassos. Este estudo aborda essa lacuna por meio de uma análise configuracional do encerramento do OP na Europa Central. Com base na literatura, identificamos cinco tipos de fatores que contribuem para o fracasso do OP e os agrupamos em três condições: político-burocrática (POL), processual-técnica (PRO) e fiscal (FISC). Utilizando a Análise Comparativa Qualitativa de Conjuntos Fuzzy (fsQCA), examinamos cinco casos de fracasso do PB: Mława (Polônia); Bratislava, Bratislava–Petržalka e Ružomberok (Eslováquia);

e Praga 7 (República Tcheca). O fracasso político-burocrático está presente em todos os cinco casos e, juntamente com o fracasso processual-técnico, descreve quatro deles. Os casos se enquadram em três tipos empíricos de fracasso: (A) cooptação e esvaziamento, (B) restrições fiscais em condições de desengajamento político-burocrático e (C) descontinuidade pós-eleitoral. As restrições fiscais, por si só, não puseram fim à BP em nenhum dos casos. Sugerimos que elas reforçam o fracasso político-burocrático, em vez de desencadeá-lo — uma hipótese que futuros estudos com grande número de casos (N) deveriam testar em amostras que também incluam casos em que a PB continuou.

Palavras-chave: Inovações democráticas, Descontinuidade institucional, fsQCA, Condições político-burocráticas, Restrições fiscais.

Understanding the Failure of Participatory Budgeting

The perception of politics as being in a persistent and deepening crisis, reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences and exacerbated by global instability, declining trust in institutions and established rules, the erosion of the rule of law, the rise of authoritarian tendencies, and the growing influence of polarizing social media, is likely one of the main drivers of citizens' fatigue, apathy, and frustration in liberal democracies. Such attitudes may, in turn, evolve into a broader range of negative emotions that can be channeled into support for populist or extremist political alternatives. Feelings of diminished control and the desire for meaningful political voice pose a significant challenge to the development and consolidation of local communities and an active local civil society, within which citizens may regain influence over important aspects of their lives and engage directly, meaningfully, and relatively easily in collective decision-making processes.

The need for effective citizen participation is reflected in an extensive body of research concerned with improving the quality of democracy through what are commonly conceptualized as democratic innovations (DIs) (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Escobar & Bua, 2026; Hendriks, 2023; Geissel & Newton, 2012; Saward, 2021; Veri, 2023). Democratic innovations are analyzed at various levels of governance (supranational, national, and subnational); however, the local dimension of innovative democratization, aimed at fostering citizen participation and oversight, is particularly noteworthy. Newton (2012, p. 4) defines DIs broadly as "the successful implementation of a new idea that is intended to change the structures or processes of democratic government and politics in order to improve them." Baiocchi and Ganuza (2016, p. 16) likewise identify democratic innovations with "new participatory devices," which "open a new political context with important effects on democratic performance."

The most prominent and widespread democratic innovation is participatory budgeting (PB). Participatory budgeting, through which citizens help decide how public funds are allocated, has been practiced for more than three decades. Originating in Brazilian cities—with Porto Alegre as the best-known and emblematic example—it has since spread across the globe to countries with markedly different political and institutional settings. Given these diverse contexts, variation in practices, objectives, and expectations is hardly surprising. Whereas the original Brazilian model developed in Porto Alegre emerged within the context of a fragile, newly re-established democracy and was primarily associated with efforts to reduce corruption, patronage, and social exclusion, the Western European context has been characterized by attempts at the "democratization of democracy," that is, by efforts to further strengthen civil society and, more broadly, improve the effectiveness of public governance (Falanga, 2024; Lee, 2023; Ma et al., 2025; Touchton et al., 2023).

Research shows that implementing democratic innovations is not always successful, yet successful cases continue to attract disproportionate academic attention. This tendency has been described by Spada and Ryan (2017, p. 772) as "failure neglect." Many questions in the study of democratic innovations remain unresolved, and our understanding of their specific impacts and long-term sustainability remains limited. A wide range of variables and relations among different types of actors, operating in diverse contexts and at different levels (Theuwis et al., 2025), shape DI outcomes, complicating both measurement and research design. Another important factor concerns the behavior and attitudes of political representatives who declare their willingness to introduce and support democratic innovations.

We argue that the "failure neglect" identified by Spada and Ryan (2017) should be addressed more systematically. Recent scholarship has begun to make progress in this regard by focusing on the critical questions of why, under what circumstances, how, and at what stages democratic innovation processes fail to develop fully, prove unsuccessful, or eventually transform into cases of failure (Hammond, 2020; Ryan, 2021; Soukop et al., 2021).

This trend can be observed particularly clearly in the case of participatory budgeting (PB). In Brazil itself, where participatory budgeting originated, scholars have sought to explain the reasons behind its deterioration and decline. These explanations point to various factors, including political factors (politicization), party-governmental dynamics, technical and institutional factors (particularly the design of procedural arrangements), and fiscal constraints affecting the volume of financial resources available at the local level. As the International Budget Partnership notes, PB processes "work best in the initial years, when scale is still limited and citizens are galvanized by its novel approach" (De Renzio et al., 2019, para. 6).

Over time, however, demands and expectations may increase, giving rise to what some authors describe as “participation fatigue.” This phenomenon occurs when participatory budgeting reaches the limits of its practical capacities, procedural fatigue sets in, and feedback mechanisms weaken or disappear altogether. Together, these factors can have severe consequences, often leading to the eventual discontinuation of PB after only a few years of operation (De Renzio et al., 2019; Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022).

We aim to contribute to the emerging body of research on the causes and contextual factors that lead to the failure of democratic innovations in practice, focusing specifically on participatory budgeting (PB). Our objective is to identify the factors, or combinations of factors, that determine the failure of participatory budgeting processes.

We apply fuzzy-set QCA to several preselected cases of municipalities and city districts in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. The principal criterion for case selection is the existence of a comprehensive dataset demonstrating that (a) participatory budgeting (PB) was introduced and implemented in the given locality, and (b) the PB process was ultimately unsuccessful or failed. The five selected cases are Mława (Poland); Bratislava, Bratislava-Petržalka, and Ružomberok (Slovakia), and Prague 7 (Czech Republic). A common characteristic of the selected cases is that they all involve unsuccessful participatory budgeting processes in municipalities of comparable significance in Central Europe. This region has undergone broadly similar political, social, and cultural developments over the last century. We regard the analysis of failed PB initiatives as a necessary foundation for broader empirical research on failures in the implementation and operation of democratic innovations, particularly within Central Europe and, more broadly, the post-communist context. This research design provides an empirical foundation for more extensive comparative research, including large-N studies.

The article is structured as follows. The first section proceeds in two steps. First, we delimit and define the PB process as employed in this study. Second, drawing on the existing literature, we provide a general classification of potential reasons for failure in participatory budgeting processes and, more broadly, in democratic innovations. The second section outlines the study’s methodological framework. The third section analyzes the selected PB cases. Finally, drawing on these findings, the concluding section discusses the main results.

Explaining the Failures of PB: Towards a General Classification

First, it is necessary to define participatory budgeting (PB) comprehensively. Elstub and Escobar (2019, pp. 25–26) offer one of the most elaborate conceptualizations, classifying participatory budgeting as one of the four "families" of democratic innovations, alongside mini-publics, referenda, and citizens' initiatives, and collaborative governance. They define PB as a process typically associated with the local level and generally open to all residents within a given jurisdiction. Participation is most based on self-selection, although election or purposive selection may also be employed. Voting constitutes the predominant mode of participation, although discursive participation and listening may also play a role. Decisions are generally reached by aggregating preferences and concerns about the allocation of public expenditures. "In terms of level of influence, participatory budgeting tends to place citizens as decision makers, either with direct authority, or in partnership as part of a co-governance arrangement" (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 26).

Sintomer et al. (2008, p. 168) made a significant contribution to refining the definition of participatory budgeting. While defining PB as a process that enables the "participation of non-elected citizens in the conception and/or allocation of public finances," they further specify the concept through five fundamental criteria: (a) finances and/or the budget must be discussed; (b) the process must take place at the city or city-district level, with an elected body and administrative authority (administrative subdivisions without decentralized powers therefore do not meet this criterion); (c) the process must be repeated (a one-off referendum or meeting cannot be considered PB). We further emphasize that participatory budgeting should be conceived as a recurring and institutionalized process. In other words, the expectation of its regular repetition and long-term sustainability should be incorporated into its design from the very beginning; (d) the process requires specific modes and platforms of decision-making beyond existing administrative or representative arrangements (PB involves more than simply inviting citizens to participate in existing local administrative or participatory structures); and (e) accountability for the results of the process is required.

This criteria-based definition, developed by Sintomer et al. (2008), makes a valuable contribution by enabling a distinction between "fake" and genuine participatory budgeting processes. "Fake" PB initiatives may serve various purposes, including political self-promotion, appeasing public demands, or concealing and legitimizing the interests of political actors and their allies. In such cases, democratic innovations may function merely as a "façade" (Spada

& Ryan, 2017, p. 772), lacking substantive effectiveness and serving primarily to create an appearance of legitimacy, give citizens a false sense of involvement, and provide political cover for instrumental or predetermined decisions. “Fake” participatory budgeting initiatives are intentionally designed as façades and serve as instruments for political actors to appropriate democratic innovations. This appropriation is facilitated by the widespread perception that citizen participation is a highly desirable democratic practice. As Baiocchi and Ganuza (2016, p. 3) argue, we live in a “participative age,” characterized by widespread enthusiasm for citizen participation and in which a “remarkable consensus has emerged around its desirability.” Another variant associated with the active involvement of political actors is co-optation. By co-optation, we refer to a process of degeneration in participatory budgeting in which an originally functioning PB design is redefined by political actors to serve their political interests.

This raises the question of how far political representatives are genuinely committed to implementing democratic innovations rather than merely using them as marketing tools. The tension between the representative role of elected officials and the ambition of democratic innovations to enhance the role of citizens has been highlighted by Thompson (2019, p. 255), who argues:

> Regardless of whether one supports a limited or more expansive role for citizens between elections, the ad hoc nature of many democratic innovations suggests that elected representatives do not yet see an ongoing role for democratic innovations as part of representative democracy. (Thompson, 2019, p. 255)

Thompson also highlights the more critical perspective advanced by Walker et al. (2015), who contend that political elites have adapted to the challenges posed by citizen participation and increasingly use participation as a “management tool” rather than a democratization method. In this view, “elite rule is reorganized to accommodate greater openness and participation without disrupting hierarchies and power relations” (Walker et al., 2015, as cited in Thompson, 2019, p. 256). This perspective suggests that democratic innovations may, under certain conditions, serve to reinforce rather than transform existing structures of political power.

In the now classic volume on the evaluation of democratic innovations by Geissel and Newton(2012), Newton identifies several reasons why democratic innovations may produce weak or no effects. First, a democratic innovation may have been implemented poorly, with inappropriate methods or procedures. Second, even when a democratic innovation is proce-

durally and methodologically sound, its outcomes may be effectively "negated" because of politicization, that is, through the influence of interested actors, including governments, parties, or opposing interest groups. Newton also refers to a "placebo effect" of democratic innovations:

> (…) caused not by the innovation itself but simply because the authorities have taken trouble to try to reach out to citizens and express an interest in their opinions. The warm and fuzzy feelings and the belief that things are getting better, even if they are not, may be what research measures, rather than any specific benefit flowing from the specific innovation. (Newton, 2012, p. 13)

If we set aside the category of "fake" democratic innovations, which were not intended from the outset to function as genuinely effective participatory mechanisms, the causes of failure or degeneration of democratic innovations can be divided into several categories. The first two categories are behavioral in nature and concern the actions and attitudes of key actors. In our classification, we label these political and administrative/bureaucratic, as they primarily concern the behavior of elected officials and public administrators. The remaining three categories relate to the institutional framework itself and are classified as procedural, technical, and fiscal. This categorization is grounded in a top-down institutional approach (Allegretti & Stortone, 2014, p. 319; Blas & Ibarra, 2006) and focuses primarily on the processes associated with the political and institutional actors responsible for initiating, designing, and implementing participatory budgeting. These actors remain indispensable, even when citizens and civil society initiate and demand participation through bottom-up processes. The complex configuration of these components decisively influences the participatory dimension of PB operationalization, shaping citizens' attitudes, behavior, and willingness to engage in the process.

As mentioned above, our categorization builds on and synthesizes existing research on democratic innovations and participatory budgeting and proposes the following five categories:

(a) Political: This category corresponds to Newton's notion of the "negation" of the outcomes of otherwise properly designed democratic innovations. It therefore includes failures of democratic innovations resulting from the influence of political or other co-opted interests. It also encompasses the aforementioned disruptive role of "politicization," as observed in the case of participatory budgeting in Brazil, where political support—particularly within polarized systems—may generate complications and lead to a loss of backing as political opposition increases (see also Cabannes, 2004, p. 33). A similar politicization-driven discontinuity has

been observed in other contexts, where opposition parties replacing incumbent governments often lack the willingness or incentives to continue policies (even when they are successful and rational) introduced by their predecessors (Rodgers, 2010). Outcomes may also depend on whether left-wing or non-left-wing parties come to power (Azevedo et al., 2022).

(b) Administrative/bureaucratic: Administrative causes include the failure or degeneration of democratic innovations resulting from the unwillingness or inability of the administrative apparatus responsible for their implementation. This bureaucratic incapacity is not necessarily intentional, as democratic innovations are complex and demanding processes. Local administrations, or administrative bodies at other levels, may not be adequately prepared to implement the required procedures without errors or may lack sufficient motivation to carry them out effectively and consistently.

(c) Procedural: This category encompasses the selection of appropriate methods for the successful implementation of participatory budgeting. As noted above, variability in PB procedures identified by Elstub and Escobar (2019) relates to methods for selecting participants, although self-selection is the dominant mode in PB. This approach has certain limitations, as it tends to result in the participation of individuals already interested in public affairs, particularly those who are more highly educated rather than less educated citizens, and members of middle and upper socioeconomic classes rather than low-income or unemployed groups. These participant characteristics may, in turn, influence the selection of projects that primarily reflect their interests and are concentrated in their residential areas (Featherstone, 2018). Conversely, other parts of the city in which participants do not reside may remain neglected or develop at a significantly slower pace (Soukop et al., 2021, p. 144). In addition, inappropriate voting methods may further undermine the process's effectiveness.

(d) Technical: This category refers primarily to the selection, design, and provision of the technical parameters of the procedures, as well as the technical preparation required to ensure the successful implementation of the participatory budgeting process. It also includes issues such as ensuring citizens' awareness and access to information, as a lack of information or poor information provision can decisively affect outcomes. Furthermore, it encompasses process transparency and the risk of excessive bureaucratization, which may undermine overall implementation effectiveness.

(e) Fiscal: Participatory budgeting is a democratic innovation that is exclusively linked to decisions about budgets and the allocation of public resources. When budgets are limited, smaller-scale projects tend to be prioritized; when financial resources are sufficient, PB may

contribute to more systemic changes within municipalities. This category, therefore, plays a crucial role in determining the success or failure of participatory budgeting processes. Spada (2023) examines the influence of economic factors on participatory budgeting in Brazil; Wampler and Goldfrank (2022) systematically examine this factor, highlighting limited flexibility in financial allocation and economic crises as critical determinants. Alarcón et al. (2019) analyze the impact of economic crises on participatory budgeting, identifying a dual effect: citizens tend to prefer less costly projects, while local governments implement fewer proposals.

Beyond these categories, it is necessary to identify one specific contextual factor that had considerable potential to influence the success or failure of participatory budgeting. This factor was the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly affected some countries (Bardovič & Gašparík, 2021; Kukučková et al., 2025).

Research Method

To analyze the causes of participatory budgeting failures in the selected cases, we employ the fuzzy-set QCA method (see Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). This choice reflects several considerations about the nature of our research problem. First, the existing literature consistently describes the causes of democratic innovation failures as configurational, meaning no single factor is sufficient to explain them. Moreover, as Spada and Ryan (2017) highlight, the overwhelming focus of existing empirical research on successful "best practices" (with only a small proportion examining discontinued cases) has left our models of democratic innovations overdetermined; explicitly studying failures is therefore necessary to refine these causal theories. The combination of several conditions is therefore crucial (Ryan & Smith, 2012; Spada & Ryan, 2017; Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022). Standard correlational approaches assuming additive effects of variables do not reflect this form of causality; QCA, by contrast, treats conjunctions of conditions as distinct causal pathways (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010). Second, causality in PB failure is likely equifinal, with multiple pathways leading to the same outcome (Ryan, 2019; Schiuma, 2025). This is consistent with the Brazilian experience described by Wampler and Goldfrank (2022) and Azevedo et al. (2022), as well as with evidence from Central Europe (Soukop et al., 2021). QCA incorporates equifinality as a fundamental assumption. Third, the relationship between the causes of success and failure is not symmetrical; that is, the absence of factors leading to failure does not automatically constitute the conditions for success, and vice versa. This causal asymmetry is another important feature of QCA that traditional regression approaches are unable to capture (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010).

Case Selection

Case selection is based on the logic of the most-similar-systems design: We select cities from the Central European region that have undergone similar political, social, and cultural development over the last century and for which a comparable institutional framework of local self-government can be assumed. The initial screening criteria are as follows:

- An established practice of PB with demonstrable institutional embedding according to the criteria of Sintomer et al. (2008);
- Available empirical evidence covering the entire mechanism from legal establishment to the implementation phase;
- A population of at least 25,000 inhabitants, ensuring the regional relevance of the case.

We also exclude cases in which the termination of PB was primarily conditioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, as it represents an exogenous shock that would complicate the identification of endogenous conditions of failure. Because this study focuses on the dynamics of PB failure, the analysis is limited to cases in which the PB process did not achieve sustained operation. Cases in which PB continued or expanded are deliberately excluded, enabling us to identify the configurations of conditions associated with failure. The implications of this design choice for the interpretation of our findings are discussed in the section on analytical limitations. Before turning to the analysis, it is also important to acknowledge that the amount of empirical evidence available varies somewhat across cases. Although we do not consider these differences substantial enough to undermine the validity of the comparison, we take them into account during the calibration process, when assigning membership scores for the conditions and the outcome (Y). Specifically, for cases with more limited documentation, we adopted a more conservative approach when assigning higher membership scores. The five cases selected for analysis include the city of Mława in Poland, Bratislava, Bratislava-Petržalka, and Ružomberok in Slovakia, and Prague 7 in the Czech Republic.

Operationalization of the Outcome

The outcome (Y) is conceptualized as the failure of the participatory budgeting process. By this term, we refer to three empirically distinguishable yet theoretically related situations:

- Transformation of PB because of political negation as defined by Newton (2012): failures of democratic innovations resulting from the influence of political or other co-opted interests and dynamics of politicization;

- Discontinuity following a period of actual operation, whereby the process is abandoned after one or several cycles;
- De facto termination despite formal retention, manifested in either a zero allocation of resources or the absence of deliberation.

We combine these definitions into a single outcome because all three situations result in the loss of PB as a functioning democratic innovation; however, their qualitative differences are reflected in the descriptions of the individual types of failure.

Operationalization of the Conditions

From our typology of five causes of failure, we derive three theoretically grounded conditions that capture the principal mechanisms identified in the literature.

POL: Political-Bureaucratic Condition

This condition captures the behavior of political actors and the responsiveness of the administrative apparatus: failure or absence of political will for decision-makers, co-optation of PB by political actors and redefinition of PB to serve political interests, loss of political support following a change in local government, and unwillingness or inability of municipal administrators to implement PB effectively (as seen in many European consultative models that lack genuine empowered participatory governance; see Sintomer et al., 2008). It draws on the arguments of Thompson (2019) and Walker et al. (2015) concerning the tension between the representative role of elected officials and the strengthening of citizens' roles, as well as on the Brazilian evidence on the politicization of PB (Azevedo et al., 2022; Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022).

PRO: Procedural-Technical Condition

This condition captures procedural and technical shortcomings in the design and implementation of PB. These include inappropriate procedures, such as winner-takes-all allocation, which creates "too many ´losers´" and may discourage future participation (Spada, 2019, p. 172); restrictions on eligible projects; and poorly designed voting arrangements (Wampler, 2007). It also covers technical aspects of the process, including insufficient promotion, which can undermine large-scale democratic innovations by leaving much of the public unaware of the process (Ardanaz et al., 2023; Ryan & Smith, 2012); inadequate information provision

that depends on overly complex materials and places high demands on participants (Azevedo et al., 2022; Lightbody & Roberts, 2019), and poorly planned timing or demanding schedules that can lead to participant fatigue (Azevedo et al., 2022; Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014).

FISC: Fiscal Condition

This condition captures the structural underfunding of the budget allocated to PB, including situations in which resources are not allocated at all. It draws on Alarcón et al. (2019) and Wampler and Goldfrank (2022), who identify fiscal capacity as a critical factor in the sustainability of PB. The conceptualization of this condition is also supported by existing QCA applications to democratic innovations, which consistently test financial capacity (such as the availability of discretionary funds for new capital investment and municipal fiscal independence) as a core explanatory factor for the success and institutionalization of PB (Ryan & Smith, 2012; Schiuma, 2025; Wampler, 2007). As Wampler (2007) notes, limited spending capacity fundamentally undermines programs that delegate authority to citizens.

Calibration

We calibrate the three conditions and the outcome using a four-value fuzzy-set scale. A score of 1 indicates full membership, 0.67 indicates that a case is more in the set than out of it, 0.33 indicates that it is more out of the set than in it, and 0 indicates full non-membership. We do not assign a score of 0.5 because it represents the crossover point between membership and non-membership (Cangialosi, 2023; Fiss, 2011; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Cases at this threshold cannot be included in the sufficiency analysis.

Calibration was based on the empirical evidence available for each case. POL and PRO each combine two sub-dimensions, which we first assessed separately and then combined using the aggregation rule in Appendix 1 (Table A1). We assessed each case individually and assigned membership scores according to the strength and consistency of the available evidence. When the evidence supported more than one plausible score, we opted for the more conservative calibration and explain the reasoning behind that decision in the corresponding case commentary.

Table 1 summarizes how the qualitative assessments reported in the results matrix were translated into fuzzy-set membership scores.

Table 1

Calibration Key

Verbal Assessment in the Matrix	Membership Score
Condition fully present	1.00
Condition strongly present, but not at full intensity	0.67
Condition present only partially or in a limited manifestation	0.33
Condition absent or present only to a negligible extent	0.00

Analysis

The analysis is conducted in two steps that are standard in fuzzy-set QCA (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). First, we examine the necessity of individual conditions. That is, condition X is a necessary condition for outcome Y if the occurrence of Y without X is not observed. The consistency of necessity is calculated as the ratio of the sum of the minima of the pairs (membership in the condition, membership in the outcome) to the sum of membership scores in the outcome. A condition is considered necessary if its consistency is at least 0.90 (Li et al., 2025; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

In the second step, we analyze sufficiency by examining whether a particular combination of conditions consistently leads to the outcome. For sufficient combinations, we report two indicators. Consistency expresses the degree to which cases exhibiting a given combination belong to the outcome (formally, it is the ratio of the sum of the minima of the pairs consisting of membership in the configuration and membership in the outcome to the sum of membership scores in the combination). Coverage expresses the proportion of membership in the outcome explained by a given combination; that is, the same numerator divided by the sum of membership scores in the outcome (Ragin, 2006).

Calibrated Values

Applying the calibration key to the five cases of failure produced the fuzzy-set scores presented in Table 2. Detailed justifications for the individual scores are provided in the appendix to this study.

Table 2

Calibrated Fuzzy-Set Scores

Case	POL	PRO	FISC	Y (Failure)
Mława	1.00	0.67	1.00	1.00
Bratislava	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Ružomberok	1.00	0.33	1.00	1.00
Prague 7	1.00	1.00	0.33	1.00
Bratislava-Petržalka	1.00	0.67	0.00	1.00

The calibrated data indicate that the condition POL attains full membership (1.00) in all five cases. Political-bureaucratic failure therefore constitutes a common feature across all cases examined. In contrast, PRO and FISC vary considerably: PRO ranges from 0.33 (Ružomberok) to 1.00 (Bratislava, Prague 7), while FISC ranges from 0.00 (Bratislava-Petržalka) to 1.00 (Mława, Bratislava, and Ružomberok). This distribution foreshadows an important finding: the political-bureaucratic dimension represents a constant across cases, whereas the procedural-technical and fiscal dimensions define qualitatively distinct types of failure.

The case of Prague 7 exhibits full membership in the outcome set (Y = 1.00). The subsequently introduced school participatory budgeting program (providing only EUR 2,000 per school, approximately EUR 16,000 in total) does not constitute a comparable continuation of the municipal participatory budgeting process as a form of citizen participation. Rather, it represents a substitute mechanism aimed at a different target group and operating with a substantially lower budget allocation.

Necessity Analysis

Table 3

Necessity Consistency Scores for Individual Conditions

Conditions	Consistency of Necessity
POL	1.00
PRO	0.73
FISC	0.67

The analysis identifies POL with a necessity consistency score of 1.00. This value reflects the fact that the political-bureaucratic dimension of failure is present at full intensity in all five analyzed cases. POL therefore qualifies as a formally necessary condition within the examined sample. Given that the study includes only cases of participatory budgeting (PB) failure, the perfect necessity consistency of POL indicates the universal presence of this condition across cases in which PB failed, rather than supporting a strong causal claim that failure would not have occurred in the absence of POL.

The condition PRO achieves a necessity consistency score of 0.73. This value falls well below the conventional threshold of 0.90 commonly used to infer necessity (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Procedural-technical failure therefore does not constitute a necessary condition in the cases under investigation, as some failures occur when this dimension is not fully present (most notably Ružomberok, with a PRO score of 0.33). Thus, procedural-technical failure may function as an accompanying factor rather than as an independent trigger of participatory budgeting failure.

The condition FISC, with a necessity consistency score of 0.67, likewise does not qualify as a necessary condition. Even in cases where budget allocations were low (approximately EUR 1 per capita in Prague 7 and a comparable amount in Bratislava-Petržalka), the immediate trigger for the termination of participatory budgeting was political-bureaucratic decisions rather than fiscal constraints. This finding weakens the assumption that financial factors constitute the primary driver within the causal structure of participatory budgeting failure.

Sufficiency Analysis

We test sufficiency for two configurations, POL*PRO and the extended POL*PRO*FISC. In line with standard QCA notation, an asterisk marks the logical AND and a tilde marks the absence of a condition. Table 4 reports the results.

Table 4

Consistency and Coverage of Sufficient Configurations

Configuration	Consistency	Coverage
POL*PRO	1.00	0.73
POL*PRO*FISC	1.00	0.47

The configuration POL*PRO achieves a sufficiency consistency score of 1.00, exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.80 (Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). When political-bureaucratic failure occurs alongside fully or substantially present procedural-technical failure, participatory budgeting can be terminated. This conclusion applies to four of the five cases under investigation: Mława, Bratislava, Prague 7, and Bratislava-Petržalka.

The fifth case, Ružomberok, exhibits only a low degree of membership in PRO (0.33) and therefore does not clearly belong to this configuration. Its failure followed a different causal pathway, which is described in the Typology of Failure Combinations section as Combination B.

POL*PRO has a coverage of 0.73. This means that the configuration accounts for most, but not all, of the membership in the outcome. In fsQCA, coverage is calculated from membership scores rather than from the number of cases. The uncovered part (1.33) comes mostly from Ružomberok, which belongs to POL*PRO only at 0.33 and accounts for 0.67 of the gap. Mława and Bratislava–Petržalka add 0.33 each, because they belong to the configuration at 0.67 rather than fully. In practical terms, the joint presence of political–bureaucratic and procedural–technical failure describes four of the five cases well. Ružomberok is the exception, and its failure followed a different path, discussed in Section 3.4 as Combination B.

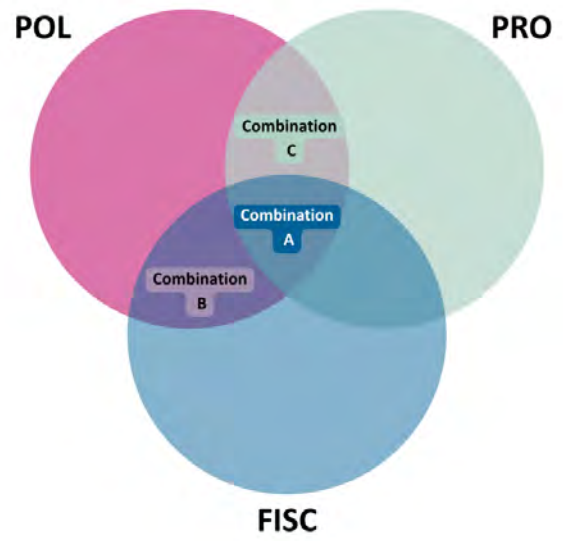
When FISC is added, consistency stays at 1.00 and coverage falls to 0.47. The consistency value tells us little here. All five cases are full members of the outcome, so every configuration reaches a consistency of 1.00 in this sample, and coverage is the more useful measure. The lower coverage shows that fiscal problems are not shared across the failed cases. They appear together with POL and PRO in Mława and Bratislava and without PRO in Ružomberok. They are absent in Prague 7 and Bratislava–Petržalka, where PB ended all the same. In our cases, fiscal failure never occurs without political–bureaucratic failure and never accounts for termination on its own. We read this as a sign that fiscal constraints may reinforce political–bureaucratic failure. Since the study includes only failed cases, this reading cannot be tested here and remains a proposition for further research.

Typology of Failure Combinations

Based on the analyzed configurations, we derive three empirically supported combinations that lead to the termination of participatory budgeting. For visual reference, Figure 1 maps the five cases under investigation onto configurations of the three conditions POL, PRO, and FISC. The cases are positioned in the diagram according to dichotomized values (with the presence of a condition corresponding to a score > 0.5). The visualization shows that all cases are located within the set POL, consistent with the finding that this condition is present in all five cases. It also demonstrates that the three observed configurations correspond to the three types of failure identified in our typology.

Figure 1

Mapping of Cases onto Combinations of POL, PRO, and FISC



*Combination A—Co-optation and Hollowing Out (Mława, Bratislava): POL*PRO *FISC*

This combination differs from the other two in several respects. It is the only one in which all three conditions are strongly present (Table 2), and the only one where PB did not decline through neglect but was actively reshaped by political actors. In both Mława and Bratislava, local leaders retained the participatory budgeting process but gradually altered its purpose. In Mława, binding decisions were replaced with non-binding consultations, while in Bratislava the municipality avoided adopting a formal statute and increasingly shifted participation from public meetings to online voting. These procedural changes were not simply signs of poor implementation. Instead, they reduced opportunities for meaningful deliberation and gave political actors greater control over the process. Limited funding reinforced this trajectory, but it was not the main driver of failure. Rather, it strengthened a process whose original participatory function had already been substantially weakened.

Combination B—Fiscal Constraints Under Conditions of Political-Bureaucratic Disengagement (Ružomberok): POL~ PRO*FISC*

Ružomberok differs from the other cases in one important respect: it is the only case with low membership in PRO (0.33; Table 2). Unlike Mława, Bratislava, Prague 7, and Bratislava-Petržalka, the termination of PB in this case cannot be attributed to major procedural or technical changes. Instead, the process gradually lost institutional support. While Combination A reflects political actors actively reshaping PB, Ružomberok represents political and administrative disengagement. The municipality did not formally redesign or restrict the process; instead, PB was gradually neglected, remained off the municipal council's agenda, operated with a frozen budget, and eventually disappeared altogether. This case therefore shows that termination does not always result from manipulating participatory procedures. Under conditions of limited political attention and declining financial support, PB can also fade away without substantial procedural intervention.

Combination C—Post-electoral Discontinuity (Prague 7, Bratislava-Petržalka): POL PRO* ~FISC*

Combination C shares an important feature with Combination A: in both cases, PB ended in the presence of political-bureaucratic and procedural-technical problems. The difference is that, in these two cases, financial constraints did not play a meaningful role in the process of decline. Instead, the turning point was a change in political leadership after local elections.

In Prague 7, the newly elected leadership decided to discontinue PB, while in Bratislava-Petržalka the incoming administration did not continue the process and gradually allowed it to disappear from the local agenda.

These cases differ from Combination A because PB was not redesigned or adapted to serve a different purpose. No one tried to reshape the process; it was simply discontinued. Comparing these two pathways shows that similar conditions can lead to different forms of failure. While Combination A reflects a situation in which PB was retained but altered by political actors, Combination C represents a situation in which the process lost political support and ended.

Limitations of the Analysis

Several limitations must be considered when interpreting the results. First, the inclusion of five cases means that out of the eight logically possible configurations of three binary conditions, only three are observed. The remaining five configurations are logical remainders, and our sufficiency conclusions apply only to the empirical sample rather than to the full combinatorial space. This limitation is consistent with the study's design, which is conceived as an empirical basis for future large-N comparative research.

Second, the study includes only cases of participatory budgeting failure. This design choice is theoretically motivated by the call to systematically address "failure neglect" (Spada & Ryan, 2017), but it has specific inferential implications. In the absence of cases of continuity, it is not possible to formally test whether the identified configurations lead to failure or whether they are merely present in selected cases of failure. In particular, the necessity consistency of POL at 1.00 does not constitute a strong causal claim about necessity; rather, it reflects the fact that this condition is fully present in all five selected cases. The sufficiency analysis, therefore, primarily serves as a description of shared characteristics of failed cases rather than as a test of causal claims. This methodological status is reflected in the formulation of the findings, where causal language is deliberately avoided.

Third, calibration in QCA is based on interpretive decisions by the researcher. In cases with less extensive documentation, we applied more conservative thresholds when assigning higher membership scores. Detailed justifications of all values in the Appendix ensure the transparency of this process.

Conclusions

The analysis of five cases of unsuccessful participatory budgeting in Central Europe empirically confirms the assumption that democratic innovations fail for more than one reason. Rather, such failures arise from specific combinations of factors. In the introductory section, we identified five principal categories that may contribute to participatory budgeting failures. For the empirical analysis, these categories were consolidated into three broader conditions.

The political-bureaucratic condition (POL) is present at full intensity in all five cases (necessity consistency = 1.00). Given that the analysis focuses exclusively on cases of municipalities and city districts in which participatory budgeting failed, POL does not, by itself, demonstrate causal necessity. Rather than functioning as an independent causal trigger, the condition appears to operate as a consistently present background factor accompanying the failure of participatory budgeting.

The procedural-technical (PRO) and fiscal (FISC) conditions are not present in all cases (necessity consistency of 0.73 and 0.67). The sufficiency analysis shows that the combination POL*PRO describes four of the five cases well (consistency = 1.00, coverage = 0.73). When FISC is added, coverage drops to 0.47, because fiscal problems were absent in two of the cases. Placing the cases on the three conditions gives three empirical types of failure: (A) co-optation and hollowing out (Mława, Bratislava); (B) fiscal constraints under conditions of political-bureaucratic disengagement (Ružomberok); and (C) post-electoral discontinuity (Prague 7, Bratislava–Petržalka).

The fiscal condition did not lead to termination on its own in any of the cases. It always appeared together with political-bureaucratic failure, and in Prague 7 and Bratislava–Petržalka PB ended even though fiscal problems were absent. We therefore suggest that fiscal constraints reinforce political-bureaucratic failure rather than trigger it. Because the study includes only failed cases, this is a hypothesis that future large-N research should test on a sample that also includes municipalities where PB continued. The finding builds on earlier work on the fiscal side of PB (e.g., Alarcón et al., 2019; Soukop et al., 2021; Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022).

Although this study is limited to Central Europe, some shortcomings of participatory budgeting (PB), or the erosion of its substance, have also been identified in the Brazilian context (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022). In the case of Porto Alegre, research has identified institutional decay compounded by fiscal constraints on PB and declining political commitment, leading

to the disruption of the model that inspired PB on a global scale. Post-electoral discontinuity, in turn, corresponds to findings from the municipal context in Brazil, where changes in local government leadership led to the termination of PB (Azevedo et al., 2022). The findings show that the identified political-bureaucratic, procedural-technical, and fiscal conditions extend beyond Central Europe, and that the problems associated with PB are global in nature. The study's conclusions can thus be replicated beyond the Central European context.

Appendix 1

Justification of calibration and intermediate calculations

This appendix supplements the study with a brief justification of fuzzy-set values for each of the five cases, including references to empirical evidence, as well as intermediate calculations of necessity and sufficiency consistency for the identified combinations.

Aggregation rule for two-component conditions

POL and PRO each combine two sub-dimensions (POL: political-participatory and administrative-bureaucratic; PRO: procedural and technical), whereas FISC is a single-component condition. The degree of presence of both sub-dimensions is converted into the resulting condition value according to the rule presented in Table A1. The rule follows a conservative logic of the calibration key; the value "fully present" applies to situations in which both sub-dimensions exhibit a significant failure.

Table A1

Aggregation rule for two sub-dimensions into the resulting condition value

Profile of two sub-dimensions	Condition value
Both sub-dimensions fully present	1,00
One sub-dimension fully present, the other at least partially present	1,00
One sub-dimension fully present, the other absent or negligibly present	0,67
Both sub-dimensions partially present	0,67
One sub-dimension partially present, the other absent or negligibly present	0,33
Both sub-dimensions absent or negligibly present	0,00

Justification of case-specific calibration

Table A2 summarizes the calibrated values; these are subsequently justified in detail.

Table A2

Calibrated fuzzy scores

Case	POL	PRO	FISC	Y
Mława	1,00	0,67	1,00	1,00
Bratislava	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Ružomberok	1,00	0,33	1,00	1,00
Praha 7	1,00	1,00	0,33	1,00
Bratislava-Petržalka	1,00	0,67	0,00	1,00

Mława

POL = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The political-participatory sub-dimension is only partially present. The decision to introduce PB was adopted unanimously by the city council in 2015, receiving 19 votes in favor, and Mayor S. Kowalewski publicly supported the initiative[1]. Political failure became apparent only at a later stage: in May 2019, the Deputy Mayor stated that municipalities of Mława's size were not legally required to implement PB[2], and it was subsequently terminated in August 2019[3]. The administrative-bureaucratic sub-dimension is fully present: The heritage conservation authority rejected permits for the mini salt towers—structures designed to enrich the air with saline aerosols—on three occasions; public procurement procedures repeatedly failed to attract bids; and the economic committee significantly underestimated the construction costs of the saline park. Of the four winning projects, only two were ultimately implemented. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "one sub-dimension fully present and the other partially present" corresponds to a condition value of 1.00.

PRO = 0.67 (condition substantially present, but not at full intensity)

The procedural sub-dimension is fully present. The winner-takes-all rule meant that the most expensive winning project consumed the entire budget of EUR 70,000[4], thereby preventing the implementation of the remaining projects. The technical sub-dimension is only partially present. Voting was accessible and was gradually improved over time, including the reduction of the minimum voting age from 18 to 16 years. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "one sub-dimension fully present and the other partially present" corresponds to a condition value of 0.67.

1 Protokół Nr VIII/2015 z obrad sesji Rady Miasta z dnia 30 czerwca 2015r. | Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej Urzędu Miasta Mława
2 protokoł z VIII sesji.pdf
3 Protokoł z X sesji.pdf
4 PROTOKÓŁ Nr V z 22.01.2019 r. do bip.pdf

FISC = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The budget allocation remained fixed at EUR 70,000 throughout all four editions (2015–2018), with no increase in response to growing demand, indicating structural underfunding.

Y = 1.00 (outcome fully present)

In August 2019, the municipality formally terminated the participatory budgeting.

Bratislava

POL = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The political-participatory sub-dimension is fully present. The city council repeatedly rejected the Framework Concept of Participatory Budgeting prepared by a civic association, while the financial allocations for PB remained substantially below the amounts promised by Mayor Ftáčnik (EUR 30,000 instead of EUR 100,000 in the first edition and EUR 46,000 in the third edition).[5] The administrative-bureaucratic sub-dimension is also fully present. The PB statute was never formally adopted; a number of approved citizen projects were either not implemented or implemented only partially; and in some cases, citizens were not compensated for the work they had carried out. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "both sub-dimensions fully present" corresponds to a condition value of 1.00.

PRO = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The procedural sub-dimension is fully present. The city council insisted on online voting as the decisive component of the process, rather than public deliberative forums, thereby circumventing the deliberative logic of participatory budgeting. The technical sub-dimension is only partially present. Online voting lacked safeguards against multiple voting, and public outreach remained inadequate despite repeated demands from the civic platform. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "one sub-dimension fully present and the other partially present" corresponds to a condition value of 1.00.

FISC = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The declared target of allocating 1% of the municipal budget (approximately EUR 2 mi-

5 *Bratislava participatory budget: Case study report & analysis.* Utopia. https://www.participativni-rozpocet.cz/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/REPORT_BRATISLAVA_PB.pdf

llion) was met only to the extent of roughly 2.3% of the declared amount (EUR 46,000), representing a ratio of approximately 1:43.

Y = 1.00 (outcome fully present)

The process formally continued only in a form that the civic platform itself regarded as illegitimate.

Ružomberok

POL = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The political-participatory sub-dimension is only partially present. Initially, participatory budgeting enjoyed political support: in December 2012, Mayor Pavlík approved a pilot allocation of EUR 5,000, and the city council formally endorsed the PB initiative. Following the 2014 local elections, however, the new municipal leadership showed little interest in continuing the process and rejected citizens' demands for the adoption of formal PB rules. The administrative-bureaucratic sub-dimension is fully present throughout the 2013–2015 period.[6] PB lacked any formal institutional framework (no directive or formal regulation was adopted), operated on an ad hoc basis through the sub-accounts of two municipal departments, and municipal officials themselves acknowledged that they were often uncertain about how to proceed with certain administrative tasks. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "one sub-dimension fully present and the other partially present" corresponds to a condition value of 1.00.

PRO = 0.33 (condition only partially present)

The procedural sub-dimension is only partially present. Although the methodology incorporated several innovative features—including a participatory methodology, thematic working groups, and decentralization—it lacked formal procedures and systematic evaluation of the voting process. The technical sub-dimension is also only partially present, as the initiative received minimal media coverage and was not supported by any systematic promotional campaign. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "one sub-dimension partially present and the other absent or negligibly present" corresponds to a condition value of 0.33.

FISC = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The PB was structurally underfunded, receiving only EUR 5,000 annually during the three

6 https://www.dvepercenta.sk/mala-asignacia/2019/05/03/ruzomberok-sk/

editions held between 2013 and 2015 (reduced to EUR 4,500 in 2014). Civic initiatives themselves described this amount as demotivating.

Y = 1.00 (outcome fully present)

In 2016, participatory budgeting "quietly disappeared" without any formal decision to terminate it.[7]

Praha 7

POL = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The political-participatory sub-dimension is fully present. Although PB initially enjoyed the support of a majority of parties represented in the municipal council, the new governing coalition led by Mayor J. Čižinský discontinued the process in its original form following the 2014 local elections[8], citing a lack of citizen interest. The administrative-bureaucratic sub-dimension is only partially present. The rules governing PB were adopted with a delay, only after the beginning of the fiscal year, and the process received virtually no public promotion. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "one sub-dimension fully present and the other partially present" corresponds to a condition value of 1.00.

PRO = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The procedural sub-dimension is fully present. Participation was restricted exclusively to investment projects, while voting was open for only 11 days and could be conducted solely in person at three designated locations. The technical sub-dimension is only partially present. Minimal promotion resulted in participation by only 0.22% of eligible voters (66 out of 30,624)[9]. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "one sub-dimension fully present and the other partially present" corresponds to a condition value of 1.00.

FISC = 0.33 (condition only partially present)

The allocation of EUR 40,000 for 2014 amounted to approximately EUR 0.9 per capita, the lowest level among Prague municipal districts (other districts allocated between EUR

7 https://www.dvepercenta.sk/mala-asignacia/2019/05/03/ruzomberok-sk/

8 Soukop, M., Šaradín, P., & Zapletalová, M. (2021). *Participatory budgeting: A case study of possible causes of failure*. Slovak Journal of Political Sciences, 21(2), 139–160, https://doi.org/10.34135/sjps.210202

9 https://alternativazdola.cz/praha-7-vysledky-hlasovani-o-vyuziti-participativni-casti-rozpoctu/

1.1 and EUR 5.5 per capita). This represented a psychologically insufficient allocation rather than a critically underfunded budget, as the available funds were sufficient to implement the winning project.

Y = 1.00 (outcome fully present)

Participatory budgeting as a citywide process ended in 2016. The school budgets introduced afterwards (EUR 2,000 per school per year) should not be regarded as a continuation of that process under a different label. They served a different target group (pupils rather than the general public), operated with only a small fraction of the original budget, and were not presented by the district as a replacement for the citywide participatory budgeting program. Nor did we find any evidence that participants in the original process could continue their involvement through the school scheme. We therefore treat the citywide participatory budgeting process as having ended in 2016.

Bratislava-Petržalka

POL = 1.00 (condition fully present)

The political-participatory sub-dimension is fully present. The municipal leadership never fully embraced participatory budgeting and formally terminated the process in 2016[10], citing its administrative and time demands. The administrative-bureaucratic sub-dimension is only partially present, as the process was hindered by lengthy bureaucratic procedures and property-rights issues related to the land on which projects were to be implemented. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "one sub-dimension fully present and the other partially present" corresponds to a condition value of 1.00.

PRO = 0.67 (condition substantially present, but not at full intensity)

The procedural sub-dimension is fully present. Participatory budgeting had a distinctly top-down character, with the municipal administration determining both the thematic areas of voting (e.g., green spaces and playgrounds) and the specific locations from which citizens could choose, rather than allowing citizens to propose projects themselves.[11] The technical

10 https://www.petrzalka.sk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Infomaterial_Vyhodnotenie_prioritnych_cielov.pdf

11 Vittek, P. (2013). Pokusy o zavedenie participatívneho rozpočtu na Slovensku. In K. Silná (Ed.), *Rozhodujme o svém městě: Participativní rozpočet jako aktivní zapojení občanů a občanek do rozhodování: Sborník konference* (pp. 32–38). Ekumenická akademie Praha. http://www.socialwatch.cz/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Sbornik_konference_PR.pdf, p. 36.

sub-dimension is only partially present, as online voting functioned without major technical problems. According to the aggregation rule, the configuration "one sub-dimension fully present and the other partially present" corresponds to a condition value of 0.67.

FISC = 0.00 (condition absent or negligibly present)

The budget allocation increased from EUR 20,000 in 2013 to EUR 30,000[12] in subsequent years. Relative to the pilot nature of the process, the budget cannot be considered objectively insufficient, and fiscal constraints played no role in the decision to terminate it. The explicitly stated reason for termination was administrative burden rather than a lack of financial resources.

Y = 1.00 (outcome fully present)

In 2016, participatory budgeting was formally terminated, and participatory funding was subsequently transferred to primary schools.

Calculation of necessity consistency

Necessity consistency is calculated as the sum of the minima, *min(X, Y)*, across all cases divided by the sum of the outcome values *(Y)*. Table A3 presents the complete intermediate calculations.

Table A3

Calculation of necessity consistency for POL, PRO and FISC

Case	POL	PRO	FISC	Y	min(POL,Y)	min(PRO,Y)	min(FISC,Y)
Mława	1,00	0,67	1,00	1,00	1,00	0,67	1,00
Bratislava	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Ružomberok	1,00	0,33	1,00	1,00	1,00	0,33	1,00
Praha 7	1,00	1,00	0,33	1,00	1,00	1,00	0,33
Petržalka	1,00	0,67	0,00	1,00	1,00	0,67	0,00
Σ				**5**	**5**	**3,67**	**3,33**

Consistency: POL = 5 / 5 = 1,00; PRO = 3,67 / 5 = 0,73; FISC = 3,33 / 5 = 0,67.

Calculation of sufficiency consistency

Table A4 presents the case-level values for the three analyzed configurations: POL ~ PRO, POL ~ FISC, and POL ~ PRO ~ FISC. The fuzzy-set score of each configuration is determined by the minimum value of its constituent conditions for a given case. Sufficiency

12 https://www.petrzalka.sk/2013-04-15-o-pouziti-financii-rozhoduju-aj-obyvatelia/

consistency is calculated as the sum of *min(configuration, Y)* divided by the sum of the configuration scores. Coverage is calculated as the same numerator divided by the sum of the outcome values *(Y)*.

Table A4

Intermediate calculations for the three analyzed configurations

Case	POL~PRO	min(~,Y)	POL~FISC	min(~,Y)	POL~PRO~FISC	min(~,Y)
Mława	0,67	0,67	1,00	1,00	0,67	0,67
Bratislava	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Ružomberok	0,33	0,33	1,00	1,00	0,33	0,33
Praha 7	1,00	1,00	0,33	0,33	0,33	0,33
Petržalka	0,67	0,67	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Σ	**3,67**	**3,67**	**3,33**	**3,33**	**2,33**	**2,33**

Σ(Y) = 5.

POL ~ PRO: consistency = 3,67 / 3,67 = 1,00; coverage = 3,67 / 5 = 0,73.

POL ~ FISC: consistency = 3,33 / 3,33 = 1,00; coverage = 3,33 / 5 = 0,67.

POL ~ PRO · FISC: consistency = 2,33 / 2,33 = 1,00; coverage = 2,33 / 5 = 0,47.

Summary of analyzed measures

Table A5

Summary of necessity and sufficiency consistency

Condition / Configuration	Necessity consistency	Sufficiency consistency	Coverage
POL	1,00	—	—
PRO	0,73	—	—
FISC	0,67	—	—
POL ~ PRO	—	1,00	0,73
POL ~ FISC	—	1,00	0,67
POL ~ PRO ~ FISC	—	1,00	0,47

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How to cite the article:
Šaradín, P., Zapletalová, M., Ostrá, D., & Zogata-Kusz, A. (2026). Understanding the Failure of Participatory Budgeting. *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 54-86. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a934

REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a971

Informational policy capacities for urban resilience: What drives them in local governments?

Capacidades informacionales del Estado para la resiliencia urbana: ¿qué las impulsa en los gobiernos locales?

Capacidades informacionais do Estado para a resiliência urbana: o que as impulsiona nos governos locais?

Recibido: 20/07/2026 - Aceptado: 19/10/2026

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Tipología del artículo: investigación.

Abstract

This study investigates the informational policy capacities of governments in the context of climate disaster prevention, response, and urban resilience. Drawing on the concept of informational capacities (Cingolani, 2013; Lopez et al., 2024; Marenco et al., 2025), it examines four dimensions: situational risk diagnostics, technologies for data collection and analysis, intersectoral articulation for information production, and projects for using produced information. We analyze the Contingency Plans of 70 of the 95 municipalities that declared public calamity after the May 2024 floods in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The research combines primary data (documentary analysis of contingency plans) and secondary data (explanatory variables on disaster exposure and technical, administrative, regulatory, and institutional capacities). Results suggest that municipalities' exposure to disaster risk has low explanatory power for informational capacities and correlates weakly with technical and

administrative capacity indices. Corroborating Wang and Feeney (2016) and Marenco and Abulatif (2025), the findings reinforce a weak relationship between Weberian characteristics and the use of informational instruments for disaster management. The study shows that municipal governments depend on external induction to develop capacities, and highlights intersectoral articulation as strategic for sharing informational resources among municipalities.

Keywords: informational policy capacities, policy capacity, urban resilience, disaster risk reduction, local government.

Resumen

Este estudio investiga las capacidades informacionales del Estado en el contexto de la prevención y respuesta a desastres climáticos y la resiliencia urbana. Con base en el concepto de capacidades informacionales (Cingolani, 2013; Lopez et al., 2024; Marenco et al., 2025), examina cuatro dimensiones: diagnósticos situacionales de riesgo, tecnologías para la recolección y el análisis de datos, articulación intersectorial para la producción de información y proyectos para el uso de la información producida. Se analizan los planes de contingencia de 70 de los 95 municipios que declararon calamidad pública tras las inundaciones de mayo de 2024 en Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. La investigación combina datos primarios (análisis documental de planes de contingencia) y datos secundarios (variables explicativas sobre exposición a desastres y capacidades técnicas, administrativas, regulatorias e institucionales). Los resultados sugieren que la exposición de los municipios al riesgo de desastres tiene bajo poder explicativo para las capacidades informacionales. En concordancia con Wang y Feeney (2016) y Marenco y Abulatif (2025), los hallazgos refuerzan la débil relación entre las características weberianas y el uso de instrumentos informacionales. El estudio muestra que los gobiernos municipales dependen de la inducción externa para desarrollar capacidades y destaca la articulación intersectorial como estratégica para el intercambio de recursos informacionales entre municipios.

Palabras clave: capacidades informacionales de políticas públicas, capacidad de políticas públicas, resiliencia urbana, reducción del riesgo de desastres, gobierno local.

Resumo

Este estudo investiga as capacidades informacionais do Estado no contexto da prevenção e resposta a desastres climáticos e da resiliência urbana. Com base no conceito de capacidades informacionais (Cingolani, 2013; Lopez et al., 2024; Marenco et al., 2025),

examina quatro dimensões: diagnósticos situacionais de risco, tecnologias para coleta e análise de dados, articulação intersetorial para produção de informação e projetos para uso da informação produzida. Analisamos os planos de contingência de 70 dos 95 municípios que decretaram calamidade pública após as enchentes de maio de 2024 no Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. A pesquisa combina dados primários (análise documental dos planos de contingência) e dados secundários (variáveis explicativas sobre exposição a desastres e capacidades técnicas, administrativas, regulatórias e institucionais). Os resultados sugerem que a exposição dos municípios ao risco de desastres possui baixo poder explicativo para as capacidades informacionais. Corroborando Wang e Feeney (2016) e Marenco e Abulatif (2025), os achados reforçam a fraca relação entre características weberianas e o uso de instrumentos informacionais. O estudo evidencia que os governos municipais dependem de indução externa para desenvolver capacidades e destaca a articulação intersetorial como estratégica para o compartilhamento de recursos informacionais entre municípios.

Palavras-chave: capacidades informacionais de políticas públicas, capacidade de políticas públicas, resiliência urbana, redução do risco de desastres, governo local.

Introduction

The increasing frequency and intensity of extreme climate events across regions worldwide pose major challenges for national and subnational governments in preparedness and response (UNDRR, 2022). The literature highlights that local governments, as a rule, bear responsibility for absorbing disaster impacts and for formulating strategies and implementing policy instruments to promote urban climate resilience (Büyükozkan et al., 2022). In this sense, the use of information is considered a strategic asset for the implementation of urban resilience policies by local governments (UNDRR, 2022). However, Wang and Feeney (2016) find that local governments may lack the capacities to produce and use information to formulate strategies and implement policy instruments, that is, informational policy capacities.

This study aims to analyze the composition of informational policy capacities in local governments and the factors that can drive their presence or absence in the context of urban resilience to climate disasters. The theoretical lens draws on the literature on policy capacities of national and subnational governments (Cingolani, 2013; Wu et al., 2015; Brenton et al., 2023), with a focus on the dimension of informational policy capacities (Whitehead, 1995; Peeters et al., 2023; Marenco et al., 2025) for local governments. This literature is associated with the theme of urban resilience, incorporating the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the City Resilience Framework (UNDRR, 2015; ARUP, 2024).

The empirical analysis examines the contingency plans of 70 Brazilian municipalities in the state of Rio Grande do Sul that declared a state of public calamity during the extreme hydrometeorological events of May 2024. The case is suited to this research for two main reasons. Brazilian legislation requires municipal governments in the national registry of disaster-prone areas to prepare Civil Protection Contingency Plans, making the plans comparable instruments across cities. Plans prepared before the May 2024 events allow *ex ante* preparedness to be analyzed. This analysis considered aspects such as the existence of situational diagnostics on disaster risk, guidelines for producing, using, and analyzing disaster risk data, and interinstitutional articulation for qualifying information. We investigate the extent to which elements related to informational policy capacities are present in Municipal Contingency Plans in ways capable of supporting planners and practitioners in better preparing for the formulation and execution of urban resilience actions. Building on this measurement, we take a further step toward testing variables with the potential to explain the variations in informational policy capacities evidenced in the contingency plans.

Among the main findings of this study, it is possible to mention that it bridges the state capacity and policy capacity traditions through the notion of operational informational capacity, stating that, in low-institutionalization contexts, planning instruments may constitute more than mere records of available capacity resources. Methodologically, the study proposes a replicable index (IndCap) that combines the Sendai Framework, the Urban Resilience Framework, and Wu et al.'s (2015) matrix. Empirically, it shows the potential dependence on external induction for the demonstration of informational policy capacities in municipal contingency plans, and indicates that structural characteristics of municipalities (such as population size and urban hierarchy) exert greater influence on informational capacities than Weberian bureaucracy and the historical record of climate disasters already experienced by municipalities, with both of the latter presenting only marginal influence on the variation of informational capacities demonstrated in the Plans.

Beyond this introduction, the paper is organized as follows: the second section reviews the literature on policy capacities, including informational policy capacities, followed by the literature on data-driven urban resilience. The third section presents the methodology and materials used to operationalize the research. The fourth and fifth sections present, respectively, the findings and a discussion of results in light of the literature on informational policy capacities of local governments for urban resilience. The sixth section presents our final considerations and directions for possible future developments of this research.

Policy Capacities for Urban Resilience

State Capacity and Policy Capacity

This investigation draws on two related but distinct traditions, the state capacity and policy capacity approaches. The state capacity literature, rooted in comparative politics and historical sociology, refers to the fundamental power of the state in terms of sovereignty, taxation, order keeping, bureaucratic quality, and infrastructural aspects, which allow the state to exist and project its authority over the territory and society (Cingolani, 2013; Munoz-del-Campo, 2026). The policy capacity literature, rooted in public policy studies, shifts the unit of analysis to specific policy functions: it concerns the skills and resources that governments possess and mobilize to formulate, implement, analyze, and evaluate policies effectively (Wu et al., 2015; Brenton et al., 2023; Munoz-del-Campo, 2026). Both approaches differ in their unit of analysis (the state as a whole versus a policy domain), in level (predominantly national versus any level of government, including municipalities), and in temporal nature (structural endowments versus capacities that can be built, mobilized, or lost within a policy subsystem).

Wu et al. (2015, p. 166) define policy capacity as "the set of skills and resources (or competences and capabilities) necessary to perform policy functions." In presenting this concept, the authors incorporate three analytical dimensions related to skills and competencies: the analytical, the operational, and the political. Analytical capacities are characterized as the ability to access and apply technical and scientific knowledge and analytical techniques in ways that enable the effective and cost-effective design and implementation of policies. Operational capacity is presented as the ability to perform key activities and functions at strategic, tactical, and operational levels. Regarding political capacities, the authors highlight political knowledge and expertise as key characteristics needed to develop and maintain relationships with governance partners and the public during policy implementation. These dimensions are positioned in relation to three levels of resources and capabilities: the individual, the organizational, and the systemic (the latter referring to the environment in which organizations and individuals involved in a given public policy interact, with particular focus on those interactions), enabling a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of policy implementation capacities. Table 1 presents an analytical framework illustrating how levels and dimensions are related, indicating possible examples of variables that may be considered for each of the nine possible combinations.

Table 1

Policy Capacities: Levels and Competencies (Dimensions)

Resource levels and capacities	Competencies (dimensions)		
	Analytic	**Operational**	**Political**
Individual	Statistical literacy and data interpretation; Proficiency in digital analytical tools; Capacity for synthesis and technical report writing; Knowledge of policy evaluation methods.	Planning and monitoring skills; Capacity for managing multidisciplinary teams; Competency in budget allocation and control; Adaptability in execution when facing unforeseen circumstances.	Capacity for reading the political environment; Negotiation and consensus-building skills; Strategic stakeholder management; Capacity for public communication and agenda framing.
Organizational	Existence of internal units for data production and analysis; Institutionalized systems for data collection and management; Guidelines and protocols for data collection and use; Evidence-oriented organizational culture; Capacity to recruit technical profiles or contract specialized services.	Performance monitoring and evaluation systems; Clear internal accountability flows; IT infrastructure to support implementation; Structured career paths and staff capacity-building plans; Standardized information and knowledge management processes.	Systematic conduct of public consultations and hearings; Institutionalized channels for dialogue with civil society; Capacity for transparent communication of decisions; Relationship management with the legislative and executive branches.
Systemic	Quality and comprehensiveness of national statistical systems; Availability of public policy training in universities; Presence of think tanks and independent research institutes; Culture of open access to government data.	Legal frameworks for intergovernmental coordination; Stable financing mechanisms across levels of government; Shared digital platforms among public agencies; Clear rules for agreements with non-governmental actors.	General level of societal trust in public institutions; Strength of the rule of law and respect for institutional rules; Legitimacy and stability of the political system; Quality of democratic accountability mechanisms.

Note. Adapted from Wu et al. (2015).

Cingolani (2023) addresses a relevant dimension of policy capacities through the concept of infrastructural capacity. The author defines infrastructural policy capacities as the state's capacity to be fully present in the territories it governs and implement its policies as expected—which, according to the author, involves committing specific endowments in the form of disposable financial resources, as well as a professional, impersonal, and stable bureaucracy. In this context, Cingolani makes an important contribution to the literature by incorporating into her analysis the role of new digital technologies in policy implementation. The author argues that digital technologies introduce at least three relevant elements to the traditional understanding of infrastructural capacities. The first concerns the possibility of bypassing the need to establish physical organizations to be present in citizens' everyday lives (where physical infrastructure would otherwise be required), allowing states to achieve uniform reach across the diversity of territories they govern. The second relates to the ability to identify citizens' needs, characteristics, and past behavior with unprecedented accuracy, such as mapping populations in high-risk areas exposed to extreme climate events in a given city. The third refers to the potential of certain technologies to achieve both of the foregoing at a lower cost than traditional bureaucratic physical presence.

Gomide and Marenco (2024, p. 5) define policy capacities as a state's skills, competencies, and bureaucratic-institutional resources to implement public policies and effectively perform its functions. The authors highlight that among the main challenges on the policy capacities research agenda are conceptual stretching, tautological explanations, endogeneity between means and ends (capacities and outcomes), and the still modest advances in the development of instruments for identifying and measuring policy capacities in ways that enable comparisons and the explanation of observed variations.

Informational Policy Capacities

Within the multifaceted strands of the policy capacities literature reviewed thus far, as well as among other sources (Migone & Howlett, 2023; Peters, 2018; Brenton et al., 2023), the capacity of governments to collect and use data from their citizens and territory is broadly recognized as an essential component for policy formulation and implementation. A particularly useful conceptual anchor for the present study is Whitehead's (1995) proposition of informational state capacity as the planned and sustained organization to collect, process, analyze, and deliver the types of information and insights about society needed for a modern state to plan, implement, monitor, and interpret the impact of its measures. In this sense, informational capacity may be understood as a strategic asset for the formulation and implementation of a given policy and its instruments (Newman et al., 2022).

It is possible to infer, therefore, that informational capacities can function as drivers of public policies (both within and across institutions) insofar as the information produced and shared may enable the identification of vulnerabilities in populations or territories that require targeted policy responses. Peeters et al. (2023) argue that information capacity opens up possibilities for policy design while simultaneously signaling specific and effective ways to implement policies. The authors highlight that informational affordances (understood as the aspects of a technology that, under certain conditions, prompt certain behaviors) provide a kind of script for action, thereby simultaneously enabling and constraining human action and policymaking. Recognizing that informational capacities can take multiple forms and nuances, Peeters et al. (2023) propose three ideal-typical models of information system design (understood not as specific software, but as procedural systems for recording, processing, and using information) to support an understanding of how governments manage the use of information for the planning and implementation of public policies in their respective areas of activity. The three typologies are the infrastructural model, the system-by-system model, and the ad hoc model.

The infrastructural model is characterized by the "once-only" principle, whereby data is recorded a single time and subsequently made available for use across a wide range of processes and organizations, combining high data quality with high intra- and interinstitutional integration. The system-by-system model, in turn, is characterized by informational islands: data collected by specific organizations primarily for their use, yielding high-quality but variable integration depending on how individual systems are configured. In the ad hoc model, data collection is carried out by patching together information sources for primary processes and organizations, resulting in low data quality and limited integration capacity. In the case of the ad hoc model, the literature recognizes that limitations in data literacy and financial resources frequently act as constraints on efforts to qualify and upgrade informational capacities (Brambor et al., 2020; Herbst, 2000).

Building on the framework proposed by Peeters et al. (2023), a key question concerns which factors are capable of inducing (or inhibiting) the constitution of informational policy capacities in local governments. In this regard, Wang and Feeney (2016) are particularly relevant: they found that Weberian bureaucratic structures may inhibit the incorporation of information technologies. Similarly, Marenco and Abulatif (2025) found that the constitution of informational policy capacities in local governments showed little relationship with the presence of Weberian bureaucracy in its most tangible form, that is, career civil servants with univer-

sity-level education. Lui et al. (2025) further corroborate this finding, showing that economic capacity and human resources, while important, are insufficient conditions for the constitution of informational policy capacities. It is therefore pertinent to investigate what factors are (or are not) capable of inducing the constitution of informational capacities in the urban resilience planning of local governments.

Operationalizing informational policy capacities through documentary analysis (particularly planning instruments) requires conceptual justification for the type of capacity under examination. In this regard, the organizational capabilities literature (Penrose, 1959; Teece et al., 1997) draws a distinction between latent capacity (the means and resources internal to a given organization that are not mobilized) and operational capacity, resources that are mobilized institutionally and in a coordinated manner, as occurs, for instance, in crisis. This distinction contributes to the analysis of informational capacities in urban resilience contexts, insofar as the capacity to mobilize resources (especially at the organizational and systemic levels) for disaster prevention and response can be enabled or enhanced through an organizational instrument such as the Contingency Plan. This claim is corroborated by Weick (1995), who argues that organizational action under conditions of ambiguity and turbulence is driven not by the prior knowledge individuals happen to possess, but by instruments previously constructed and structured to enable and direct collective institutional action.

This dynamic is further crystallized in the case of street-level bureaucrats, who, in low-institutionalization contexts, tend to confine their actions to pre-established protocols and routines rather than drawing on tacit organizational knowledge that was never formalized or learned (Lipsky, 1980). This argument is reinforced in the context of local governments characterized by ad hoc informational capacity regimes. In such contexts, formalizing guidelines and protocols for informational resources within a contingency plan does not merely signal pre-existing capacity; it makes a given informational capacity operationally available for collective action (Wu et al., 2015). Conversely, the absence of informational capacity indicators in a contingency plan, under ad hoc conditions, should not be interpreted as the absence of a given capacity, but rather as evidence that such capacity (even if present at the individual level) is not operationally available for mobilization at the organizational and systemic levels by all the potential actors who should be able to activate such resources when a disaster threatens or occurs.

The IndCap index developed in the present study therefore proposes to measure operational informational policy capacity (understood as the institutionalized and coordinated di-

mension of informational capacity that is effectively available for mobilization in the context of urban resilience governance in local governments) rather than the stock of latent resources that may or may not be mobilized by local governments.

Translating the concept of information capacities to municipal governments requires recognizing that, in decentralized federations such as Brazil, municipalities are on the front lines of disaster risk governance. Under federal legislation, municipalities map and monitor risk areas, develop risk contingency plans, and provide the initial response to disasters (Brasil, 2023), while much of the data cities rely on is produced by federal and state agencies. In this sense, it is possible to infer that while supermunicipal governments develop and apply their informational capacities, this does not translate into improved or developed municipal informational policy capacities. Municipal informational capacity is therefore less about producing data from scratch than about accessing, integrating, qualifying, and acting upon data produced at other levels.

Determinants of Informational Policy Capacities

The literature identifies five groups of potential determinants, which can suggest the selection of explanatory variables (EV). Scale and urban complexity (EV 1): larger, more central municipalities face more complex informational demands and benefit from economies of scale in data infrastructure (Schabbach et al., 2024), suggesting a positive association with population and urban hierarchy. Weberian bureaucracy (EV 2): the state capacity tradition associates professional and stable bureaucracies with higher implementation capacity (Cingolani, 2013; Marenco, 2017). Politicization (EV 3): political appointments constitute a distinct dimension of bureaucratic quality in Brazil and are associated with worse governance outcomes (Bersch et al., 2017). Disaster experience (EV 4): recurrent disasters may open windows for policy learning, although evidence from municipal governments indicates that such learning is neither automatic nor homogeneous (Crow et al., 2018). Economic resources (EV 5): wealth is expected to enable investments in data literacy and infrastructure, though it is not sufficient for informational capacities (Lui et al., 2025). A positive but weak association is expected for GDP per capita, with territorial area included as a control for monitoring costs. Finally, because contingency plans are legally maintained and often drafted from standardized templates, external induction through coercive and mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) is an alternative explanation that may reduce the variation attributable to local attributes.

Data-Driven Urban Resilience

Increasingly resilient cities have greater capacity to prevent and rapidly recover from extreme climate disasters. The concept of urban resilience has become increasingly prominent in the literature on cities—not only as a framework for better preparing for extreme climate events, but also for addressing the everyday challenges of urban spaces that are growing ever more stressed, noisy, and conflictual, particularly in the Brazilian context. Büyükozkan et al. (2022) highlight, in this regard, how the COVID-19 pandemic led cities to reassess the importance of developing in more resilient ways. Lowe et al. (2024, p. 892) define urban resilience as "the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems within a city to adapt, survive, and thrive no matter what kind of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience, and to positively transform as a result," and identify four key characteristics for its development at the local level: recovery, persistence, adaptive capacity, and transformative capacity.

In the planning of more resilient cities, the creation of information systems (incorporating georeferenced data and monitoring technologies) is gaining increasing relevance as a means of supporting public action not only to adapt cities to extreme climate events, but also to inform public policies across the three phases of risk management: prevention, response, and recovery. These information systems are related to the informational capacities of the state. Drawing on Marenco et al.'s (2025) conceptualization, informational capacities are assessed along the following dimensions: (i) implementation of situational diagnostics on disaster risk, (ii) adoption of technologies for data collection and analysis, (iii) intersectoral articulation for the production and qualification of information, and (iv) projects for the use of produced information.

For the specific analysis of these variables in the informational capacities of Rio Grande do Sul municipalities affected by the 2024 floods, two guiding frameworks for the development of more resilient cities were used as references: the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2015) and the City Resilience Framework (CRF) presented by the Resilient Cities Network (ARUP, 2024). The former is an international agreement established by the United Nations in 2015 that is directly aligned with the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, and the New Urban Agenda.

The Sendai Framework has proven a valuable reference tool for recent empirical research. Abulatif et al. (2025) drew on the Framework to develop a methodology for assessing

the institutional learning capacity of municipalities affected by the 2024 floods, examining the extent to which the disaster experience qualified and enhanced the implementation of prevention and mitigation instruments for hydrometeorological disasters, thereby contributing to increased urban resilience at the local level.

The City Resilience Framework (CRF) is a complementary analytical tool developed specifically for urban resilience; its first edition was launched in 2013 and updated in 2024. It drew on urban resilience research across a diverse set of cities, which showed that resilient systems are defined by reflectiveness, resourcefulness, robustness, redundancy, flexibility, inclusivity, and integration (Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2022; Lowe et al., 2024). These qualities are directly relevant to the present study, as each, to varying degrees, addresses the design of public policies that can anticipate, prevent, and prepare for disaster occurrence. Robustness refers to the importance of designing and managing projects well so that failure becomes more predictable and therefore more manageable. Redundancy (the reserve capacity created to withstand extreme pressures, demand peaks, or external shocks) involves multiple ways to meet a given need (ARUP, 2024).

Flexibility among decision-makers broadens the range of alternative response strategies available in crisis situations and requires continuously updated technologies and knowledge, including recognition of traditional practices. The qualities of inclusivity and integration are associated with effective governance and leadership, ensuring that investments and actions are directed toward meeting the needs of the most vulnerable populations, that is, building a resilient city for all. These processes underscore the importance of shared governance in creating a sense of public purpose and the need to collectively build urban resilience. Finally, the Framework emphasizes the need for integrated processes that bring together systems and institutions, with shared resources and empowered social actors working collaboratively toward collective goals (ARUP, 2024).

The Framework thus offers a broad range of analytical possibilities for understanding the complexity of cities and the factors that contribute to their resilience, enabling the identification of critical areas of fragility and the definition of targeted actions and programs to strengthen it. It proposes four main axes for the development of urban resilience: (i) local governance and planning, (ii) health and well-being, (iii) infrastructure and environment, and (iv) economy and society (ARUP, 2024, p. 9). We argue that combining the axes of the CRF with the priorities of the Sendai Framework offers an innovative analytical toolkit for municipalities (and in the case of this study, for the municipalities of Rio Grande do Sul) to more effectively

prevent, mitigate, respond to, and recover from climate disasters. In this regard, while the Sendai Framework and the City Resilience Framework share important conceptual convergences, they also reflect distinct emphases on aspects that are relevant to the construction of urban resilience.

This convergence becomes evident when considering that one of the Sendai Framework's core priorities is the strengthening of disaster risk governance. In the City Resilience Framework, this concern is addressed by emphasizing appropriate governmental decision-making. While the Sendai Framework emphasizes the role of local coordination and cooperation forums, disaster risk reduction plans with clear targets, and the capacity-building of authorities for community coordination (a key element in climate disaster management), the CRF focuses on effective coordination across different governmental bodies, proactive collaboration with multiple stakeholders, and the development of mechanisms for meaningful community engagement with government. Table 2 presents the convergences between the two frameworks that informed the analysis of informational capacities across the 70 Rio Grande do Sul municipalities examined in this study. To this end, Priorities 1 and 2 of the Sendai Framework were considered, and the possible convergences with the CRF were mapped alongside their correspondence to the study's information capacity dimensions.

Table 2

Convergences Between the Sendai Framework and the City Resilience Framework in Relation to Informational Capacity Dimensions

Sendai Framework Priorities	City Resilience Framework	Informational Capacity Dimensions
Priority 1: Understand Disaster Risk	**07.1 Comprehensive hazard and exposure mapping**	(1) implementation of situational diagnostics on disaster risk.
- Data collection, analysis, and dissemination.	10.4 Comprehensive hazard monitoring and risk assessment.	(2) adoption of technologies for data collection and analysis.
-Periodic assessment of risks and vulnerabilities.	**12.1 Comprehensive city data monitoring and management**	(4) projects for the use of produced information.
- Use of maps and geospatial technology.		(2) adoption of technologies for data collection and analysis.
- Strengthening the dialogue between science and public policy.	**10.3 Proactive collaboration with multiple stakeholders**	(2) adoption of technologies for data collection and analysis.

Sendai Framework Priorities	City Resilience Framework	Informational Capacity Dimensions
- Integration of risk assessments into land use planning.		(4) projects for the use of produced information.
Priority 2: Strengthen Disaster Risk Governance	**10.1 Appropriate governmental decision-making**	(3) intersectoral articulation for the production and qualification of information.
- Integration of disaster risk reduction policies.	**10.2 Effective coordination with other governmental bodies**	(3) intersectoral articulation for the production and qualification of information.

Note. Prepared by the authors.

The convergences presented in Table 2 highlight the intersectoral and participatory dimension as fundamental to the effective use of information, grounded in the connection between smart technologies (real-time and georeferenced data), intersectoral articulation, and governance approaches that engage communities in disaster prevention and management. Budimir et al. (2025) underscore the institutional and informational challenges facing community-directed early warning systems, particularly in Global South countries, a perspective that is essential for contextualizing the Brazilian case. Regarding the event that motivates this paper, two studies are particularly relevant. Alvalá et al. (2024) analyze the hydrological disaster of September 2023 in Rio Grande do Sul, examining vulnerabilities in risk management capacities among smaller municipalities in the state. CEMADEN/INPE (2025) assesses the performance of federal early warning systems and their interface with the municipalities affected by the May 2024 floods. These studies, among others, consolidate the argument that the construction of resilient cities is inseparable from the capacity to produce, integrate, and mobilize qualified information grounded in robust, comprehensive, and reliable data.

Methodology

To address the research questions regarding the characterization of informational policy capacities in local governments and which variables might explain the extent to which such capacities are evidenced in the Plans, an exploratory and inferential study was conducted, analyzing data obtained from the Contingency Plans for disaster prevention and response of 70 municipalities in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. These 70 municipalities are among the 95 that declared a state of public calamity following the hydrometeorological disasters of May 2024. The municipalities were selected because they had a contingency plan

publicly available and developed before the May 2024 hydrometeorological disasters. This selection criterion was established to assess municipalities' level of preparedness (in terms of planning) for disaster prevention, response, and recovery, which broadly corresponds to the urban resilience approach. The remaining 25 municipalities were excluded when no plan was publicly available, or the available plan was drafted after May 2024.

Within the scope of this study, the analysis of policy capacities was delimited to the specific dimension of informational policy capacities, measured by the IndCap Index (as the dependent variable), with emphasis on the organizational and systemic levels and on the analytical and operational dimensions, as proposed by Wu et al. (2015). Regarding the informational aspects of the urban resilience literature, analytical attention was directed to the Understanding Disaster Risk (UDR) pillar of the Sendai Framework and the Local Governance & Planning (LGP) dimension of the City Resilience Framework. To obtain objective information on the informational aspects of the contingency plans, a set of questions was formulated to be answered through documentary analysis (see Table 3). Each question was scored using the following criteria: No—the plan does not address or indicate anything related to the topic (score = 0); Partial—the plan addresses the topic only in general terms and does not objectively meet the question's requirements (score = 1); Yes_1—the plan addresses at least one criterion in the question (score = 2); Yes_2—the plan addresses at least two criteria in the question (score = 3).

It is important to acknowledge a conceptual boundary in this study's measurement strategy. Contingency plans are not treated here as proxies of latent informational policy capacities, but as the instruments through which informational capacities are institutionalized and made available to collective action at the organizational and systemic levels. The IndCap measures documented operational informational capacity (the extent to which municipal governments have formally incorporated informational instruments into disaster risk planning). At the same time, we recognize that a municipality may possess informational capacities that are not formalized in its contingency plan and, conversely, may produce a well-structured plan based on external templates without having internalized the underlying capacities. This limitation is discussed in the concluding section. The analytical focus, therefore, is on the institutionalized and documented dimension of informational policy capacities, which is itself a theoretically relevant object of study insofar as formalization signals organizational commitment and shapes implementation behavior (Wu et al., 2015).

The analysis treats contingency plans as instruments through which informational policy capacities are constituted and institutionalized to be made accessible for action at the organizational and systemic levels. In this way, as addressed in the literature review (Penrose, 1959; Teece et al., 1997), the analytical focus remains on operational capacity, the institutionalized and coordinated dimensions of capacity that are collectively mobilizable.

Table 3

Analytical Framework

Question (IndCap variables)	Level	Capacity	Sendai	CRF	Informational Capacity Dimension
Does the CP include guidelines or proposals for the collection of disaster risk data?	Organizational	Operational	UDR		2
Does the CP indicate guidelines or proposals for the use and analysis of disaster risk information?	Organizational	Analytical	UDR	LGP - Data Management	4
Does the CP include a Situational Diagnostic section produced from municipal data?	Organizational	Analytical	UDR		1
Does the CP indicate actions for the acquisition of instruments or contracting of services for the production of risk information?	Organizational	Operational	UDR		2
Does the CP indicate actions for interinstitutional articulation for the sharing and qualification of information relevant to disaster prevention and mitigation?	Systemic	Analytical and Operational	UDR	LGP - Data Management	3
Does the CP indicate actions for the dissemination of disaster risk information to the municipal population?	Organizational	Operational	UDR		4
Does the Plan explicitly indicate actions directed at data security in disaster situations?	Organizational	Operational		LGP - Data Management	2

Note. Prepared by the authors.

Based on the scoring system described above, the scores for each question were summed by municipality, and an index of informational policy capacities for local governments (IndCap) was constructed. This index has a theoretical range of 0 to 21, derived from the sum

of the individual variable scores, with each variable carrying a maximum score of three points and all variables weighted equally in the index. Equal weights reflect that neither the literature nor the Sendai Framework nor the Urban Resilience Framework establishes a hierarchy among the informational dimensions considered; all are treated as complementary components of risk understanding.

The IndCap should be understood as an index of documented policy design capacity, that is, the extent to which municipalities have formally incorporated informational instruments into their disaster risk planning. This is distinct from, though related to, implementation capacity, which would require longitudinal or observational data on actual organizational behavior (Wu et al., 2015). The distinction matters: a municipality may score high on IndCap by articulating strong informational guidelines in its plan, yet face significant implementation gaps in practice. Conversely, low IndCap scores may underestimate actual informational practices that were not formalized in the plan. We argue that documented policy design capacity is itself a theoretically meaningful dimension of informational policy capacities, as the absence of formalized informational guidelines signals structural gaps in the organizational and systemic levels of policy capacity (Wu et al., 2015), and is associated with weaker preparedness outcomes in the disaster risk literature (UNDRR, 2022).

We collected data through a systematic process combining human action and artificial intelligence. A large language model (Claude 4.6, Anthropic) was deployed using a structured coding protocol and applied to the automated analysis of contingency plans. To support transparency and quality control, the model was instructed to assign a confidence score to each coding decision, ranging from 1 (classification not possible; mandatory human review) to 5 (two or more criteria objectively and substantively met in accordance with the coding guide, yielding high interpretive confidence). No score of 1 was recorded across the full coding process, indicating that the model was able to produce a classifiable response for all plan-variable combinations.

The coding process involved three validation phases: (1) a pilot round in which a subsample of plans was independently coded by human researchers and by the model, with discrepancies discussed and used to refine both the coding instructions and the prompt strategy; (2) full automated coding of all 70 plans; and (3) systematic human review concentrated on responses assigned lower confidence scores (2 and 3), ensuring that borderline classifications received direct human judgment. All phases were subject to continuous human oversight to ensure standardization and consistency of results across the full dataset.

For each analyzed plan, we created a table containing the analytical questions (variables), the coded response (No, Partial, Yes_1, Yes_2), the justification for the response, the verbatim excerpt from the plan supporting the classification, and the AI model's confidence score. The tables from all 70 plans were consolidated into a single variable table identifying each municipality and its scores across all analyzed variables. This dataset was processed using KNIME Analytics Platform (version 5.11), through which the following contextual variables were added: municipal population (based on the 2022 Census), total and per capita gross domestic product, urban hierarchy, distance from the state capital, population size interval, territorial area, characterization of municipal public servants by employment status and educational level, and the historical record of hydrometeorological disaster occurrences in the ten years preceding the May 2024 disaster.

To classify municipalities' exposure to hydrometeorological risk, a binary variable (hist_hidro) was operationalized as the occurrence of four or more extreme hydrometeorological events in the ten years preceding May 2024, based on data from the Integrated Disaster Information System (S2ID). The threshold of four events was established through exploratory frequency analysis of the distribution of disaster occurrences in the sample, identifying municipalities with recurrent (rather than episodic) exposure to hydrometeorological risk as a theoretically meaningful analytical category.

With the dataset structured, the next step was an exploratory descriptive analysis of the data. This was followed by inferential analyses using multivariate linear regression and principal component analysis (PCA). The inferential tests were performed considering the IndCap (or its constituent variables) as the dependent variable, and the remaining variables described above as potential explanatory variables for the induction of informational policy capacity constitution in the municipalities under study.

The sample size of n = 70, combined with up to eight predictors in the complete OLS model (M1), implies an observation-to-predictor ratio at the lower bound of what is conventionally recommended for stable multiple regression estimates. To address potential multicollinearity, variance inflation factors (VIF) were calculated for all predictors in M1. The highest value was observed for log(Pop) (VIF = 4.19), followed by % of university-educated staff (VIF = 3.52), urban hierarchy (VIF = 2.76), % of tenured civil servants (VIF = 2.56), and % of appointed positions (VIF = 2.04). All values remained well below the conventional threshold of 10 (and below the more conservative threshold of 5), suggesting that multicollinearity does not substantially distort the estimates. Additionally, principal component analysis serves as

a complementary analytical strategy that reduces the predictor space to orthogonal components, mitigating collinearity concerns while preserving interpretive content. The convergence of results across both approaches is taken as evidence of robustness.

Due to the article length limits established by the journal, verbatim excerpts from the contingency plans were not included in the text. The complete dataset, including the scores assigned to each indicator and the plan excerpts that supported each classification, is available to readers upon request.

Results

The analysis of the contingency plans was organized into two complementary stages. The first, descriptive in nature, mapped the presence of the seven informational dimensions—six corresponding to the Understanding Disaster Risk (UDR) pillar and one to the Local Governance & Planning (LGP) dimension—across the plans, and constructed IndCap_soma as a composite index. The second, inferential in nature, tested (through OLS linear regression and principal component analysis (PCA)) which structural and administrative variables explain the variation in IndCap across municipalities. Following methodological exclusions (plans outside the temporal scope or those that do not strictly constitute contingency plans), the study analyzes n = 70 municipalities out of the 95 that declared a state of public calamity in May 2024.

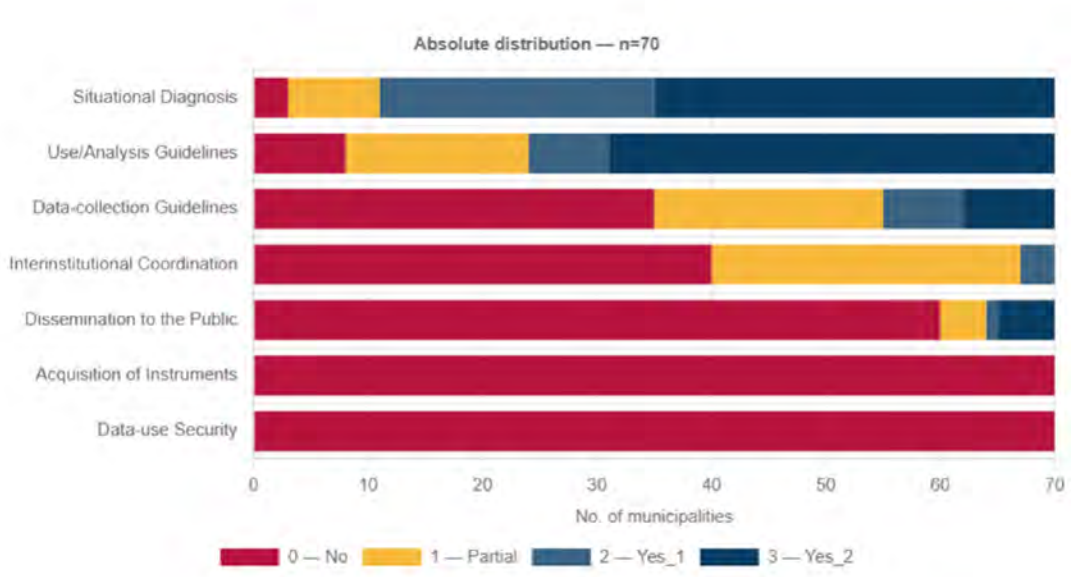
Descriptive Exploratory Analysis of Informational Policy Capacities

The analysis of the frequency distributions of the seven informational policy capacity variables across the contingency plans revealed a systematic internal hierarchy among dimensions. As shown in Figure 1, the variables concerning situational diagnostics (mean = 2.30; 84% of plans reaching Yes_1 or Yes_2) and data use and analysis guidelines (mean = 2.10) are the most consistently covered; interinstitutional articulation, information dissemination to the population, instrument acquisition, and data security are the weakest. Notably, regarding intersectoral articulation, the predominant classification is “Partial”, a result of what was characterized as “unilateral articulation,” in which the municipality receives data from other institutions but neither shares its data nor provides feedback on the data received. The dimensions “Instrument Acquisition” and “Data Security” receive a score of zero in 100% of the plans, suggesting, respectively, that there is no evidence of commitment to qualifying information production processes to support disaster prevention, response, and recovery, and

that information security is entirely disregarded as a component of urban resilience strategy, contrary to what is proposed by the City Resilience Framework under the principle of secure and effective data management.

Figure 1

Absolute Distribution of the Seven Informational Dimensions (n = 70)



Note. Prepared by the authors.

Based on the initial measurement of the informational policy capacity variables, a composite index (IndCap) was constructed for the joint analysis of all seven variables. It is important to note that, given the complete absence of scores on the "Instrument Acquisition" and "Data Security" dimensions across all plans, the effective ceiling of the IndCap is 15. The distribution of IndCap results enabled the construction of a value-range categorization (Low: 0–4; Medium: 5–8; High: 9–15), as presented in Table 4.

The observed distribution yielded a mean IndCap of 6.00 (median = 6; maximum observed = 14; standard deviation = 3.03), corresponding to only 28.6% of the theoretical ceiling. Only 14.3% of municipalities reached the "High" category (IndCap ≥ 9), while 35.7% fell into the "Low" category (IndCap ≤ 4).

Table 4

IndCap Distribution

Category	IndCap Range	n	% of total
Low	0 – 4	25	35.7%
Medium	5 – 8	35	50.0%
High	9 – 14	10	14.3%

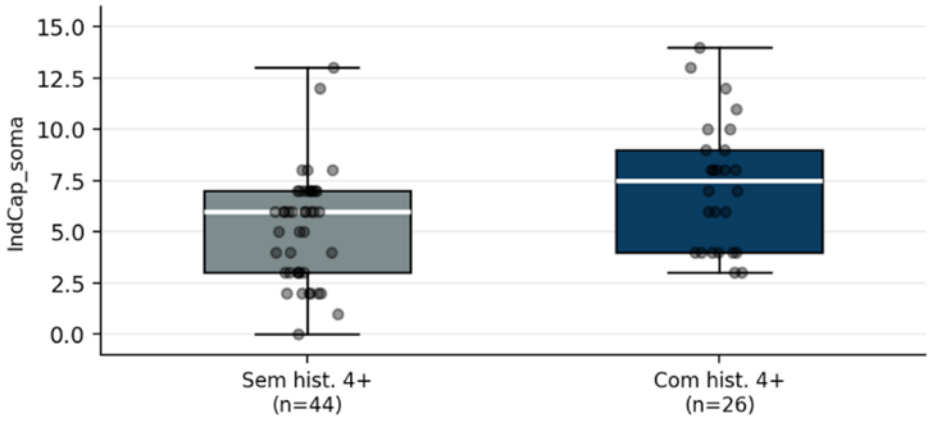
Note. Prepared by the authors.

The structural absence of scores on the "Instrument Acquisition" and "Data Security" dimensions across all 70 municipalities warrants a conceptual observation. While the original seven-dimension structure of the IndCap is retained for theoretical completeness (as the absence of these dimensions is itself a substantively meaningful finding), the effective measurement range of the index is 0–15. For comparative and inferential purposes, results are interpreted against this effective ceiling. The universal zero-scoring on these two dimensions should not be read as a measurement artifact but as evidence of a systematic gap in municipalities' informational policy capacities: the absence of any documented effort to qualify information production processes or to incorporate data security into disaster resilience strategies.

The bivariate comparison of IndCap between municipalities with four or more extreme hydrometeorological disasters in 2014–2023 (n = 26) and the remaining municipalities (n = 44) was conducted using three tests: descriptive mean comparison, the Mann-Whitney test (non-parametric, one-tailed, g1 > g0), and Spearman correlation between the binary variable hist_hidro and IndCap_soma. This analysis showed that municipalities with a history of four or more hydrometeorological disasters had a median IndCap_soma of 7.5, compared with 6.0 for the remaining group. As shown in Figure 2, this difference is statistically robust under both the non-parametric test (Mann-Whitney U = 801.5, p = .002) and the Spearman correlation (ρ = +.339, p = .004). It should be noted, however, that a significant portion of this effect operates indirectly through correlated structural variables (log(Pop) and urban hierarchy), suggesting that rather than reflecting genuine institutional learning from prior disaster experience, municipalities may have merely incorporated data produced on an ad hoc basis.

Figure 2

Distribution of IndCap_soma by Hydrometeorological History Group

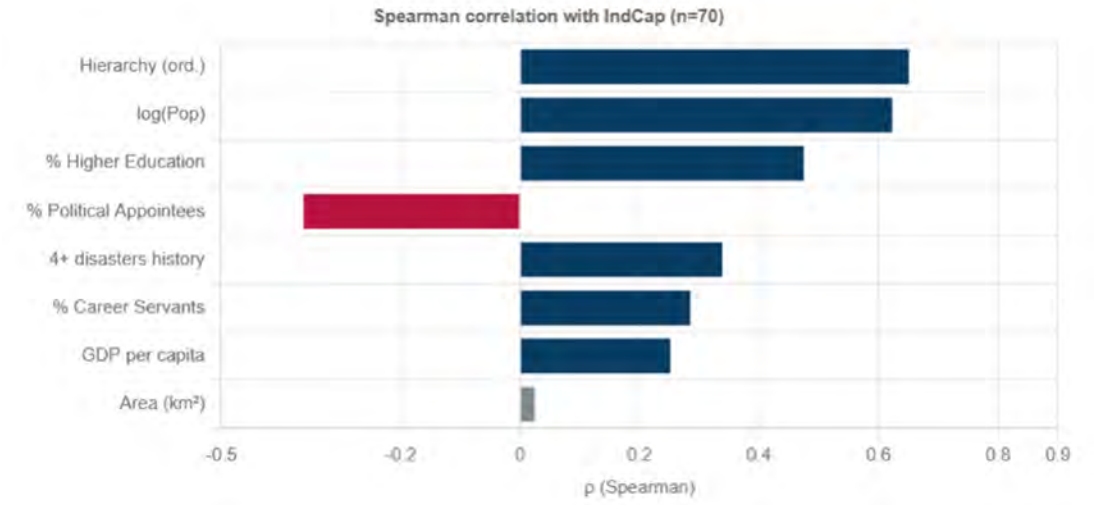


Note. Prepared by the authors.

The next step was to conduct Spearman correlation analyses between IndCap_soma and eight potential structural and administrative predictors. Seven of the eight predictors correlate significantly with IndCap ($p < .05$). Figure 3 presents the predictors in descending order of association strength: ordinal urban hierarchy ($\rho = +.65$), log(Pop) ($\rho = +.62$), percentage of university-educated staff ($\rho = +.48$), percentage of appointed positions ($\rho = -.36$, the only significant negative association), hist_hidro ($\rho = +.34$, history of four or more extreme hydro-meteorological disasters in 2014–2023), percentage of tenured civil servants ($\rho = +.28$), and GDP per capita ($\rho = +.25$). Only the territorial area ($\rho = +.02$) did not correlate significantly. Two findings merit particular attention: (i) the strongest positive correlation (urban hierarchy) suggests that greater structural complexity in public functions and socioeconomic dynamics may act as inducing factors for the formal institutionalization of informational policy capacities in climate disaster prevention and response planning; and (ii) the negative correlation with the percentage of appointed positions constitutes evidence that the politicization of bureaucracy is associated with lower informational capacity, a finding further reinforced by the PCA results.

Figure 3

Spearman Correlations of Predictors With IndCap_sum



Note. Prepared by the authors.

Inferential Analysis: What Induces Informational Policy Capacities for Urban Resilience?

Five OLS linear regression models were tested with IndCap_soma as the dependent variable and progressively larger sets of predictors. The five models were composed as follows: M1 - Complete [log(Pop), GDP per capita, AREA_KM2, urban hierarchy, hist_hidro, and the three bureaucratic composition variables: % tenured civil servants, % appointed positions, and % university-educated staff]; M2 - Structural [log(Pop), GDP per capita, and urban hierarchy]; M3 - Structural + Staff [M2 + % tenured civil servants, % appointed positions, and % university-educated staff]; M4 - Structural + Staff + Hydrometeorological History [M3 + hist_hidro]; M2+ - Structural + Hydrometeorological History [M2 + hist_hidro].

As shown in Table 5, Model M2 presents the best AIC. The addition of hist_hidro to M2 (Model M2+) yielded only marginal gains: the adjusted R^2 increases slightly from 0.379 to 0.381, with a modest reduction in AIC (323.6). These results indicate that structural variables outside the local bureaucracy explain the induction of informational policy capacity constitution better, while the history of extreme hydrometeorological events shows limited evidence of driving institutional learning.

Table 5

Comparison of the Five OLS Models (n = 70)

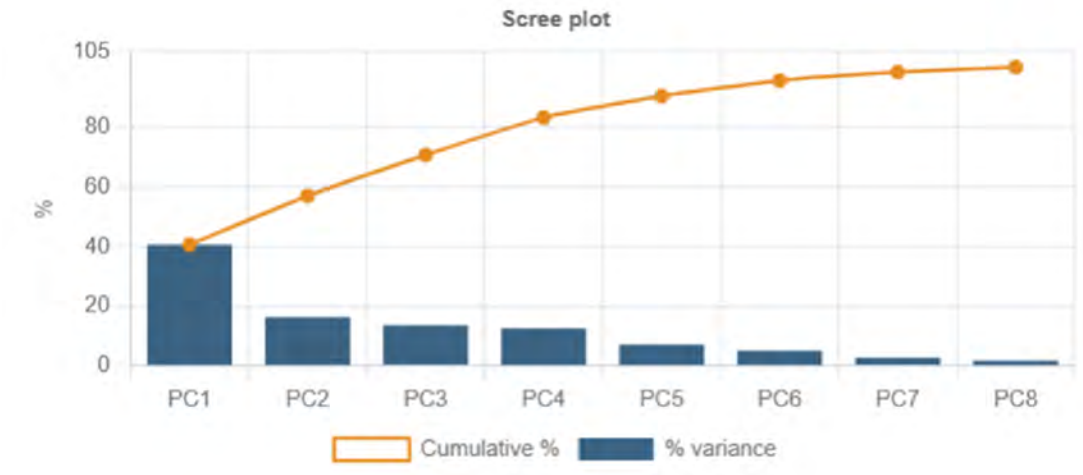
Model	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	p (F)	AIC
M1 — Complete	0.421	0.345	5.54	<0.001	331.1
M2 — Structural	0.406	0.379	15.03	<0.001	322.9
M3 — Structural + Servants	0.408	0.351	7.23	<0.001	328.7
M4 — Struc. + Serv. + hist_hidro	0.420	0.355	6.42	<0.001	329.2
M2+ — Struc + hist_hidro	0.417	0.381	11.63	<0.001	323.6

Note. Prepared by the authors.

A PCA was applied to the eight standardized predictors with the aim of identifying latent factors that organize the correlation structure among them and testing whether these reduced dimensions (see Table 6) explain the variation in IndCap. Three principal components were found to jointly explain 70.6% of the variance in the predictors (see Figures 4 and 5). The first component (PC1) alone accounts for 40.6% and has a clear substantive interpretation: it combines, with positive loadings, population scale (log(Pop)), urban hierarchy, and bureaucratic professionalization (% university-educated staff and % tenured civil servants), and with a negative loading, politicization (% appointed positions). It is reasonable to interpret PC1 as a dimension of "Weberian bureaucratic complexity." The second component (PC2, 16.3%) combines prior exposure history (hist_hidro, loading +0.53) with territorial area (+0.61), a dimension that may be read as "Exposure + Territory," identifying municipalities that are both physically large and historically more exposed to disasters.

Figure 4

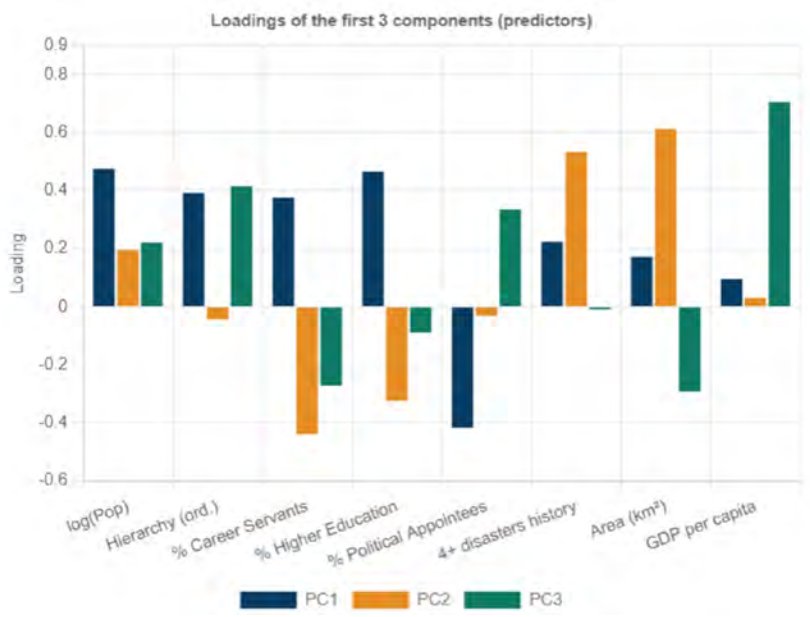
Variance Explained by Each Component



Note. Prepared by the authors.

Figure 5

Loadings of Predictors on the First Three Components



Note. Prepared by the authors.

As shown in Table 6, scale and bureaucratic professionalization load jointly, suggesting that PC1 can be interpreted as Weberian bureaucratic complexity, which can be labeled as "urban-administrative scale": larger and more central municipalities also have more professionalized and less politicized bureaucracies. PC2 combines disaster history and territorial area. PC3 is dominated by GDP *per capita*, with secondary loadings for urban hierarchy and political appointees and a negative loading for area.

Table 6

Variance Explained and Interpretation of the First Three Principal Components

Component	% variance	Cumulative	Proposed interpretation
PC1	40.6%	40.6%	**Weberian Bureaucratic Complexity (scale + hierarchy + professionalization vs. politicization)**
PC2	16.3%	56.9%	Exposure + Territory (hist_hidro + area in km²)
PC3	13.7%	70.6%	Wealth + Centrality (GDP per capita + hierarchy)

Note. Prepared by the authors.

Pearson correlations were calculated between each principal component and IndCap_soma, followed by the regression IndCap ~ PC1 + PC2 + PC3. PC1 was found to be the

only component that significantly predicts IndCap, while PC2 (Exposure + Territory) and PC3 (Wealth + Centrality) did not yield significant predictions. The regression IndCap ~ PC1 + PC2 + PC3 reaches an adjusted R^2 = .347, with PC1 alone accounting for virtually all the explanatory power (see Table 7 and Figure 6). Even with the inclusion of hist_hidro among the predictors, the latent dimension "Weberian Bureaucratic Complexity" remains the consolidated predictor, constituting an additional indication that the effect of prior disaster exposure observed in the bivariate analysis operates primarily through administrative scale and urban hierarchy.

Table 7

Pearson Correlation of the First Three Principal Components With IndCap_sum

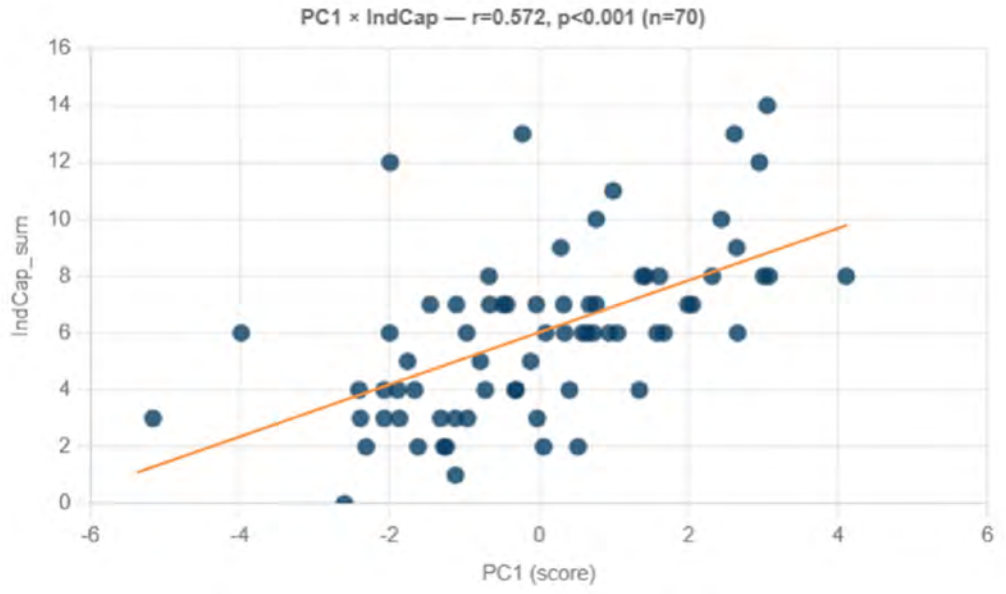
Component	r (Pearson)	p value	Significance
PC1—Bureaucratic Complexity	**+0.572**	<0.001	**Yes (p < .05)**
PC2—Exposure + Territory	+0.121	0.318	No
PC3—Wealth + Centrality	+0.183	0.130	No

Note. Prepared by the authors.

Figure 6 shows a positive, approximately linear association, but also substantial dispersion: some municipalities with below-average PC1 scores reach IndCap values of 12 and 13, indicating that scale and administrative structure are not necessary conditions for high documented informational capacity.

Figure 6

Scatterplot of PC1 (Urban-Administrative Scale) and IndCap_sum



Note. Prepared by the authors.

Discussion

The results presented signal important features of the reality of informational policy capacities for urban resilience among local governments, a reality that warrants attention from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike. A first notable finding concerns the fact that, although municipalities formally include situational diagnostics in their Contingency Plans (84%), their planning documents show no indication of any effort to qualify the processes of data collection, management, and analysis through the procurement of instruments or specialized services for that purpose.

This reality is compounded by the low level of intersectoral articulation for data sharing and qualification, and where articulation does exist, it consists essentially of the reception of external data rather than the active production of information within a partnership network. Drawing on the typology of informational policy capacities proposed by Peeters et al. (2023), we suggest that a first key finding of this study is that municipalities operate fundamentally in ad hoc mode in terms of informational capacities, and therefore exhibit low capacity with respect to the Understanding Disaster Risk dimension of the Sendai Framework.

It is therefore possible to infer that the predominance of municipalities operating in this condition tends to undermine both their own response capacity and their ability to benefit from peer-to-peer information sharing (through cooperation networks or inter-municipal consortia), which has the potential to reduce information acquisition costs and, as a rule, provides better conditions for coordinated and integrated action toward regionalized disaster risk reduction and climate disaster management.

The inferential analysis identified several relevant aspects regarding the development of informational policy capacities in the analyzed municipalities. A first aspect concerns the convergent direction indicated by both the linear regression and the PCA: the data support the interpretation that municipal informational capacities depend to a significant degree on external induction through structural factors (particularly population size and urban hierarchy) rather than on internal dimensions such as Weberian state bureaucracy. While it is not possible to directly test the induction mechanisms with the available data, the proposed interpretation finds theoretical grounding in the multilevel governance literature discussed by Arretche et al. (2007) and Gomide and Marenco (2024). Regarding Weberian bureaucracy specifically, the variables associated with it (percentage of tenured civil servants and percentage of university-educated staff) cannot individually predict the constitution of informational capacities, corroborating the findings of Marenco and Abulatif (2025) and Wang and Feeney (2016). It

is further possible to infer that if the use or qualification of informational resources does not emerge in a consolidated form within Contingency Plans, there is a structural weakness in the analytical and operational dimensions at the organizational level of informational policy capacities (as characterized by the typology proposed by Wu et al. (2015)).

Another relevant finding is that disaster history matters for the constitution of informational policy capacities, but is not sufficient. Municipalities with a history of four or more hydrometeorological disasters in the decade preceding May 2024 presented a median IndCap 1.5 points higher than those with fewer such events. Given that urban hierarchy proves a stronger predictor of IndCap performance than disaster history in the analyzed cases, it is possible to infer the presence of a pronounced weakness in organizational-level information and knowledge management capacity, one that has prevented local governments from transforming prior disaster experience into institutionalized learning regarding the constitution and qualification of informational policy capacities.

Intersectoral articulation was identified as a strategic bottleneck in the constitution and qualification of informational policy capacities for urban resilience among the analyzed municipalities. The finding that 57% of municipalities presented no indication of intersectoral articulation for data sharing and qualification, and that 38.6% of plans were classified as exhibiting only partial articulation (primarily due to what may be characterized as unilateral articulation, in which the municipality merely receives or accesses disaster risk information without indicating any sharing of its data with partner networks or engagement in regionalized data analysis) reveals a weak operational and political articulation capacity at the organizational level of municipal administrations.

Final Remarks

This study, by analyzing contingency plans elaborated before a severe hydrometeorological disaster, has shed light on the development of operational information policy capacities as a fundamental element of local governments' preparedness for climate disaster prevention and response. As addressed in the reviewed literature, contingency plans are the instruments that enable the mobilization of informational resources at the organizational and political levels toward more effective collective and systemic action for the promotion of urban resilience. The development of the IndCap (derived from a systematic analysis of contingency plans) as a measurement instrument for informational policy capacities offers a relevant contribution to understanding how informational capacities are constituted and which factors influence their performance. The me-

thodology employed in this study, combining systematic documentary analysis and inferential methods such as OLS regression and PCA, supported by the application of generative artificial intelligence, confers methodological robustness to the diagnostic presented.

The main findings, organized according to the study's analytical phases, are as follows: (i) municipalities operating predominantly in ad hoc mode regarding informational policy capacities; (ii) external structural factors (particularly population size and urban hierarchy) are more consistent predictors of the informational capacity index than Weberian bureaucracy; and (iii) the history of disasters matters marginally, but does not translate into consolidated institutional learning capable of inducing the constitution of informational capacities.

A potential contribution of this study to the policy capacities literature in Latin America lies in the application of the distinction between latent capacity and operational capacity in a context that remains underexplored in the regional literature. By advancing the argument that contingency plans constitute (rather than merely record) operational capacity in ad hoc contexts, the study seeks to move conceptually beyond the use of documents as proxies, proposing a constitutive relationship between formalization and capacity availability. A further contribution concerns the corroboration of findings from other bodies of literature demonstrating that Weberian bureaucracy alone is insufficient to predict informational capacities. The study goes a step further by identifying that bureaucratic politicization (measured as the percentage of appointed positions) is negatively associated with the informational capacity index, suggesting the active presence of patrimonialist logics in local public administration.

A third contribution of this study lies in the novel articulation between the Sendai Framework, the City Resilience Framework, and the policy capacities literature. An analytical convergence between two international climate resilience frameworks (with the Sendai Framework adapted to the local level) and the policy capacities literature was proposed and operationalized. This initiative may be understood as a replicable diagnostic toolkit for other local government contexts, with potential contributions both to the academic-scientific community and to policymakers and practitioners across Latin America and other regions.

In terms of concrete implications for policymakers and practitioners, two aspects merit particular attention. The first concerns the problem of municipalities' dependence on external induction: the findings indicate that informational capacities depend primarily on population size and urban hierarchy rather than on local learning. This reality suggests that smaller municipalities or those of lower urban hierarchy tend to be less equipped (in terms of structure and resources) to develop their informational capacities autonomously, and are therefore in greater need of fede-

rative induction mechanisms or regionalized articulation strategies, such as integration into regional inter-municipal consortia. The second aspect concerns intersectoral articulation as a strategic asset for the development of informational capacities for urban resilience. The finding that 57% of municipalities have not formalized intersectoral articulation processes (and that, where it exists, it occurs predominantly unilaterally) shows that strategies such as forming active information-sharing networks and the regionalized, shared use of informational resources remain largely underexplored. This reality suggests that smaller municipalities, which may lack the resources to independently constitute informational capacities, may be forgoing the economies of scale and knowledge dissemination benefits that networked governance arrangements could provide.

Among the limitations of this research, the IndCap (by measuring documented operational capacity) may underrepresent municipalities with non-formalized capacities, or conversely, overrepresent those whose plans do not reflect genuinely internalized capacities. This is an inherent characteristic of the methodological strategy adopted (one that enables the capture of information on informational capacities that would not otherwise be publicly available in the context of the analyzed local governments) and does not undermine the value of the index, but indicates that its application calls for careful and criteria-based interpretation. Two other limitations should be noted. One is that the sample includes only municipalities with publicly available plans drafted before May 2024 (70 of 95), which may affect the average level if municipalities without plans have lower capacity. The other is that this study is cross-sectional, which implies that the associations identified are not necessarily causal effects.

As directions for future research, we identify the opportunity for a longitudinal study comparing the dataset used here (drawn from plans elaborated before May 2024) with a corresponding dataset of plans from the same municipalities produced after May 2024, thereby enabling an analysis of institutional learning and potentially contributing to the organizational learning literature. Additionally, tests incorporating federal and state induction mechanisms could deepen the understanding of municipalities' dependence on external drivers. Another avenue is to replicate the IndCap methodology in other Brazilian states and Latin American contexts (including both federal and unitary systems) to assess the external validity of the findings and contribute to a middle-range theory of subnational informational policy capacities in low-institutionalization contexts.

We close by returning to the motivation of this study: the hydrometeorological disaster of May 2024 in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, which exposed the fragility of local governments' informational policy capacities and thereby prompted the present research. In

doing so, it underscored the importance of better understanding the factors that can build local governments' informational capacities for urban resilience, so institutional actions for climate disaster prevention and response can become more effective.

We conclude that the relationship between policy capacities and urban resilience is a field of inquiry with significant potential for theoretical and empirical advancement. This is particularly pressing given that the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme climate events place ever greater demands on local governments to act in the prevention of and response to crisis and turbulence, requiring the constitution and consolidation of their policy capacities and the strategic use of informational resources. It is therefore hoped that the methodology developed and the findings presented in this study may contribute positively (for researchers and practitioners alike) to the production of new research and increasingly effective actions for the promotion of urban climate resilience in Latin America and beyond.

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How to cite the article:
Abulatif, L., Garcia, R., & Steigleder, C. N. (2026). Informational policy capacities for urban resilience: What drives them in local governments? *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 87-121. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a971

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REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a752

IT Teams and Municipal Digital Services: A Transaction Cost Analysis Across Brazilian Municipalities

Equipo de TI y servicios digitales municipales: Un análisis de costes de transacción en municipios brasileños

Equipe de TI e serviços digitais municipais: Uma análise de custos de transação entre municípios brasileiros

Recibido: 26/05/2026 - Aceptado: 20/10/2026

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Abstract

Under what conditions does local IT governance remain consequential for municipal digital service capacity when higher levels of government increasingly supply shared digital infrastructure? Drawing on transaction cost theory (TCT) and the literature on digital state capacity, we examine how task specificity, platform substitutability, and organizational continuity condition the association between municipal IT arrangements (internal, outsourced, and mixed) and formal digital service provision. We use data on all 5,569 Brazilian municipalities across seven MUNIC waves (2004–2024), distinguish informational from transactional services, and combine between-effects, Poisson, reweighting, and longitudinal analyses. Mixed arrangements are associated with greater service capacity, particularly for transactional services that require localized administrative knowledge; we interpret this as a conditional association rather than evidence of a superior sourcing model. The unadjusted gap in digital services between municipalities with and without

dedicated IT teams fell from 2.28 to 0.54 index points (−76%) between 2012 and 2024, with convergence concentrated in informational services, alongside the expansion of federal digital platforms. Teams sustained for five years or more show an additional association with service capacity, compatible with organizational continuity but also with preexisting capacity. The findings suggest that, in federal systems, shared platforms can substitute for some local capabilities but not for those embedded in local administrative processes.

Keywords: IT governance, e-government, Brazilian municipalities, transaction cost theory, digital service capacity.

Resumen

¿En qué condiciones sigue siendo relevante la gobernanza local de TI para la capacidad municipal de servicios digitales cuando los niveles superiores de gobierno proveen, cada vez más, infraestructura digital compartida? Con base en la Teoría de los Costos de Transacción (TCT) y en la literatura sobre capacidad estatal digital, examinamos cómo la especificidad de las tareas, la sustituibilidad mediante plataformas y la continuidad organizacional condicionan la asociación entre los arreglos municipales de TI (internos, externalizados y mixtos) y la oferta formal de servicios digitales. Utilizamos datos de los 5.569 municipios brasileños en siete olas de la MUNIC (2004–2024), distinguimos servicios informacionales y transaccionales y combinamos modelos de efectos entre grupos, especificaciones de Poisson, reponderación y análisis longitudinales. Los arreglos mixtos se asocian con una mayor capacidad de servicios, especialmente en los servicios transaccionales que requieren conocimiento administrativo localizado; interpretamos este resultado como una asociación condicional y no como evidencia de un modelo de aprovisionamiento superior. La brecha no ajustada de servicios digitales entre municipios con y sin equipos dedicados de TI se redujo de 2,28 a 0,54 puntos del índice (−76 %) entre 2012 y 2024, con una convergencia concentrada en los servicios informacionales, en paralelo a la expansión de las plataformas digitales federales. Los equipos mantenidos durante cinco años o más presentan una asociación adicional con la capacidad de servicios, compatible con la continuidad organizacional, pero también con una capacidad preexistente. Los hallazgos sugieren que, en sistemas federales, las plataformas compartidas pueden sustituir algunas capacidades locales, pero no aquellas integradas en los procesos administrativos locales.

Palabras clave: gobernanza de TI, gobierno electrónico, municipios brasileños, teoría de los costos de transacción, capacidad de servicio digital.

Resumo

Em que condições a governança local de TI continua relevante para a capacidade municipal de serviços digitais quando níveis superiores de governo passam a oferecer, cada vez mais, infraestrutura digital compartilhada? Com base na Teoria dos Custos de Transação (TCT) e na literatura sobre capacidade estatal digital, examinamos como a especificidade das tarefas, a substituibilidade por plataformas e a continuidade organizacional condicionam a associação entre os arranjos municipais de TI (internos, terceirizados e mistos) e a oferta formal de serviços digitais. Utilizamos dados de todos os 5.569 municípios brasileiros em sete ondas da MUNIC (2004–2024), distinguimos serviços informacionais e transacionais e combinamos modelos between-effects, especificações Poisson, reponderação e análises longitudinais. Arranjos mistos estão associados a maior capacidade de serviços, especialmente em serviços transacionais que exigem conhecimento administrativo localizado; interpretamos esse resultado como uma associação condicional, e não como evidência de um modelo de contratação superior. A lacuna não ajustada de serviços digitais entre municípios com e sem equipes dedicadas de TI caiu de 2,28 para 0,54 ponto do índice (−76%) entre 2012 e 2024, com convergência concentrada nos serviços informacionais, em paralelo à expansão das plataformas digitais federais. Equipes mantidas por cinco anos ou mais apresentam associação adicional com a capacidade de serviços, compatível com a continuidade organizacional, mas também com capacidade preexistente. Os resultados sugerem que, em sistemas federativos, plataformas compartilhadas podem substituir algumas capacidades locais, mas não aquelas inseridas nos processos administrativos locais.

Palavras-chave: governança de TI, governo eletrônico, municípios brasileiros, teoria do custo de transação, capacidade de serviço digital.

IT Teams and Municipal Digital Services: A Transaction Cost Analysis Across Brazilian Municipalities

The decision about how to govern information technology (IT) functions—whether to build internal teams, contract external providers, or ado*p*t a hybrid configuration—is among the most consequential organizational choices local governments make in the digital era. Yet the empirical literature examining how these IT governance structures relate to the breadth of digital services delivered to citizens remains sparse. This gap is particularly acute at the subnational level in emerging economies and across extended time horizons (Gil-Garcia et

al., 2018). While existing cross-sectional studies capture valuable snapshots, they lack the longitudinal perspective required to understand whether and how governance arrangements are persistently associated with service capacity over time and whether these associations remain stable or are contingent on the broader digital infrastructure environment.

Accordingly, this study asks: Under what task and infrastructural conditions does local IT governance remain consequential for municipal digital service capacity? We address this question by examining how three conditions shape the association between municipal IT arrangements and formal digital service provision: the specificity of the task, the substitutability of local capabilities by shared higher-level platforms, and the continuity of the organization over time. In doing so, we connect transaction cost reasoning to the literature on state capacity, digital-era governance, and federalism. In federal systems, the central government can shape municipal capacity not only through fiscal transfers and regulation but also by supplying shared technological infrastructure (Arretche, 2012; Dunleavy et al., 2006).

We ground our research in transaction cost theory (TCT; Lacity & Willcocks, 1998; Williamson, 1985), which explains why the value of alternative governance structures should vary with the characteristics of the task. TCT posits that asset specificity and output uncertainty, two defining features of municipal IT functions, favor governance arrangements that internalize highly idiosyncratic and strategically sensitive activities. Applied to digital public services, this framework suggests that the relative value of internal, outsourced, and mixed (hybrid) arrangements should increase or decrease with the specificity and uncertainty of the services being governed. We examine these conditional expectations using a multi-estimator strategy. Finally, we employ institutional memory theory (Walsh & Ungson, 1991) not as a competing primary framework, but as a compatible interpretive lens to explain the long-term maturity gradient of these governance choices.

We examine all 5,569 Brazilian municipalities, which vary widely in institutional capacity, fiscal resources, and population size. Brazil provides substantial variation in IT governance configurations alongside a well-documented evolution of national digital policy. The country's policy trajectory—from the Fiscal Responsibility Law of 2000, which initially catalyzed voluntary digital transparency among administratively capable municipalities (Diniz et al., 2009; Kubota, 2024), to the Access to Information Law of 2011—provides a useful context for this analysis. This environment is well suited for examining how local IT arrangements correlate with formal digital capacity over a two-decade horizon.

Our analysis yields three primary findings that together qualify the conventional expectation of a general advantage associated with hybrid IT governance. First, mixed (hybrid) IT configurations, which combine internal civil servants with external contractors, are associated with greater formal digital service capacity, and this association is particularly pronounced for transactional services requiring localized administrative knowledge and coordination. Because more capable municipalities may be better able to sustain hybrid arrangements, we interpret this as a conditional association rather than the effect of choosing a particular sourcing model. Second, the digital service gap between municipalities with and without dedicated IT teams contracted by 76% in unadjusted terms between 2012 and 2024, alongside the expansion of federal digital platform programs. As standardized federal digital capabilities expanded, differences associated with local IT arrangements became increasingly concentrated in transactional services that are more difficult to standardize. Third, we document a five-year maturity threshold, in which municipalities maintaining IT teams for five or more years exhibit an additional association with formal service capacity, which may reflect preexisting capacity as well as continuity. Although this temporal pattern does not directly demonstrate organizational learning or institutional memory, it suggests that the relationship between governance arrangements and digital capacity may also depend on organizational continuity over time. Recent comparative and Brazilian evidence likewise emphasizes that local digital transformation is shaped by governance structures and broader administrative capacities rather than by technology alone (Kuhlmann et al., 2026; Lui et al., 2025).

This study makes three main contributions. First, it moves beyond the established comparison between insourcing and outsourcing by identifying the conditions under which hybrid IT governance is most strongly associated with digital service capacity. Rather than finding a uniform hybrid advantage across digital services, we show that the association is substantially stronger for transactional services, where localized administrative knowledge, coordination, and asset specificity make standardization more difficult. This task-level contingency refines the application of transaction cost theory to digital government by shifting attention from which governance arrangement performs best in general to when different governance arrangements matter most.

Second, the study identifies the expansion of higher-level digital platforms as a boundary condition for the relevance of local IT governance. As federal platforms expanded standardized digital capabilities, differences in informational service capacity between municipalities with and without dedicated IT teams narrowed substantially, while organizational differences

remained more consequential for transactional services. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that shared digital infrastructure substitutes for some forms of local organizational capacity, but that such substitution has limits where service delivery remains embedded in local administrative processes. For federal systems, this points to a channel through which the central government shapes municipal capacity by supplying technological infrastructure rather than resources or rules. Third, the study introduces a temporal dimension to the analysis of IT governance by documenting a five-year maturity threshold in the association between dedicated IT teams and formal digital service capacity. Interpreted cautiously, this pattern is consistent with the possibility that organizational continuity allows knowledge, routines, and relational capabilities to accumulate over time. Together with the study's 20-year coverage of all 5,569 Brazilian municipalities, these findings shift the debate from a static choice between internal and external provision toward a contingent understanding of how task characteristics, shared digital infrastructure, and organizational continuity shape the relevance of local IT governance.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Task Specificity and the Contingent Value of IT Governance

Transaction cost theory, developed by Williamson (1985) and extended to IT governance by Lacity and Willcocks (1998), provides the primary theoretical framework for this study. TCT asks why organizations choose to make, buy, or hybridize activities, and it identifies three transaction characteristics that determine which governance structure minimizes total costs: asset specificity, behavioral uncertainty, and transaction frequency.

Asset specificity refers to the degree to which investments lose value outside the current governance relationship. When assets are highly specific—tailored to a particular organizational context and difficult to redeploy—the party that makes the investment is exposed to appropriation risks if the relationship ends. In municipal IT, specificity takes several forms. Physical specificity arises from IT systems customized to local administrative workflows, hardware configurations, and network architectures that have limited redeployment value. Human capital specificity arises from the accumulated knowledge of staff who understand the municipality's administrative processes, data structures, interoperability requirements with state and federal systems, and citizen service patterns. Relational specificity arises from the trust, communication protocols, and shared understandings that develop between IT staff and departmental users over repeated interaction (Jacobides & Billinger, 2006; Lacity & Willcocks, 1998; Williamson, 1985).

Behavioral uncertainty refers to the difficulty of specifying, observing, and evaluating the performance of the other party to a transaction. In municipal IT, uncertainty is high across multiple dimensions. Output uncertainty is high because digital service quality resists complete contractual specification: citizen satisfaction, system reliability, response time, accessibility, and integration with other services involve professional discretion that cannot be fully codified in advance. Environmental uncertainty is high because technological standards change rapidly, citizen needs evolve, federal regulatory requirements shift, and the digital platform landscape is continuously restructured. Measurement uncertainty is high because IT performance depends on a combination of technical and organizational factors that are difficult to separate, making it difficult to attribute outcomes to vendor performance versus client behavior (Cordella & Willcocks, 2012; Williamson, 1985).

When asset specificity and uncertainty are simultaneously high, Williamson (1985) predicts that hierarchical governance—organizing the activity within the firm or agency through employment relationships—reduces total transaction costs relative to market contracting. The costs of writing complete contracts, monitoring vendor compliance, renegotiating when circumstances change, and resolving disputes ex post exceed the coordination costs of hierarchical authority. When transactions are instead standardized, and uncertainty is low, market procurement offers efficiency advantages through competition, specialization, and scale that hierarchy cannot match (Jacobides & Billinger, 2006; Lacity & Willcocks, 1998).

H_1: Municipalities with a dedicated IT team, regardless of arrangement type, are more likely to offer a broader range of formal basic digital services than municipalities without any dedicated IT team.

Lacity and Willcocks (1998) apply this framework empirically to IT outsourcing decisions, finding that selective outsourcing—retaining internal governance for strategic and asset-specific IT functions while contracting standardized commodity functions—consistently outperforms both total outsourcing and total insourcing on cost and performance criteria. Their analysis establishes that the key governance question is not a binary choice between make or buy but a decision about what to make, what to buy, and how to manage the interface. Organizations that retain internal capacity for the most idiosyncratic and strategically sensitive IT activities, while accessing external providers for volume, specialization, and commodity functions, capture the advantages of both governance modes.

Cordella and Willcocks (2012) extend this analysis to the public sector, documenting that government IT outsourcing faces additional institutional constraints that pure transaction cost minimization does not capture: democratic accountability requirements constrain what can be contracted; public value considerations shape which service attributes matter; and political cycles create governance instability that disrupts the long-term relationships on which effective IT outsourcing depends. Schomaker and Bauer (2022) further demonstrate empirically that trust deficits between public and private actors elevate transaction costs in public–private IT partnerships, reinforcing the TCT prediction that arrangements with an internal anchor reduce contractual hazards. Potoski (2026) advances TCT measurement in public contracting, validating that asset specificity and measurability—the core TCT constructs—are empirically tractable in government IT contexts. Clarke (2020) shows that the emergence of hybrid digital government units—organizational forms that blend internal civil service expertise with external technical partnerships—represents a practical institutional response to these constraints. Those units seek governance models that preserve public accountability while accessing the technical capabilities and scale that internal government IT often lacks.

H2a: Arrangements that retain internal IT knowledge (internal-only and mixed) are more likely than outsourced-only arrangements to be associated with greater formal basic digital service capacity.

These arguments imply that the relevance of IT governance arrangements should not be uniform across digital services. Informational services, such as publishing information and providing downloadable forms, involve comparatively standardized outputs and limited integration with idiosyncratic administrative processes. Transactional services, by contrast, require greater coordination with local workflows, data structures, procurement routines, and citizen-facing administrative processes. They therefore involve greater asset specificity and behavioral uncertainty. From a TCT perspective, the organizational advantages associated with retaining internal knowledge and combining it with external technical expertise should consequently be more pronounced for transactional than for informational services. The relevant theoretical question is thus not simply which governance arrangement performs best, but under which task conditions differences among governance arrangements become most consequential. We therefore expect the complementarity of mixed arrangements to matter most where tasks are least standardizable. Recent evidence also identifies institutional and organizational barriers as a recurrent challenge in public-sector digital transformation (Figueredo & Silva, 2026).

H2b: The advantage associated with mixed IT arrangements increases with task specificity: it is expected to be larger for transactional services, which require coordination with local administrative processes, than for informational services, which are more standardized.

Shared Digital Infrastructure, Federalism, and Platform Substitutability

State capacity is usually conceived as a stock of resources, skills, and organizational structures held by a given government. Digital-era governance, however, relocates part of that capacity into shared infrastructure that can serve many organizations at once (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). In federal systems, this creates a channel through which the central government shapes subnational capacity without transferring funds or imposing rules: by providing platforms that change the production function of local government (O'Reilly, 2011). This resembles what Mann (1984) called infrastructural power, the capacity of the state to penetrate and coordinate action across its territory.

In Brazil, where municipalities hold broad service responsibilities but have highly unequal administrative capacities (Arretche, 2012; Grin et al., 2021), federal digital platforms may therefore act as a capacity equalizer. This equalization should be selective. Platforms can supply standardizable capabilities, such as publishing information or processing access-to-information requests, but not capabilities embedded in local procurement, protocol, and grievance processes. Combining this argument with TCT yields the expectation that local IT governance remains consequential precisely where shared infrastructure cannot substitute for local knowledge.

A critical question for any TCT analysis of IT arrangements is whether its predictions are temporally stable or contingent on the broader technology environment. The platform governance literature suggests a boundary condition: as higher-level digital platforms mature and achieve infrastructural reach, they reduce the local organizational requirements for baseline digital service provision (Haug et al., 2024). Digital public infrastructure similarly emphasizes foundational capabilities that organizations and levels of government can share rather than reproduce locally (Bauer et al., 2025), while comparative evidence shows that multilevel governance structures strongly condition local digital transformation (Kuhlmann et al., 2026). When a federal platform provides standardized digital capabilities that municipalities can access without building equivalent local capacity, the marginal transaction cost advantage of internal IT governance at the informational service tier diminishes (OECD, 2024, 2026; OECD/IDB, 2024). Platform infrastructure therefore changes the transaction-cost environment itself. Capabilities that

once required local organizational investment may become standardized external resources, shifting the domains in which local governance arrangements remain consequential.

In the Brazilian context, four federal milestones are associated with this equalization dynamic: the Federal E-Government Program (2000), the Access to Information Law (2011), the e-SIC (2012) platform, and the GOV.BR portal (2019). We predict that as these platforms matured, the formal digital service gap between municipalities with and without IT teams narrowed, but unevenly across digital service types: informational and transactional. Standardized platforms can most fully substitute for local capacity, helping equalize basic informational digital services. However, transactional digital services require coordination on interoperability, citizen data management, and integration with local administrative processes. Centralized platforms can only partially standardize these requirements, as they are tied to specific municipal contexts. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_3: As federal digital platforms expand, the formal digital service gap between municipalities with and without IT teams is expected to narrow, more strongly for basic informational than for basic transactional services.

Organizational Continuity and Institutional Memory

Transaction cost theory explains why governance arrangements may differ in their capacity to manage asset specificity and uncertainty, but the effectiveness of a governance structure may also depend on the organizational history through which it operates. Institutional memory theory (Walsh & Ungson, 1991) provides a complementary lens for understanding this temporal dimension. Organizations retain knowledge through individual expertise, routines, procedures, cultural understandings, and relational experience. In municipal IT governance, continuity may allow employees to accumulate knowledge of administrative processes, while repeated interaction among public employees, external providers, and service departments may generate shared routines, communication protocols, and relational knowledge that reduce future coordination costs.

This temporal perspective also connects to absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Internal IT capacity may enable municipalities not only to retain context-specific knowledge but also to evaluate, assimilate, and productively use specialized expertise obtained from external providers. In mixed arrangements, therefore, continuity may strengthen the interface between internal institutional knowledge and external technical capabilities. Relational history

may also affect trust and reliability: repeated productive interactions can reduce monitoring and coordination costs, whereas unstable relationships or repeated personnel turnover may prevent such capabilities from consolidating. We treat these mechanisms as interpretive rather than directly tested explanations. MUNIC identifies the presence and configuration of IT teams but does not measure employee motivation, organizational culture, interpersonal trust, contractual quality, team integration, or the routines through which knowledge is retained. Consequently, any maturity pattern observed in the data should be interpreted as compatible with institutional memory and relational accumulation, rather than as direct evidence of these mechanisms. Alternative explanations, including survivor bias and administrative sorting, remain possible. In particular, duration may be endogenous to capacity: municipalities able to sustain a team for several years may be structurally more capable.

H_4: Conditional on having adopted a dedicated IT team, municipalities that sustain it for five years or more are more likely to show greater formal digital service capacity than municipalities with more recently established teams.

Case Selection, Data, Variables, and Research Design

This study tests the hypotheses using all Brazilian municipalities as the research setting. Brazil's 5,569 local governments span a broad range of institutional capacities, fiscal resources, and population sizes, providing substantial variation in IT governance configurations alongside a well-documented evolution of national digital policy. The policy trajectory from the Fiscal Responsibility Law of 2000, which initially catalyzed voluntary digital transparency among administratively capable municipalities (Diniz et al., 2009; Kubota, 2024), to the Access to Information Law of 2011 provides a useful context for this analysis. At the federal level, coordination and support for municipal digital transformation are primarily led by the Digital Government Secretariat [Secretaria de Governo Digital] (SGD), within the Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services [Ministério da Gestão e da Inovação em Serviços Públicos] (MGI). The SGD is responsible for promoting national digital government policies, developing shared digital infrastructure and platforms, and supporting subnational governments in the expansion and modernization of digital public service provision.

Moreover, in 2012, the federal government adopted a digital platform that sought to equalize access to digital services across all municipalities over successive policy cycles. The e-SIC—Electronic System for Citizen Information Service [Sistema Eletrônico do Serviço de Informação ao Cidadão]—was established in 2012 to provide a standardized online portal

through which any citizen can submit, track, and receive responses to public information requests, making formal digital citizen–government interaction accessible to all municipalities regardless of local IT capacity. GOV.BR, launched in 2019, consolidated access to federal public services under a single authenticated digital ecosystem. By 2025, the platform registered over 170 million users (80% of the Brazilian population), brought together more than 4,500 federal digital services, and extended integration to 16 states, providing municipalities with a universally accessible catalog of formal digital services that requires no local organizational investment to access. These platforms constitute the federal digital infrastructure whose successive rollouts are temporally aligned with the platform equalization pattern documented in this study.

Data and Dependent Variable

The empirical analysis draws on MUNIC (Basic Municipal Information Survey), conducted by IBGE across all 5,569 Brazilian municipalities in seven waves: 2004, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2019, and 2024 (N = 38,983 municipality-year observations). The Digital Services Index (DSI; range: 0–5) measures the formal nominal availability of five basic e-government functions: (1) informational services and local news; (2) online access to documents and forms; (3) electronic bidding participation; (4) protocol tracking; and (5) citizen grievance channels. Each item is binary. The informational service subindex (0–2) aggregates items 1–2; the transactional service subindex (0–3) aggregates items 3–5. “Transactional” denotes basic interactive exchange, such as electronic bidding, protocol tracking, and grievance submission, rather than advanced digital integration or automation (OECD/IDB, 2024). All measures capture formal supply-side provision capacity, not service quality, usage, or citizen adoption.

The MUNIC definition of a dedicated IT team changed in 2019, when the questionnaire adopted a stricter criterion. As a result, the number of municipalities classified as having no IT team rose from 900 in 2014 to 2,379 in 2019. Comparisons across the 2014–2019 break are therefore interpreted with caution.

Figure 1

Proportion of Municipalities with a Dedicated IT Team



Note. Source: MUNIC/IBGE (2004–2024). Shading indicates the proportion of municipalities with any dedicated IT team per state (light = low prevalence; dark = high prevalence).

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the presence of dedicated IT teams over the study period. In 2004, dedicated IT teams were concentrated in the South and Southeast and nearly absent in the North and Northeast. Between 2006 and 2014, adoption expanded progressively across all regions, peaking when more than 80% of southern municipalities had already dedicated IT capacity. The sharp drop in 2019 is a measurement artifact: the MUNIC questionnaire adopted a stricter definition of “IT team” in that edition, rather than reflecting the actual dissolution of teams. By 2024, prevalence had partially recovered but remained below 2014 levels, partly because the new criterion was more demanding and possibly because federal platforms such as GOV.BR reduced the need for autonomous local IT structures to offer basic digital services, a possibility we treat as a hypothesis rather than a finding. The north-south gradient persists throughout, but is visibly narrower in 2024 than in 2004, a pattern consistent with, but not proof of, the equalizing reach of federal digital infrastructure across historically more vulnerable regions.

Between 2019 and 2024, when the definition is homogeneous, state-level trajectories diverged. The share of municipalities with a dedicated IT team fell in several North and Northeast states, such as Piauí (from 42% to 29%), Ceará (from 57% to 47%), and Pará (from

60% to 51%), and rose in others, such as Tocantins (from 39% to 50%) and Espírito Santo (from 76% to 85%). These movements may reflect changes in sourcing strategies, in municipal capacity, or in the broader technological environment.

Key Predictors and Controls

For the seven-wave Layer 1 analysis, the primary predictor is a binary indicator of IT team presence. For the two-wave Layer 2 analysis, MUNIC 2019 and 2024 provide four mutually exclusive categories: No IT Team (reference category), Internal Only, Outsourced Only, and Mixed. IT arrangements are operationalized through binary variables for data center existence and in-house software development. Partnership Breadth is an additive index (0–5) across five partner types. All models control for log (population), civil servants per 1,000 inhabitants, and log (GDP per capita). Model M3 in Layer 1 adds two political controls from the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), both referring to the mayor. Reelection status captures the incumbent's time horizon and administrative continuity, because reelected mayors may be more willing to invest in IT capacity whose returns extend beyond one term. Educational attainment (higher-education degree) proxies managerial capacity at the top of the executive.

Estimation Strategy

The primary specification uses the between-effects estimator, which uses municipality-level means over time, to describe persistent cross-sectional differences in IT governance arrangements and formal basic digital service capacity. This answers the TCT-motivated question: Which municipalities show stronger associations between governance arrangement type and formal service portfolios? The Hausman test ($\chi^2(10) = 40.909$, $p < .001$) rejects random effects (Appendix Table A1). We retain between-effects estimation as the primary estimator because our question concerns persistent cross-municipal differences; fixed-effects estimates, reported in Table A1, also show a positive and significant association for mixed arrangements. All variance inflation factors (VIFs) fall below 3.0. Poisson generalized linear models (GLMs) complement ordinary least squares (OLS) for all Layer 2 specifications, reporting incidence rate ratios (IRRs). Large proportional ratios in some specifications reflect the near-zero baseline of never-treated municipalities in early waves and are contextualized accordingly.

Two-way fixed-effects (TWFE) models document how formal basic digital service capacity evolves relative to IT team adoption timing. The event study constructs relative-time bins from the year the team was established and time to treatment. Significant positive pre-adoption

trends demonstrate that the parallel trends assumption fails, precluding causal interpretation (Roth et al., 2023; Sun & Abraham, 2021). These are descriptive longitudinal patterns. The maturity analysis tests whether post-adoption patterns reflect a discrete threshold at 5 and 10 years of operation. Event study plots are in Appendix Figure A1. Cohort-specific comparisons using only the 237 never-treated municipalities as controls avoid the forbidden-comparisons problem in standard TWFE (Goodman-Bacon, 2021) and provide additional descriptive triangulation (Callaway & Sant'Anna, 2021). The appendix reports the Hausman test and VIF diagnostics (Table A1), inverse probability weighted (IPW) OLS estimates (Table A2), Mundlak–Poisson estimates (Table A3), federal policy milestones (Table A4), and the full Poisson specification (Table A5).

Three methodological commitments frame our analysis throughout. First, the dependent variable captures the formal, supply-side provision of five basic e-government functions, rather than service quality, backend integration, or citizen adoption. Second, all reported estimates represent structural associations derived from observational data, not causal treatment effects. Third, significant pre-adoption trends in our event study indicate positive selection regarding prior administrative capacity, further precluding a strictly causal interpretation of the longitudinal patterns.

Results

Descriptive Overview

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics stratified by IT team arrangement (pooled 2019 and 2024; N = 11,138). The mean DSI is 3.73 (SD = 1.25). Municipalities with mixed arrangements average 0.84 DSI points higher than those with no IT team (4.25 vs. 3.41) but also differ substantially in size, wealth, and technical endowment, which motivates multivariate controls. In 2019, 42.7% of municipalities had no dedicated IT team; by 2024, mixed arrangements had grown to 22.1%. In 2004, 100% of municipalities without IT teams scored zero on the DSI; formal basic digital service provision was at that point almost exclusively associated with dedicated IT capacity.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics by IT Team Arrangement (Pooled 2019 and 2024; N = 11,138)

Variable	No IT Team (n = 4,737)	Internal Only (n = 1,218)	Outsourced Only (n = 2,857)	Mixed (n = 2,326)	Full Sample
DSI Total (0–5)	3.408	3.869	3.776	4.247	3.728 (1.249)
Informational (0–2)	1.504	1.681	1.641	1.776	1.615 (0.615)
Transactional (0–3)	1.903	2.189	2.135	2.471	2.113 (0.841)
Data Center (CPD)	0.217	0.658	0.597	0.835	0.492 (0.500)
In-House Software Dev.	0.120	0.196	0.215	0.394	0.210 (0.407)
Partnership Breadth	0.402	0.529	0.597	0.766	0.542 (0.712)
Log (Population)	9.034	9.389	9.346	10.491	9.457 (1.181)
Log (GDP per capita)	9.857	10.270	10.130	10.459	10.098 (0.753)
Civil Servants/1,000	36.85	35.69	35.62	32.67	35.54 (23.37)

*Note. Cell values are group means; the full-sample column reports the mean (*SD*). Unadjusted differences are confounded by size, wealth, and technical endowment; see multivariate models below.*

IT Team Arrangement and Formal Digital Service Capacity

Tables 2, 3, and 4 present the primary results. Across all estimators, the pattern is consistent with the conditional expectations derived from TCT: IT team presence is associated with substantially more formal basic digital service capacity (H_1); arrangements retaining internal knowledge are associated with greater capacity than outsourced-only arrangements (H2a); and the association for mixed arrangements is larger for basic transactional services (H2b). Table 2 presents three progressive specifications that reveal the trade-off between temporal coverage and covariate richness. M1 (baseline, 2004–2024) covers all seven waves with minimal controls, excluding GDP per capita because it is unavailable before 2014. M2 (economic controls, 2014–2024) adds GDP per capita but restricts the sample to the three most recent waves; the smaller IT Team Present coefficient (β = 0.866 vs. 2.295) reflects this compressed post-equalization window rather than a weakening of the association. M3 (*p*olitical controls, 2006–2024) adds mayoral reelection status and educational attainment available from 2006 onward (both coefficients are reported in Table 2), yielding a coefficient (β = 2.049) close to M1. Across all three specifications, the IT Team Present coefficient is positive, large, and significant at $p < .001$, providing consistent evidence for H_1.

Table 2

Between-Effects Estimates — Layer 1: IT Team Presence (2004–2024)

Variable	M1 (2004–2024): Baseline	M2 (2014–2024): Economic controls	M3 (2006–2024): Political controls
IT Team Present	2.295***	0.866***	2.049***
Log (Population)	0.054*	0.116***	0.090***
Log (GDP per capita)	—	0.367***	—
Civil Servants per 1,000	−0.008**	−0.005***	−0.007**
Mayor reelected	—	—	0.158***
Mayor with higher education	—	—	0.183***
N municipalities	5,569	5,569	5,569
R^2	0.358	0.300	0.468

Note. Between-effects OLS. Dependent variable: Digital Services Index (DSI; 0–5). HC3 robust SEs. Political controls (M3) refer to the mayor (source: TSE). Coefficients are structural associations. *p < *.05,* **p < *.01,* ***p < *.001.*

Table 3 (Layer 2) shows the arrangement-type ordering consistent with H2a across all specifications. Internal Only is associated with 0.220 additional DSI points ($p < .001$; IRR = 1.061); Outsourced Only with 0.146 additional DSI points ($p < .001$; IRR = 1.047); Mixed with 0.407 additional DSI points ($p < .001$; IRR = 1.093). The internal–outsourced gap (0.074 points) persists after controlling for data center and software development, consistent with TCT's prediction that governance arrangement captures organizational value beyond technical infrastructure. This ordering aligns with earlier research on selective IT outsourcing while extending that pattern to municipal digital service portfolios. It also resonates with recent Brazilian evidence that local digital transformation varies with fiscal, human-resource, and technical-administrative capacities (Lui et al., 2025). Because more capable municipalities may be better able to sustain hybrid arrangements, these estimates are conditional associations rather than effects of choosing a sourcing model.

Table 3

Between-Effects Estimates — Layer 2: IT Team Type (2019 and 2024)

Variable	Total DSI M1	Total DSI M2	Total DSI M3	Informational Services M3	Transactional Services M3
Internal Only	0.330***	0.240***	0.220***	0.115***	0.106**
Outsourced Only	0.271***	0.170***	0.146***	0.079***	0.067*
Mixed	0.587***	0.432***	0.407***	0.155***	0.252***
Data Center (CPD)	—	0.238***	0.228***	0.045*	0.183***
In-House Software Dev.	—	0.200***	0.190***	0.079***	0.111***
Partnership Breadth	—	—	0.164***	0.105***	0.059*
Federal Partnership	—	—	−0.050	−0.031	−0.019
Private Partnership	—	—	0.107	−0.036	0.143**
Log (Population)	0.085***	0.052***	0.041**	0.000	0.041***
Log (GDP per capita)	0.323***	0.284***	0.268***	0.084***	0.185***
Civil Servants per 1,000	−0.004**	−0.004**	−0.004†	−0.003**	−0.001
N municipalities	5,569	5,569	5,569	5,569	5,569
R^2	0.169	0.182	0.188	0.093	0.191

*Note. Between-effects OLS. Reference category: No IT Team. DSI = Digital Services Index; M1 = socioeconomic controls; M2 adds IT infrastructure; M3 is the full model. HC3 robust SEs. Coefficients are structural associations. †p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.*

The Mixed association is larger at the basic transactional tier (β = 0.252; IRR = 1.106) than at the informational tier (β = 0.155; IRR = 1.076). Transactional services are the service type for which asset specificity and output uncertainty, and therefore the TCT-predicted advantage of mixed governance, are highest. IPW-weighted estimates (β = 0.363, p = .008; Appendix Table A2) confirm that the pattern persists after reweighting on six observable confounders. The Mundlak–Poisson results (Appendix Table A3) show mixed retaining significance (IRR = 1.042 total; IRR = 1.056 transactional), while the association for Internal Only attenuates, indicating that the Internal Only association is more sensitive to stable municipality characteristics. The non-significance of Federal Partnership across all specifications is consistent with H_3: federal digital platforms may have become sufficiently universal that a formal federal partnership confers no additional formal service advantage. The stronger association for transactional services is also consistent with recent research emphasizing that digital transformation depends on organizational capacity and the integration of technology with administrative processes, not simply on technology availability (Figueredo & Silva, 2026; Gasco-Hernandez, 2024).

Because the two subindices have different ranges (0–2 and 0–3), their raw coefficients are not directly comparable. The Poisson incidence rate ratios, which express associations in proportional terms, point in the same direction (Mixed: IRR = 1.106 for transactional and 1.076 for informational services; Appendix Table A5), although the difference is modest. The task gradient is specific to Mixed arrangements: Internal Only (0.115 vs. 0.106) and Outsourced Only (0.079 vs. 0.067) show similar associations across service types. This suggests that it is the combination of internal and external capabilities, rather than internal capacity per se, whose value rises with task specificity (H2b).

Platform Equalization: A Boundary Condition on the TCT Associations

Table 4 documents the year-by-year formal digital service gap between municipalities with and without IT teams, defined as the absolute difference in unadjusted mean DSI between the two groups in each wave. The gap peaked at +2.28 index points in 2012 and contracted to +0.54 in 2024, a 76% reduction over 12 years ((2.284 − 0.541) / 2.284), while both groups continued expanding their formal digital portfolios. This contraction is temporally aligned with three federal policy milestones: the Access to Information Law (2011), the e-SIC platform (2012), and the GOV.BR portal (2019). We interpret this as a boundary condition on the TCT findings: the pattern is consistent with federal platforms reducing the organizational requirements for baseline formal digital service provision, compressing the informational-tier gap while leaving the transactional-tier association more intact, although our design does not isolate that mechanism.

Table 4

Platform Equalization: Formal Digital Service Gap by Wave (2004–2024)

Year	Mean - with IT team	Mean - no IT team	Gap	N (with IT team)	N (without IT team)
2004	1.363	0.000	+1.363	2,162	3,397
2006	1.943	0.119	+1.824	2,385	3,178
2009	2.005	0.292	+1.713	2,840	2,724
2012	2.579	0.294	+2.284	3,883	1,681
2014	2.762	0.550	+2.212	4,669	900
2019	3.790	3.220	+0.570	3,190	2,379
2024	4.139	3.597	+0.541	3,211	2,358

Note. Five-item longitudinal DSI (0–5). Unadjusted means. Gap = absolute difference between group means. The 76% contraction from the 2012 peak is temporally aligned with the Access to Information Law (2011), e-SIC/INDA (2012), and GOV.BR (2019). Other contemporaneous factors may contribute.

Most of this contraction occurred between 2014 and 2019, when the MUNIC questionnaire adopted a stricter definition of a dedicated IT team and the no-team group grew from 900 to 2,379 municipalities. Part of the convergence may therefore reflect reclassification rather than change in service provision. Within the two definitionally homogeneous periods, Table 4 shows that the gap changed little: from +2.284 in 2012 to +2.212 in 2014, and from +0.570 in 2019 to +0.541 in 2024. The magnitude of the 76% contraction should therefore be read with caution; the more robust part of the finding is the differential pattern across service types discussed below.

The tier-specificity is consistent with H_3. At the informational tier, convergence is near-complete by 2024: municipalities without IT teams averaged 0.00 informational services in 2004 and 1.68 in 2024 (gap: 0.10 points). The basic transactional tier retains a larger association: mixed teams show β = 0.252 for transactional services in the fully specified between-effects model, compared to β = 0.155 for informational, consistent with the prediction that services requiring local administrative process integration resist standardization by federal platforms. This selective convergence is consistent with the broader logic of shared digital infrastructure: standardized foundational capabilities can be supplied across jurisdictions, while locally embedded transactional processes continue to require organizational coordination and context-specific knowledge (Bauer et al., 2025).

Longitudinal Patterns and Maturity Gradient

The event study (Appendix Figure A1) documents significant positive pre-adoption trends (β = 0.342 at 10–15 years and β = 0.714 at 15 or more years before adoption) demonstrating positive selection on administrative capacity that precludes causal interpretation of post-adoption patterns. After adoption, the TWFE model shows large positive associations for total DSI at onset (β = 1.093) and similar ones at +6 to +10 years (β = 1.026), so no monotonic increase is implied; for basic transactional services, the association rises from β = 0.297 (+1 to +5 years) to β = 0.446 (+6 to +10 years). A dip at −2 to −4 years (β = −0.211) precedes adoption, consistent with a reorganization period.

Table 5 (Panel A) shows that the maturity gradient is not linear: the coefficient on years since adoption is non-significant (β = −0.005, p = .272), while a discrete positive pattern emerges at five or more years of operation (β = 0.190, p < .001). This threshold pattern is compatible with institutional memory theory—knowledge consolidating into productive routines over multiple years—but equally compatible with survivor bias and administrative sorting.

This pattern is consistent with H_4, although, as with H_1–H_4, it reflects a structural association rather than a causal effect of organizational tenure. Table 5 (Panel B) reports cohort-specific comparisons against the 237 never-treated municipalities, showing consistent patterns across 2006–2014 cohorts (range: 1.454 to 1.887) with a weighted average of 1.613, closely aligned with the TWFE estimate of 1.204.

Table 5

Maturity Pattern (Panel A) and Cohort Comparisons (Panel B)

Panel A — Maturity Analysis (TWFE, 7 waves)	**β**		***SE***		***p***
IT team adopted (onset)	1.204***		0.022		< .001
Linear age (years since adoption)	−0.005		0.005		.272
Five-year threshold (≥ 5 years)	0.190***		0.026		< .001
Ten-year threshold (≥ 10 years)	0.054		0.031		.081
R^2-within / N	0.635 / 38,913		-		-
Panel B — Cohort Comparisons (Callaway-Sant'Anna framework)	*N*o. of adopters	Total Digital Services Index	*SE*	Transactional Services	*SE*
2006 (2004→2006)	887	1.634***	0.040	0.488***	0.026
2009 (2006→2009)	727	1.454***	0.050	0.444***	0.031
2012 (2009→2012)	692	1.855***	0.055	0.733***	0.036
2014 (2012→2014)	618	1.887***	0.079	0.818***	0.049
2019 (2014→2019)	173	0.236	0.163	0.069	0.102
Weighted average	-	1.613	-	0.575	

*Note. Panel A: TWFE with municipal and wave FE, clustered SEs. Panel B: 2 × 2 comparisons vs. never-treated (*N = *237); descriptive patterns only.* ***p < *.001.*

Because the maturity model includes municipality fixed effects, time-invariant differences in capacity are absorbed. The remaining concern is time-varying capacity: municipalities on improving trajectories may be those that sustain their teams. We therefore interpret the threshold as capturing organizational stability, which may reflect preexisting capacity as much as continuity itself.

Discussion

The central finding of this study is not simply that mixed IT arrangements are associated with broader digital service capacity than purely internal or outsourced arrangements. Such a ranking is broadly consistent with established research on selective IT outsourcing (Lacity & Willcocks, 1998). The more theoretically informative finding is that this advantage is not uniform across digital tasks. Mixed arrangements exhibit a stronger association with tran-

sactional services (β = 0.252) than with informational services (β = 0.155; see also the incidence rate ratios in Appendix Table A5), indicating that the relevance of governance structure increases where digital service delivery depends more heavily on localized administrative knowledge, coordination, and process integration. The findings therefore shift the analytical emphasis from whether hybrid governance performs better in general to the conditions under which its organizational advantages become most consequential.

From Hybrid Advantage to Contingent Hybrid Governance

This task-level heterogeneity refines the application of transaction cost theory to digital government. Informational services are comparatively amenable to standardization: publishing information, providing forms, and maintaining basic online access require less integration with idiosyncratic administrative processes. Transactional services such as electronic bidding, protocol tracking, and grievance channels are more deeply embedded in local workflows, data structures, legal procedures, and interdepartmental coordination. These characteristics increase asset specificity and behavioral uncertainty, precisely the conditions under which purely contractual governance becomes more difficult and retaining internal organizational knowledge becomes more valuable.

Mixed arrangements appear particularly well positioned under these conditions because they combine two forms of capacity that are difficult to maximize simultaneously. Internal personnel retain contextual knowledge of administrative processes, legal requirements, organizational routines, and user needs, while external providers offer specialized expertise, technological updating, and scale. The relevant contribution is therefore not a universal claim that hybrid governance is the optimal organizational form. Rather, the findings suggest a contingent hybrid advantage: the relative value of combining internal and external capabilities increases as service delivery becomes more organizationally specific and less amenable to standardization. Recent evidence from Brazilian municipalities likewise shows that digital maturity is embedded in broader fiscal, human-resource, and structural capacities (Lui et al., 2025).

This interpretation also requires caution about the direction of the relationship. More capable municipalities may be precisely those able to sustain hybrid arrangements, so the mixed association may partly reflect selection or reverse causation. The evidence identifies conditional associations: hybrid arrangements are associated with greater capacity, particularly when tasks require a combination of external resources and internal organizational knowledge, not a causal effect of choosing a particular sourcing arrangement.

The robustness pattern reinforces this interpretation while also requiring caution. The association for internal-only arrangements attenuates to non-significance in the Mundlak–Poisson specification, whereas the mixed association persists after accounting for stable municipality-level heterogeneity. This pattern is consistent with the complementarity argument underlying selective outsourcing and recent work on insourcing (Petersen, 2024), but it does not identify the underlying mechanisms causally. The data observe governance configurations and formal service capacity, not contractual exposure, vendor monitoring, strategic alignment, or the actual integration of internal and external expertise. Thus, the findings provide evidence consistent with TCT mechanisms rather than direct tests of those mechanisms.

Platform Equalization and the Changing Value of Local Capacity

The second contribution concerns how the broader digital infrastructure environment changes the relevance of local governance arrangements. Between 2012 and 2024, the formal digital service gap between municipalities with and without dedicated IT teams contracted 76% in unadjusted terms, alongside the expansion of federal digital platforms and standardized digital capabilities. This convergence was concentrated in informational services rather than transactional services. The pattern is consistent with the possibility that higher-level digital infrastructure substitutes for some forms of local organizational capacity, but that this substitutability depends on the characteristics of the service being provided.

Our evidence documents convergence; it does not isolate substitution. The narrowing of the gap is temporally aligned with the Access to Information Law, the e-SIC platform, and GOV.BR and is concentrated in the informational services those initiatives most directly standardize. Other processes may contribute to the same pattern: the diffusion of standardized software, declining technology costs, learning across municipalities, broadband expansion, and the regulatory mandate of the Access to Information Law itself. We therefore read platform substitution as the most plausible interpretation consistent with the service-type pattern, not as an established causal mechanism.

This finding extends the TCT argument beyond the choice among internal, outsourced, and hybrid arrangements. Digital platforms alter the transaction-cost environment in which those choices operate. When a higher-level government provides standardized infrastructure for activities that municipalities would otherwise need to organize locally, part of the value associated with local IT capacity is effectively externalized to a shared infrastructure. The relevant organizational boundary therefore shifts: municipalities need not reproduce locally capa-

bilities that can be reliably standardized and supplied through common platforms. This logic is consistent with recent work conceptualizing digital public infrastructure as shared foundational capabilities for public-interest value creation (Bauer et al., 2025) and with comparative evidence on the multilevel governance of local digital transformation (Kuhlmann et al., 2026).

Yet platform substitution has limits. Transactional services remain tied to local administrative processes, interoperability requirements, citizen data management, procurement routines, and organizational coordination. These activities retain forms of asset specificity that centralized infrastructure cannot easily eliminate. The resulting pattern is therefore one of selective rather than universal equalization: higher-level platforms can raise the digital floor while leaving local organizational capacity consequential for services that resist standardization. This helps reconcile two developments that might otherwise appear contradictory: the increasing centralization of digital infrastructure and the continuing importance of local organizational capacity.

The broader implication is that digital state capacity should not be understood solely as a stock of resources located within individual governments. In increasingly platformized public sectors, some capabilities can be supplied as shared infrastructure across jurisdictional boundaries, while others remain embedded in local organizations. For federal systems in particular, the key governance question may therefore be not simply how much digital capacity municipalities possess, but which capabilities must remain local and which can be effectively provided through higher-level platforms. This channel complements the fiscal and regulatory instruments traditionally emphasized in studies of Brazilian federalism (Arretche, 2012): by supplying shared platforms, the central government can alter the production function of local government without transferring resources or imposing rules—an expression of what Mann (1984) termed infrastructural power.

Organizational and Relational Conditions of Hybrid Governance

Governance structure alone, however, cannot explain how IT teams function. Two municipalities classified as having mixed arrangements may combine public employees and external providers in formally similar ways while differing substantially in the quality of their internal relationships, managerial practices, contractual arrangements, and organizational environments. The effectiveness of hybrid governance may therefore depend on organizational and relational conditions that are not captured by the formal sourcing categories used in this study. Recent research on local digital leadership and broader evidence on digital-service implementation likewise emphasize that organizational and institutional conditions shape digital transformation outcomes (Branderhorst & Ruijer, 2025; Figueredo & Silva, 2026).

Trust is one such condition. Repeated interaction between public employees and external providers can generate shared expectations, communication protocols, and confidence in partners' reliability, potentially reducing monitoring and coordination costs (Schomaker & Bauer, 2022). Conversely, low trust may increase contractual safeguards, monitoring demands, and conflict, reducing the benefits expected from combining internal and external capabilities. Prior organizational history therefore matters: hybrid governance is not created anew in each period but operates through relationships shaped by earlier decisions, interactions, successes, failures, and personnel continuity.

Organizational culture and employee motivation may operate similarly. A collaborative culture may facilitate knowledge exchange across organizational boundaries, whereas cultures characterized by strong public-private segmentation may inhibit the transfer of expertise even when internal and external personnel formally coexist. Motivation may affect whether public employees actively develop the capacity to supervise, learn from, and integrate external expertise rather than becoming passive contract managers. Legal and institutional structures can further condition these relationships by determining procurement flexibility, contractual duration, accountability requirements, personnel stability, and the discretion available to managers. These factors are particularly relevant in public organizations, where sourcing decisions are embedded in legal and political constraints that differ from those faced by private firms (Cordella & Willcocks, 2012). This broader perspective is also consistent with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean's (ECLAC, 2025) recent digital-government governance framework for Latin America and the Caribbean, which emphasizes institutional, cultural, organizational, leadership, and technical elements alongside information and communication technology itself.

These considerations qualify how the observed mixed advantage should be interpreted. The results identify an association between governance architecture and service capacity; they do not imply that combining internal and external personnel mechanically produces superior outcomes. Hybrid arrangements create an organizational opportunity for complementarity, but realizing that complementarity may depend on trust, motivation, organizational culture, contractual quality, leadership, and effective integration between internal and external actors. Because MUNIC does not measure these mechanisms, the present study cannot determine which of them explains variation among municipalities with formally similar arrangements. This distinction between governance architecture and organizational functioning represents an important agenda for subsequent research.

Organizational Continuity, Institutional Memory, and the Maturity Gradient

The five-year maturity threshold adds a temporal dimension to this distinction between governance architecture and organizational functioning. Municipalities maintaining IT teams for five or more years exhibit an additional association with formal digital service capacity (β = 0.190, $p < .001$), whereas the linear duration gradient is not significant. Rather than indicating a simple year-by-year accumulation of capacity, the pattern suggests that organizational continuity may matter after a period in which knowledge, routines, and relationships have had time to consolidate.

Institutional memory theory offers one plausible interpretation. Stable IT arrangements may allow context-specific knowledge to move beyond individual employees and become embedded in routines, procedures, communication practices, and organizational relationships. In mixed arrangements, continuity may also strengthen absorptive capacity by allowing internal personnel to develop the knowledge required to evaluate, assimilate, and productively apply expertise obtained from external providers. From this perspective, the history of the governance arrangement becomes potentially as important as its formal structure.

The maturity finding also provides a possible bridge to the relational mechanisms discussed above. Trust, shared routines, and reliable patterns of cooperation are inherently temporal: they develop through repeated interaction rather than through the formal creation of an IT unit. Frequent turnover among employees, contractors, or political leadership may interrupt these processes even when the formal governance category remains unchanged. Conversely, continuity may permit relationships and routines to stabilize. This interpretation is consistent with institutional memory and relational specificity, but the present data cannot establish that either mechanism produced the observed threshold.

Alternative explanations remain plausible. Municipalities capable of maintaining IT teams for five or more years may simply be better governed; more capable administrators may sort into municipalities with mature teams; or capital investment may follow a similar temporal trajectory. The threshold should therefore be treated as a theoretically suggestive pattern rather than evidence that five years constitute a causal maturation period. Because the maturity model includes municipality fixed effects, stable differences in capacity are absorbed, but municipalities on improving trajectories may be those that sustain their teams; the threshold may therefore capture organizational stability or preexisting capacity as much as continuity itself. Direct testing would require data on personnel tenure, turnover, team composition, routine formalization, contractual relationships, trust, and knowledge-sharing practices.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings should be interpreted within four main limitations. First, the study identifies persistent associations rather than causal effects of IT governance arrangements. Significant pre-adoption trends in the event-study analyses indicate positive selection into IT-team adoption, preventing a causal interpretation of the estimated relationships. The duration of IT teams may itself be endogenous to municipal capacity. Future studies exploiting exogenous variation, including electoral discontinuities, regional IT labor-market shocks, or federal programs with differential municipal exposure, could provide stronger identification.

Second, the governance categories capture organizational structure but not organizational functioning. MUNIC does not measure motivation, organizational culture, interpersonal trust, leadership, team integration, contractual quality, knowledge-sharing practices, or the prior history of public-private relationships. These unobserved characteristics may explain why municipalities with formally similar governance arrangements achieve different levels of digital service capacity. Mixed-method and organizational-level studies are particularly important for identifying these mechanisms.

Third, our measures capture the formal availability of relatively basic digital services rather than service quality, usage, citizen experience, or advanced digital integration. A municipality may formally provide a transactional service while citizens experience substantial difficulties using it. Future research should therefore connect governance arrangements not only to formal service supply but also to service quality, take-up, accessibility, and distributional outcomes.

Fourth, the platform equalization interpretation is grounded in the temporal correspondence between the expansion of federal digital infrastructure and convergence in municipal informational services; the present design does not isolate the causal effect of individual federal platforms. Moreover, the Access to Information Law is a regulatory mandate rather than a platform, so regulatory and infrastructural channels cannot be fully separated, and other processes may also contribute to convergence. The 2019 change in the MUNIC definition of an IT team further qualifies comparisons across the 2014–2019 break. Comparative research across federal and multilevel systems could test whether similar patterns emerge where higher-level governments expand shared digital infrastructure. Such comparisons would help establish whether platform substitutability represents a more general boundary condition on the organizational determinants of local digital capacity.

Conclusion

This study asked under what task and infrastructural conditions local IT governance remains consequential for municipal digital service capacity, using 20 years of data covering all 5,569 Brazilian municipalities. The findings provide evidence consistent with transaction cost theory but also qualify a simple expectation that hybrid arrangements uniformly outperform alternative governance forms. Mixed IT arrangements show their strongest association with transactional services, where digital provision remains more dependent on localized administrative knowledge, process integration, and coordination.

The results further indicate that the relevance of local IT governance is contingent on the broader digital infrastructure environment. Between 2012 and 2024, the digital service gap between municipalities with and without dedicated IT teams narrowed substantially, particularly for informational services, alongside the expansion of federal digital platforms. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that higher-level digital infrastructure substitutes for some forms of local organizational capacity while leaving local governance arrangements consequential for services that resist standardization.

A third finding concerns organizational continuity. The five-year maturity pattern is compatible with the possibility that knowledge, routines, and relational capabilities accumulate over time, although the study does not directly observe these mechanisms. More broadly, formal governance architecture should not be equated with organizational functioning: trust, leadership, motivation, organizational culture, contractual quality, and prior relational history may all shape whether the potential complementarity of mixed arrangements is realized.

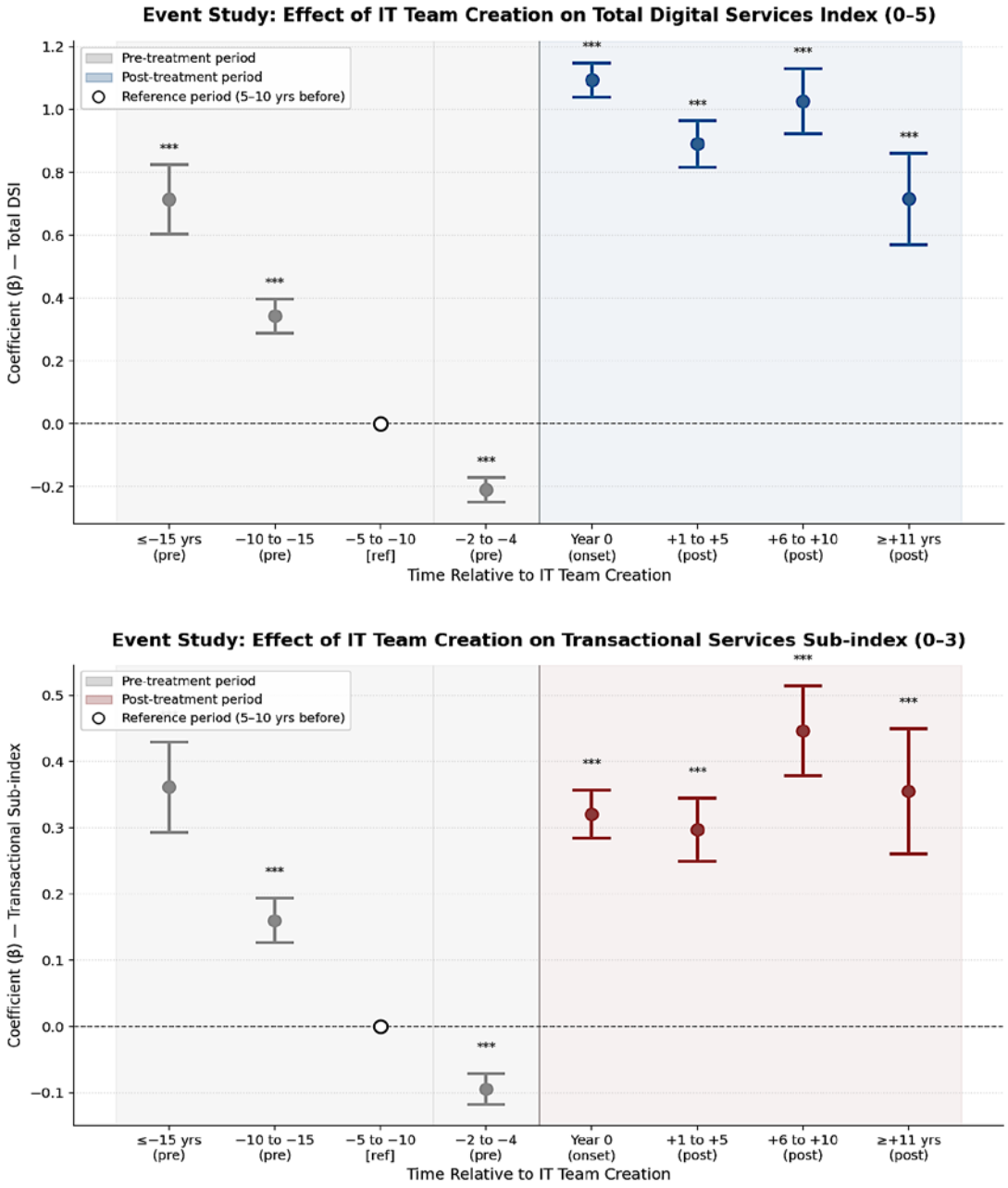
Taken together, these findings answer the question that motivated the study. Local IT capacity remains consequential where tasks are embedded in local administrative processes, where shared infrastructure cannot standardize the capability, and where organizations have been stable long enough to integrate internal and external expertise.

For public management, the implication is not that municipalities should universally adopt hybrid IT structures. Rather, sourcing decisions should reflect the characteristics of the services being governed and the capabilities already available through shared higher-level infrastructure. Internal organizational knowledge appears especially relevant where services require local integration, while standardized capabilities may increasingly be supplied through common platforms. For federal systems, this shifts the digital-governance question from how much capacity should reside locally to which capabilities must remain local and which can be effectively shared across levels of government.

Appendix

Figure A1

Event Study



Note. Top: Total DSI (0–5). Bottom: Transactional Sub-index (0–3). TWFE with municipality and wave FE; controls: log(population), civil servants per 1,000; clustered SEs. Reference: 5–10 years before adoption (open circle). Significant positive pre-trends document positive selection; post-adoption patterns are descriptive longitudinal associations, not causal estimates.

Table A1

Hausman Test and VIF Diagnostics

Panel A. Hausman Test: Fixed Effects, *R*andom Effects, and Between-Effects Estimates

Variable	β (Fixed Effects)	β (Random Effects)	β (Between-Effects)	Δ (FE−RE)
Internal Only	0.112	0.195**	0.220***	−0.083
Outsourced Only	0.146***	0.148***	0.146***	−0.002
Mixed	0.159**	0.326***	0.406***	−0.168
Data Center	0.050	0.175***	0.228***	−0.126
In-House Software Dev.	0.165***	0.181***	0.190***	−0.017
Partnership Breadth	0.173***	0.175***	0.164***	−0.002
Log (Population)	−0.577	0.056	0.041**	−0.633
Civil Servants/1,000	−0.005***	−0.005***	−0.004	0.000
R^2	0.048 (within)	0.133 (overall)	0.188	

Note. Hausman $\chi^2(10) = 40.909$, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Panel B. VIF Diagnostics for the Primary M3 Model

Variable	VIF
Internal Only	1.23
Outsourced Only	1.44
Mixed	2.17
Data Center	1.77
In-House Software Dev.	1.25
Partnership Breadth	2.69
Federal Partnership	2.21
Private Partnership	1.26
Log (Population)	1.87
Log (GDP per capita)	1.36
Civil Servants/1,000	1.25
Maximum	2.69 (all < 5)

Table A2

IPW-Weighted OLS

Variable	β	SE	p
Internal Only	0.228***	0.041	< .001
Outsourced Only	0.146**	0.054	.007
Mixed	0.363**	0.140	.008
Data Center	0.231***	0.042	< .001
In-House Software Dev.	0.188***	0.046	< .001
Partnership Breadth	0.161***	0.029	< .001
Log (Population)	0.098***	0.022	< .001
Log (GDP per capita)	0.261***	0.031	< .001

Note. Before reweighting: max SMD = 1.44; after: all SMDs < 0.05.
N = *5,569.* *p < *.05,* **p < *.01,* ***p < *.001.*

Table A3

Mundlak–Poisson

Between-Effects and Mundlak–Poisson IRRs

Variable	Total: BE	Total: Mundlak	Trans.: BE	Trans.: Mundlak
Internal Only	1.065***	1.032	1.057**	1.032
Outsourced Only	1.045***	1.046**	1.039**	1.054**
Mixed	1.111***	1.042*	1.120***	1.056**
Data Center	1.066***	1.015	1.095***	1.018
In-House Software Dev.	1.049***	1.033**	1.049***	1.030*
Log (Population)	1.018***	1.067***	1.025***	1.058***
Log (GDP per capita)	1.082***	1.072***	1.098***	1.083***
N	11,124	11,124	11,124	11,124

Note. Mundlak adds entity-level means of time-varying regressors. Mixed remains significant; Internal Only attenuates. *p < *.05,* **p < *.01,* ***p < *.001.*

Table A4

Federal Policy Milestones

Milestone	Date	Relationship to findings
Federal E-Government Program	April 2000	Federal digital infrastructure; contextualizes positive pre-trends in event study
Access to Information Law	November 2011	First mandate for digital citizen channels; consistent with pre-adoption dip
e-SIC launch	2012	Standardized LAI platforms; temporally aligned with gap contraction beginning
GOV.BR portal launch	July 2019	Universal federal portal with 4,500+ services; primary temporal correlate of gap contraction from +2.28 to +0.54

Note. Milestones are temporally aligned with the platform equalization pattern; other contemporaneous factors may contribute.

Table A5

Poisson Count Models — Full Specification (Layer 2)

Variable	Total IRR	Info. IRR	Trans. IRR
Internal Only	1.061***	1.067***	1.057***
Outsourced Only	1.047***	1.047***	1.046***
Mixed	1.093***	1.076***	1.106***

Variable	Total IRR	Info. IRR	Trans. IRR
Data Center (CPD)	1.055***	1.029***	1.075***
In-House Software Dev.	1.042***	1.043***	1.040***
Partnership Breadth	1.030***	1.038***	1.023**
Federal Partnership	1.002	1.004	1.000
Private Partnership	1.031*	1.016	1.042**
Wave 2024	1.076***	1.057***	1.091***
Log (Population)	1.017***	1.008*	1.024***
Log (GDP per capita)	1.078***	1.055***	1.095***
N	11,124	11,124	11,124

Note. Poisson GLM with HC3 robust SEs. IRR = incidence rate ratio. The non-significance of Federal Partnership is consistent with H3.
*p < *.05*, **p < *.01*, ***p < *.001*.

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How to cite the article:
Avellaneda, C., & Gomes, A. (2026). IT Teams and Municipal Digital Services: A Transaction Cost Analysis Across Brazilian Municipalities. *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 122-156. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a752

REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a961

Innovar localmente, ¿escalar nacionalmente? Gobiernos locales y sistema nacional de cuidados de larga duración[1]

Inovar localmente, escalar nacionalmente? Governos locais e o sistema nacional de cuidados de longa duração

Innovating Locally, Scaling Nationally? Local Governments and the National Long-Term Care System

Recibido: 16/07/2026 - Aceptado: 25/10/2026

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Tipología del artículo: investigación.

Resumen

El rápido envejecimiento de América Latina y el Caribe ha impulsado la creación de sistemas nacionales de cuidados de larga duración. Su consolidación plantea un desafío de gobernanza: coordinar la prestación de servicios entre los gobiernos nacionales y locales para evitar la fragmentación territorial. Este artículo presenta la primera evaluación experimental de un programa municipal de teleasistencia domiciliaria en América Latina, implementado mediante un ensayo controlado aleatorizado con 636 personas mayores con necesidades de cuidado. El servicio redujo la soledad y mejoró la salud mental; también redujo las llamadas al servicio de emergencias, aunque este efecto no resiste el ajuste por comparaciones múltiples. No se

1 Ayuda JDC2023-050418-I financiada por MICIU/AEI /10.13039/501100011033 y por el FSE+. Ximea Alvarenga Fournier fue beneficiaria de una beca del Programa Paulo Freire+ de la Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos (OEI).

observaron efectos sobre la salud física ni sobre la hospitalización, y la evidencia sobre la carga de las personas cuidadoras no es concluyente. A partir de una lectura interpretativa de casos comparados de gobernanza multinivel, el artículo argumenta que la efectividad de las innovaciones locales no garantiza su escalabilidad a nivel nacional en ausencia de mecanismos de coordinación y financiamiento entre los distintos niveles de gobierno. El estudio contribuye a la literatura sobre gobiernos locales, capacidades institucionales y gobernanza multinivel al examinar cómo la evidencia experimental generada en un gobierno local puede orientar el diseño institucional de los sistemas nacionales de cuidados.

Palabras clave: gobiernos locales, gobernanza multinivel, cuidados de larga duración, teleasistencia domiciliaria, capacidades institucionales, Costa Rica.

Resumo

O rápido envelhecimento da América Latina e do Caribe impulsionou a criação de sistemas nacionais de cuidados de longa duração. Sua consolidação coloca um desafio de governança: coordenar a prestação de serviços entre governos nacionais e locais para evitar a fragmentação territorial. Este artigo apresenta a primeira avaliação experimental de um programa municipal de teleassistência domiciliar na América Latina, implementado por meio de um ensaio controlado randomizado com 636 pessoas idosas com necessidades de cuidado. O serviço reduziu a solidão e melhorou a saúde mental; também reduziu as chamadas ao serviço de emergência, embora esse efeito não resista ao ajuste por comparações múltiplas. Não foram observados efeitos sobre a saúde física nem sobre a hospitalização, e a evidência sobre a sobrecarga das pessoas cuidadoras não é conclusiva. A partir de uma leitura interpretativa de casos comparados de governança multinível, o artigo argumenta que a efetividade das inovações locais não garante sua expansão nacional na ausência de mecanismos de coordenação e financiamento entre níveis de governo. O estudo contribui para a literatura sobre governos locais, capacidades institucionais e governança multinível ao examinar como a evidência experimental gerada por um governo local pode orientar o desenho institucional de sistemas nacionais de cuidados.

Palavras-chave: governos locais, governança multinível, cuidados de longa duração, teleassistência domiciliar, capacidades institucionais, Costa Rica.

Abstract

Rapid population ageing in Latin America and the Caribbean has driven the creation of national long-term care systems. Their consolidation poses a governance challenge: coordinating service provision across national and local governments to prevent territorial fragmentation. This article presents the first experimental evaluation of a municipal home telecare programme in Latin America, implemented through a randomised controlled trial with 636 older adults with care needs. The service reduced loneliness and improved mental health, it also reduced calls to emergency services, although this effect does not survive adjustment for multiple comparisons. No effects were found on physical health or hospitalisation, and the evidence on caregiver burden is inconclusive. Drawing on an interpretive reading of comparative cases of multilevel governance, the article argues that the effectiveness of local innovations does not guarantee their national scaling-up in the absence of coordination and financing mechanisms across levels of government. The study contributes to the literature on local governments, institutional capacity and multilevel governance by examining how experimental evidence generated by a local government can inform the institutional design of national long-term care systems.

Keywords: local governments, multilevel governance, long-term care, home tele-assistance, institutional capacity, Costa Rica.

Introducción

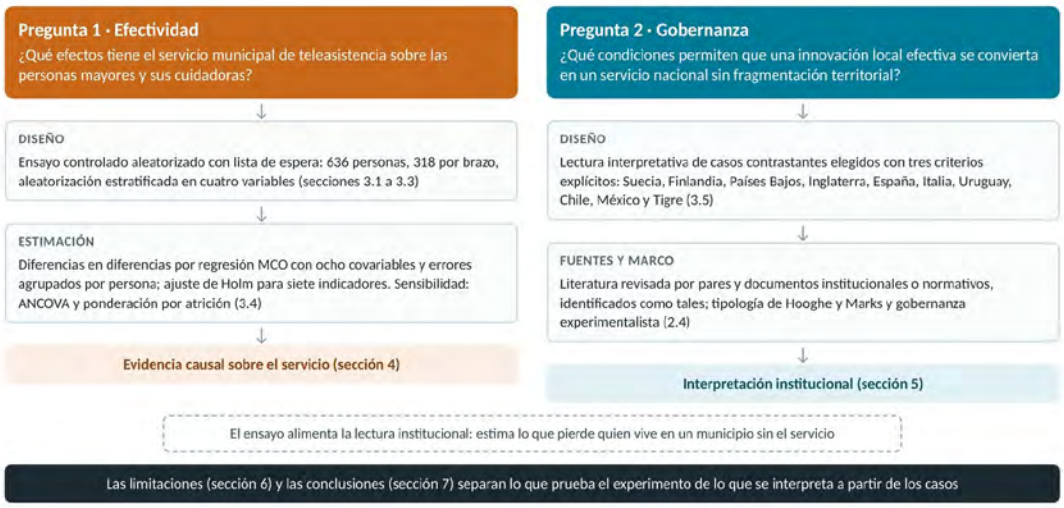
Los países de América Latina han comenzado a legislar sobre sistemas nacionales de cuidados de larga duración (CLD), pero la provisión de servicios sigue dependiendo en gran medida de lo que cada gobierno local puede o decide ofrecer. Costa Rica es un caso claro de esa tensión. En 2022 creó un sistema nacional que reconoce cinco modalidades de servicio y, cuatro años después, solo las transferencias monetarias operan a escala nacional. La teleasistencia domiciliaria existe porque el municipio de Heredia decidió financiarla, implementarla y evaluarla con recursos propios.

El artículo plantea dos preguntas que requieren evidencia distinta. La primera es de efectividad: ¿qué efectos tiene un servicio municipal de teleasistencia sobre el bienestar de las personas mayores con necesidades de cuidado y sobre sus cuidadoras? La respondemos con un ensayo controlado aleatorizado. La segunda es institucional: ¿qué condiciones de gobernanza multinivel permiten que una innovación local efectiva se convierta en un servicio

nacional sin generar fragmentación territorial? Esta la abordamos con una lectura interpretativa de casos comparados, a la luz de la tipología de Hooghe y Marks (2003). La figura 1 resume cómo se articulan ambas partes del estudio.

Figura 1

Articulación de las dos partes del estudio



Fuente: elaboración propia.

El objetivo es, por tanto, doble: estimar el efecto causal del servicio y discutir qué implica esa evidencia para el diseño institucional de un sistema nacional de CLD. A lo largo del texto mantenemos separadas ambas partes. El experimento informa sobre la efectividad del servicio; las conclusiones sobre gobernanza se derivan de la lectura de casos y deben interpretarse, no tomarse como prueba.

La contribución es tanto empírica como conceptual. En el ámbito empírico, el artículo presenta la primera evaluación experimental de un servicio de CLD ofrecido por un gobierno local en América Latina. En lo conceptual, usa la distinción entre gobernanza de tipo I y de tipo II para leer el caso de un Estado unitario con municipios de capacidad fiscal muy desigual, un contexto distinto del que dio origen a la tipología.

Marco teórico y contexto

Gobiernos locales, capacidades institucionales y gobernanza del cuidado

La provisión de CLD plantea a los gobiernos locales un desafío de capacidad institucional comparable al que enfrentaron décadas atrás en materia de agua potable, residuos sólidos o salud primaria. La literatura sobre descentralización advirtió tempranamente que transferir competencias sin transferir la capacidad fiscal ni técnica genera brechas de implementación entre los municipios (Cabrero, 2006). Esa brecha se agudiza cuando la competencia transferida es nueva, como ocurre con los sistemas de CLD, para los que numerosos países de la región han comenzado a legislar en la última década. La gobernanza democrática local depende de un conjunto de capacidades administrativas, financieras y técnicas que no se derivan automáticamente del reconocimiento legal de una prestación (Hernández-Bonivento, 2011).

Los gobiernos locales rara vez son actores pasivos en la construcción de los sistemas de bienestar. En ausencia de una oferta nacional suficiente, algunos municipios asumen funciones de innovación social que anteceden y, en ocasiones, orientan la política nacional (Blanco y Gomà, 2003). Esta capacidad de anticipación no es una particularidad costarricense. Un análisis comparado reciente del diseño de cinco sistemas de cuidado en América Latina, que incluye tanto los casos nacionales de Chile, Uruguay y Costa Rica como dos sistemas subnacionales, Bogotá y San Pedro Garza García, demuestra que el nivel local también articula intervenciones de cuidado con el objetivo de reconocer, reducir y redistribuir el trabajo no remunerado que persiguen los sistemas nacionales (Michel et al., 2025). Esa capacidad de anticipación tiene, sin embargo, un costo: cuando la innovación local no se acompaña de una ruta de financiamiento intergubernamental, el resultado es una oferta de servicios fragmentada y dependiente de la voluntad política y de la capacidad de recaudación de cada municipio.

La literatura sobre gobernanza democrática local distingue entre la capacidad de decidir una política y la de implementarla de forma sostenida (Hernández-Bonivento, 2011). El caso costarricense refleja esa brecha: el Estado creó un sistema nacional de CLD, pero no desarrolló las capacidades institucionales que los gobiernos locales requieren para prestar de manera homogénea las cinco modalidades reconocidas por la ley. Esta tensión constituye el punto de partida del análisis y se examina a través de la tipología de gobernanza multinivel de Hooghe y Marks (2003).

El rol de los gobiernos locales en la arquitectura de los sistemas nacionales de *CLD*

La provisión de CLD rara vez es exclusivamente nacional o local (Matus-López y Rodríguez-Modroño, 2014). En la mayoría de los sistemas consolidados, se organiza como una estructura de gobernanza multinivel (Arlotti et al., 2021), en la que el nivel central o regional define los derechos, establece estándares y aporta parte del financiamiento, mientras que los gobiernos locales implementan y adaptan las políticas según sus capacidades institucionales. Esta distribución de responsabilidades genera una tensión entre la uniformidad del diseño nacional y la discrecionalidad en la implementación local.

La evidencia europea documenta esta tensión con especial claridad. En Italia, la implementación local de un programa nacional de cuidados domiciliarios mostró que la discrecionalidad municipal no solo preserva la autonomía local, sino que también permite a los gobiernos locales captar recursos centrales o trasladar a niveles superiores los costos que no desean asumir, especialmente cuando los mecanismos de coordinación vertical son débiles (Arlotti et al., 2021). En los Países Bajos, la descentralización de la política social trasladó parte de esta tensión al ámbito municipal, donde los trabajadores sociales municipales terminan por definir cómo se materializan los derechos reconocidos por la legislación nacional (Jansen et al., 2021).

Suecia ofrece uno de los ejemplos más consolidados de descentralización municipal en materia de CLD. Estudios pioneros mostraron que el acceso a servicios domiciliarios y residenciales variaba sustancialmente entre municipios, incluso cuando las necesidades de la población eran similares (Trydegård y Thorslund, 2001, 2010). Dos décadas después, un análisis de los 290 municipios suecos confirma que esta heterogeneidad persiste y que factores como la densidad poblacional, la orientación política del gobierno local y el nivel de ingresos continúan explicando las diferencias en las políticas municipales de acceso a los cuidados (Wittberg y Kelfve, 2025). El propio Estado sueco intenta corregir esa variación mediante la supervisión estatal de los servicios municipales (Andersson et al., 2018). Incluso los mecanismos nacionales de supervisión encuentran límites para homogeneizar la prestación local, ya que los sistemas de evaluación utilizados por el Estado y por los municipios responden a criterios distintos sobre qué constituye un cuidado de calidad (Hanberger y Lindgren, 2018).

En España, la última reforma del Sistema para la Autonomía y Atención a la Dependencia ha sido impulsada por decisiones adoptadas por las comunidades autónomas (Perna et al.,

2025). Asimismo, un estudio comparativo entre España e Italia concluye que la capacidad institucional de los municipios constituye un factor determinante para desarrollar formas más democráticas e inclusivas de gobernanza del cuidado (Donati y Rodríguez-García, 2026). En Inglaterra, las autoridades locales son responsables de la organización del cuidado social para las personas mayores, mientras que el gobierno central mantiene el control sobre los criterios generales de elegibilidad y una parte importante del financiamiento, configurando un sistema de interdependencia entre ambos niveles de gobierno (Needham et al., 2025).

La arquitectura de prestaciones de los sistemas nacionales de *CLD*

Más allá de las diferencias institucionales entre países, los sistemas nacionales de CLD presentan una arquitectura de prestaciones notablemente convergente, compuesta por cinco modalidades principales (Costa-Font et al., 2015; Rachter et al., 2024). Las residencias de larga estancia atienden a personas con dependencia severa que requieren supervisión permanente. Los centros diurnos combinan atención profesional con apoyo temporal a las personas cuidadoras. La atención domiciliaria lleva profesionales al hogar de la persona usuaria. La teleasistencia domiciliaria complementa la atención presencial mediante la vigilancia y el acompañamiento telemático. En España, la evidencia administrativa confirma que esta última es compatible con el resto de las prestaciones, no un sustituto de ellas (Martínez López, 2017). Finalmente, las transferencias monetarias (cash-for-care) se reservan principalmente para zonas rurales o de difícil acceso. Estas cinco modalidades son precisamente las que la ley costarricense reconoce.

Costa Rica creó el Sistema Nacional de Cuidados y Apoyos para Personas Adultas y Personas Adultas Mayores en Situación de Dependencia (SINCA) en 2022, tras declarar de interés público la Política Nacional de Cuidados 2021–2031 un año antes (Chaverri-Carvajal y Matus-López, 2021; Matus-López y Chaverri-Carvajal, 2022). Como país entonces clasificado como de renta media, fue el primero de ese nivel de ingreso en aprobar un marco legal integral para los CLD (Matus-López, et al., 2022). En julio de 2025, el Banco Mundial reclasificó a Costa Rica como economía de ingreso alto (Banco Mundial, 2025), sin que ese salto se haya traducido todavía en el desarrollo nacional de los servicios en especie que la ley prevé (Chaverri-Carvajal y Alvarenga, 2026).

De las cinco modalidades, actualmente solo las transferencias monetarias están implementadas a nivel nacional. En la práctica, con datos de junio de 2026, se asignan a 6200 mujeres en situación de pobreza que son cuidadoras de personas con dependencia seve-

ra. El número de personas usuarias de residencias y centros diurnos ha disminuido desde 2021, antes de la creación del SINCA. La atención domiciliaria se encuentra en fase piloto y la teleasistencia, modalidad que este artículo evalúa, se ha desarrollado únicamente en el ámbito municipal.

Esta configuración tiene implicaciones directas para la igualdad de género. La literatura comparada indica que las transferencias monetarias refuerzan la responsabilidad familiar del cuidado y tienden a perpetuar las desigualdades de género al sustituir servicios por apoyos económicos (Rachter et al., 2024). En Suecia, Francia y España, su expansión se ha asociado con una menor participación laboral femenina (Rodríguez Modroño y Matus-López, 2016). En Costa Rica, el 94 % del cuidado sigue siendo proporcionado por mujeres familiares no remuneradas (Chaverri-Carvajal y Alvarenga, 2026), y una evaluación experimental de esta modalidad mostró que la transferencia incrementó el síndrome de *burnout* (Chaverri-Carvajal y Matus-López, 2023). La expansión de los servicios en especie constituye, por tanto, una condición necesaria para lograr sistemas más equitativos.

En este contexto, la teleasistencia ocupa una posición singular. La municipalidad estudiada implementó, con recursos propios, el primer servicio público y gratuito de teleasistencia domiciliaria para personas mayores con necesidades de cuidado, con criterios de acceso basados en la necesidad de cuidados y no en el nivel de ingresos. Además, desarrolló la primera evaluación experimental de un servicio en especie de atención a la dependencia provisto por un gobierno local en América Latina, con apoyo técnico del Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID) y del Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social (IMAS). El protocolo, publicado previamente (Chaverri-Carvajal y Arguedas, 2024), recibió la aprobación administrativa del IMAS, al estar comprendido entre las exenciones del comité ético-científico, mediante el oficio IMAS-PE-1086-202.

El municipio no partió de cero. Su capacidad administrativa y la experiencia acumulada en cooperación con organismos nacionales e internacionales crearon las condiciones para innovar en un ámbito en el que el nivel nacional aún no había desarrollado servicios (Hernández-Bonivento, 2011). El caso permite analizar cómo un gobierno local puede desarrollar, implementar y evaluar una política de CLD en un sistema en el que el reconocimiento legal precedió a la construcción de capacidades para hacerla efectiva.

Gobernanza experimentalista: aprender de la diferencia local

La gobernanza experimentalista ofrece una segunda lente, complementaria a la de Hooghe y Marks (2003). Sabel y Zeitlin (2008) la describen como una arquitectura de cuatro elementos: metas comunes fijadas entre niveles, autonomía local para alcanzarlas, informes de resultados comparables y revisión conjunta para corregir prácticas y metas. Su lógica es el aprendizaje a partir de la diferencia: la variación entre jurisdicciones deja de ser un problema que hay que suprimir y se convierte en un incentivo para mejorar la política.

Esta perspectiva es importante para los sistemas de CLD porque la variación municipal es inevitable. La pregunta relevante no es cómo eliminarla, sino si existen mecanismos que conviertan las experiencias locales en conocimiento utilizable por el sistema. Un piloto municipal evaluado mediante un diseño experimental es, en principio, el tipo de insumo que esa arquitectura necesita. Que se traduzca o no en política nacional depende de que existan los canales de reporte y de revisión conjunta que describe la teoría, y eso es lo que el caso costarricense permite examinar en la Discusión.

Vacío de investigación

Pese a que la literatura comparada documenta la tensión entre el diseño nacional y la capacidad de implementación local en países de renta alta, no existe evidencia experimental sobre innovaciones locales de cuidado en América Latina. Para verificarlo, realizamos entre mayo y octubre de 2026 una búsqueda en Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed y SciELO, con combinaciones en español, portugués e inglés de los términos teleasistencia (telecare, teleassistência), ensayo aleatorizado (randomized controlled trial), CLD y personas mayores, junto con los nombres de los países de la región. La búsqueda identificó un ensayo aleatorizado de teleasistencia multidisciplinaria en Ribeirão Preto (Brasil), conducido por universidades, con 40 personas mayores autónomas (da Silva Sobrinho et al., 2025), y experiencias no experimentales de teleasistencia en México (Giraldo-Rodríguez et al., 2013), pero no identificó ninguna evaluación experimental de un servicio de CLD provisto por un gobierno local, ni se cuenta con una muestra paramétrica. Esta ausencia limita el diseño y la escalabilidad de los sistemas nacionales. La región cuenta con análisis comparativos del diseño institucional de sus sistemas de cuidado (Michel et al., 2025) y con evaluaciones experimentales de transferencias monetarias (Chaverri-Carvajal y Matus-López, 2023). Carece, sin embargo, de evidencia rigurosa sobre los servicios en especie provistos por las municipalidades. Este artículo responde a ese vacío.

Metodología

Diseño y muestra

Entre setiembre de 2024 y setiembre de 2025, la municipalidad estudiada implementó un ensayo controlado aleatorizado de dos brazos para evaluar el impacto causal del servicio de teleasistencia domiciliaria. El diseño contempló una línea base al inicio de la intervención y una evaluación final a los 12 meses, en una muestra aleatorizada de 636 personas adultas mayores (318 en tratamiento y 318 en control), estratificada por nivel de dependencia, sexo, subregión geográfica y nivel socioeconómico. La figura 2 resume la secuencia completa del diseño, desde la elaboración del protocolo hasta la evaluación final.

Figura 2
Cronología del diseño e implementación del ensayo



Fuente: elaboración propia.

La selección de la muestra consistió en tres pasos. Primero, entre mayo y junio de 2024, se valoró con el baremo de dependencia a 1038 personas mayores, con el apoyo del IMAS y de tres valoradoras contratadas por el BID. Segundo, se consideraron elegibles las personas con dependencia leve o moderada, así como las sin dependencia que se encontraban en situación de soledad según esa valoración. Tercero, entre las elegibles se seleccionó al azar el tamaño de muestra calculado en el protocolo, 636 personas, que se asignaron aleatoriamente a tratamiento y control (318 y 318), con estratificación por grado de dependencia, sexo, distrito y nivel socioeconómico.

Por esos criterios, la muestra combina personas en soledad no deseada (31,1 %) con personas con dependencia leve (44,3 %) y moderada (24,5 %) (tabla 1). En este artículo nos referimos a ellas como personas mayores con necesidades de cuidado y no como personas mayores dependientes.

El tamaño de la muestra se determinó mediante el cálculo de potencia estadística descri-

to en el protocolo publicado del ensayo (Chaverri-Carvajal y Arguedas, 2024). Con las parejas pretest-postest finalmente analizadas, el efecto mínimo detectable, con una potencia del 80 % y un nivel de significación del 5 %, es de 0,25 desviaciones estándar. En el subgrupo con persona cuidadora identificada, asciende a 1,04 desviaciones estándar, de modo que esos análisis solo pueden detectar efectos muy grandes.

La tabla 1 describe la muestra total previa a la aleatorización. Predominan las mujeres (69,5 %), con una edad media de 75,2 años. En cuanto al grado de dependencia, el 44,3 % presenta dependencia leve y el 24,5 % dependencia moderada. La distribución por distrito refleja la composición territorial del cantón, con mayor concentración en San Francisco (35,4 %) y menor en Varablanca (1,4 %). Según el Sistema Nacional de Información y Registro Único de Beneficiarios del Estado (SINIRUBE), el 38,8 % de las personas participantes se encuentra en alguna condición de pobreza o vulnerabilidad. Solo el 13,8 % de la muestra cuenta con una persona cuidadora identificada en el registro, una proporción que no debe confundirse con la prevalencia de cuidado familiar no remunerado, ya que responde a un criterio de registro administrativo distinto.

Tabla 1

Características sociodemográficas de las personas participantes (n = 636)

Característica	n	%
Sexo		
Mujer	442	69,5 %
Hombre	194	30,5 %
Grado de dependencia		
Sin dependencia	198	31,1 %
Leve	282	44,3 %
Moderada	156	24,5 %
Distrito		
Heredia	146	23,0 %
Mercedes	160	25,2 %
San Francisco	225	35,4 %
Ulloa	96	15,1 %
Varablanca	9	1,4 %
Situación socioeconómica (SINIRUBE)		
No pobreza	389	61,2 %
Vulnerabilidad	74	11,6 %
Pobreza básica	104	16,4 %
Pobreza extrema	69	10,8 %

Característica	n	%
Escolaridad		
Primaria incompleta	117	18,4 %
Primaria completa	152	23,9 %
Secundaria incompleta	135	21,2 %
Secundaria completa	90	14,2 %
Universitaria incompleta	62	9,7 %
Universitaria completa	80	12,6 %
Cuenta con persona cuidadora identificada		
Sí	88	13,8 %
No	548	86,2 %

Fuente: elaboración propia. Nota: los valores se presentan como n y como porcentaje del total de la muestra.

La aleatorización se estratificó por sexo, nivel de dependencia, distrito y situación socioeconómica, mediante bloques aleatorizados de tamaño variable, implementados en R.La tabla 2 muestra la distribución de ambos grupos tras la aleatorización. No se observan diferencias estadísticamente significativas entre el tratamiento y el control en ninguna de las características. Además, esas variables se incluyen como covariables en el modelo de estimación.

Tabla 2

Distribución de la muestra entre grupos de la evaluación

Característica	Tratamiento		Control		p
	n	%	n	%	
Sexo					**0,343**
Mujer	215	67,6	227	71,4	
Hombre	103	32,4	91	28,6	
Grado de dependencia					**0,983**
Sin dependencia	98	30,8	100	31,4	
Leve	142	44,7	140	44,0	
Moderada	78	24,5	78	24,5	
Distrito					**0,554**
Heredia	76	23,9	70	22,0	
Mercedes	75	23,6	85	26,7	
San Francisco	120	37,7	105	33,0	
Ulloa	43	13,5	53	16,7	
Varablanca	4	1,3	5	1,6	

Característica	Tratamiento		Control		p
Situación socioeconómica (SINIRUBE)					**0,778**
No pobreza	192	60,4	197	61,9	
Vulnerabilidad	38	11,9	36	11,3	
Pobreza básica	56	17,6	48	15,1	
Pobreza extrema	32	10,1	37	11,6	
Escolaridad					**0,504**
Primaria incompleta	66	20,8	51	16,0	
Primaria completa	68	21,4	84	26,4	
Secundaria incompleta	64	20,1	71	22,3	
Secundaria completa	46	14,5	44	13,8	
Universitaria incompleta	33	10,4	29	9,1	
Universitaria completa	41	12,9	39	12,3	
Cuenta con persona cuidadora identificada					**0,730**
Sí	46	14,5	42	13,2	
No	272	85,5	276	86,8	
Total	318	100	318	100	

Fuente: elaboración propia.

Intervención evaluada

El servicio de teleasistencia domiciliaria conecta a la persona usuaria con una central atendida por profesionales de psicología, trabajo social, medicina y personal operador capacitado, disponible las 24 horas del día, los 365 días del año, mediante un terminal fijo y un dispositivo portátil de manos libres. Cada persona cuenta con un plan de atención individualizado que integra cinco funciones: gestión de emergencias, seguimiento telefónico contra la soledad no deseada, recordatorio de citas médicas, recordatorio de medicación y orientación a las personas cuidadoras principales.

Instrumentos e hipótesis

El ensayo se diseñó para contrastar cuatro hipótesis preespecificadas en el protocolo, cada una evaluada con medidas aplicadas en el pretest y repetidas en el postest, siguiendo el protocolo publicado (Chaverri-Carvajal y Arguedas, 2024). La primera es que la teleasistencia mejora la calidad de vida relacionada con la salud, medida con una versión en español del Cuestionario de Salud SF-36 (Alonso et al., 1995; Ware y Sherbourne, 1992), adaptada para la encuesta: las preguntas de vitalidad y salud mental utilizan cinco catego-

rías de respuesta en lugar de seis. Cada ítem se transformó linealmente a una escala de 0 a 100 según su número de categorías; los ítems se promediaron en las ocho dimensiones del instrumento y las dimensiones se estandarizaron con la media y la desviación estándar de la propia muestra (pretest y postest en conjunto). Los componentes sumarios físico (PCS) y mental (MCS) se construyeron con los coeficientes de Ware et al. (1994) y se expresan en una escala T (media 50, desviación estándar 10), en la que valores más altos indican mejor salud. La segunda es que reduce la soledad no deseada, medida mediante una pregunta directa de respuesta dicotómica («¿Usualmente se siente solo/a?», sí o no); el indicador es la proporción de personas que responden afirmativamente. Los ítems únicos de este tipo tienen una validez aceptable, aunque menos precisión que las escalas de varios ítems (Mund et al., 2023), y no contamos con una validación en Costa Rica. La tercera es que disminuye el uso de servicios de urgencia, medido mediante dos preguntas autorreportadas sobre el año anterior a cada medición: el número de noches de hospitalización y el número de llamadas al servicio de emergencias 911. La cuarta es que alivia la sobrecarga de las personas cuidadoras, medida mediante las horas diarias dedicadas al cuidado y la versión abreviada de la escala de sobrecarga de Zarit (Bédard et al., 2001; Regueiro Martínez et al., 2007; Zarit et al., 1980). El pretest incluyó un módulo sociodemográfico. Ambas fases se administraron de forma digital, sin uso de papel, tanto al grupo de tratamiento como al de control.

Procedimiento y análisis

Todas las personas participantes, o sus representantes legales en los casos de deterioro cognitivo, otorgaron su consentimiento informado antes de la aplicación del pretest. El grupo control recibió el servicio de teleasistencia al finalizar el período de evaluación, una vez completado el postest. Cada persona se identificó en ambas mediciones mediante un código formado por sus iniciales. Para el análisis, se emparejaron los registros del pretest y del postest de cada brazo tras normalizar los códigos (en mayúsculas, sin tildes ni signos). Todas las personas fueron asignadas aleatoriamente a uno de los dos grupos. Entre las personas con ambas mediciones no hubo datos faltantes en los indicadores.

El efecto se estimó mediante una regresión lineal por mínimos cuadrados ordinarios sobre los datos en formato largo, en los que cada persona aporta dos filas, una por medición. La ecuación es $Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta1 \cdot T_i + \beta2 \cdot Post_t + \delta \cdot (T_i \times Post_t) + \gamma \cdot X_i + \varepsilon_{it}$, donde Y_{it} es el indicador de la persona i en el momento t, T_i vale 1 si la persona fue asignada al tratamiento, $Post_t$ vale 1 en el postest y X_i reúne las covariables de línea base. En esta especificación, β1 recoge la diferencia inicial entre grupos, β2 el cambio del grupo de control

y δ, el coeficiente de la interacción, es la doble diferencia: el cambio del grupo de tratamiento menos el cambio del grupo de control, que vivió el mismo periodo sin el servicio. Esa resta descuenta lo que habría ocurrido de todas formas con el paso del tiempo y deja el efecto atribuible al servicio.

Las dos filas de una misma persona no son independientes. Por eso los errores estándar se calculan agrupados por persona (errores robustos por conglomerado), y la significación estadística de δ se evalúa con la prueba t de Student de ese coeficiente: el cociente entre δ y su error estándar. El intervalo de confianza del 95 % es δ ± 1,96 errores estándar. En la soledad y la sobrecarga de Zarit, que son variables dicotómicas, el modelo es de probabilidad lineal y el efecto se expresa en puntos porcentuales. En las llamadas al 911 y en las noches de hospitalización, el efecto se expresa en el número de llamadas o de noches al año. Los cambios de cada grupo que se presentan junto al efecto (ΔT y ΔC) son la media de la diferencia postest menos pretest, calculada en esas mismas personas, de modo que todas las cifras de una fila provienen de la misma muestra.

Para cada indicador se informan el efecto, su intervalo de confianza, el valor p y un tamaño de efecto estandarizado, d, que se calcula como δ dividido por la desviación estándar del indicador en el pretest, calculada con ambos grupos. Así, un d de 0,20 equivale a un quinto de la desviación estándar, independientemente de la unidad del indicador. Como el protocolo no identificó un resultado primario, los siete indicadores se consideran una sola familia de contrastes y sus valores p se ajustan mediante el procedimiento de Holm (1979). El procedimiento ordena los siete valores p de menor a mayor, multiplica el primero por 7, el segundo por 6 y así sucesivamente, y no permite que un valor ajustado sea menor que el anterior. Un efecto se considera robusto si su valor p ajustado es menor que .05.

Se llevaron a cabo dos análisis de sensibilidad. El primero es un modelo de covarianza (ANCOVA), que usa una fila por persona y modela el postest en función de la asignación, el pretest del mismo indicador y las mismas covariables, con errores estándar robustos a la heterocedasticidad (HC2). A diferencia de la doble diferencia, el ANCOVA no supone que el pretest tenga el mismo peso en ambos momentos y, con asignación aleatoria, suele ser más preciso; si ambos estimadores coinciden, el resultado no depende de la especificación. El segundo valora el sesgo de atrición. Primero se estimó, mediante una regresión logística en 636 personas aleatorizadas, la probabilidad de permanecer en el estudio en función del grupo, el sexo, la edad, el grado de dependencia, la situación de pobreza, la soledad y las llamadas al 911 en la línea base, incluyendo interacciones entre el grupo y cada una de estas carac-

terísticas. Después, se repitió la doble diferencia ponderando a cada persona retenida por la inversa de su probabilidad de pérdida, de modo que las personas con perfiles similares a los que se perdieron durante el seguimiento reciben mayor peso. Para saber si la atrición fue diferencial, es decir, si el perfil de quienes se perdieron difiere entre brazos, se comparó ese modelo logístico con otro sin interacciones mediante una prueba de razón de verosimilitud.

La heterogeneidad del efecto por sexo, situación de pobreza o vulnerabilidad y grado de dependencia (moderada frente a leve o nula) se exploró mediante la inclusión en la ecuación de una triple interacción $T_i \times Post_t \times G_i$, donde G_i indica el subgrupo. El efecto en cada subgrupo se obtiene a partir de los coeficientes del modelo, con errores estándar que incorporan su covarianza, y el valor p de la triple interacción indica si los dos efectos difieren. Se aplicó a los cuatro indicadores con muestra suficiente (soledad, salud mental, llamadas al 911 y noches de hospitalización), lo que da lugar a doce contrastes sin ajuste por multiplicidad; por eso, estos resultados se consideran exploratorios. Todo lo anterior se realizó con el consentimiento informado de cada participante y con datos anonimizados durante todo el proceso. Los análisis se hicieron en R (versión 4.3.3).

Análisis institucional comparado: selección de casos y fuentes

La segunda pregunta del artículo no se responde mediante el experimento, sino mediante una lectura interpretativa de casos. Su propósito es ilustrar mecanismos institucionales, no estimar relaciones causales, por lo que no se aplica un método comparativo sistemático.

Los casos se seleccionaron según tres criterios. Primero, que su sistema de CLD asigne responsabilidades explícitas a los gobiernos subnacionales, de modo que la tensión entre el diseño nacional y la implementación local sea evidente. Segundo, que en conjunto cubran la variación relevante en la distribución de la provisión y el financiamiento entre niveles: provisión municipal con fuerte autonomía (Suecia, Finlandia, Países Bajos e Inglaterra), provisión regional con marco nacional (España e Italia), coordinación nacional de la teleasistencia (Uruguay) y ausencia de oferta nacional con iniciativas locales o regionales (Chile, México y el municipio argentino de Tigre). Tercero, que existiera literatura publicada que documentara el caso. Para América Latina, se priorizaron los casos con experiencia en teleasistencia, por ser la modalidad evaluada en el ensayo.

Las fuentes son de dos tipos: literatura académica revisada por pares y documentos institucionales o normativos (leyes, comunicados oficiales e informes de organismos internacionales). Los casos no son comparables en sentido estricto porque difieren en el nivel de ingreso, la estructura del Estado y la madurez de sus sistemas. Se usan como contraste: para identificar qué arreglos de gobernanza acompañan la sostenibilidad o la fragmentación de los servicios y para situar el caso costarricense en ese espectro. El ensayo entra en este análisis como evidencia de lo que está en juego cuando un servicio efectivo solo está disponible en algunos territorios.

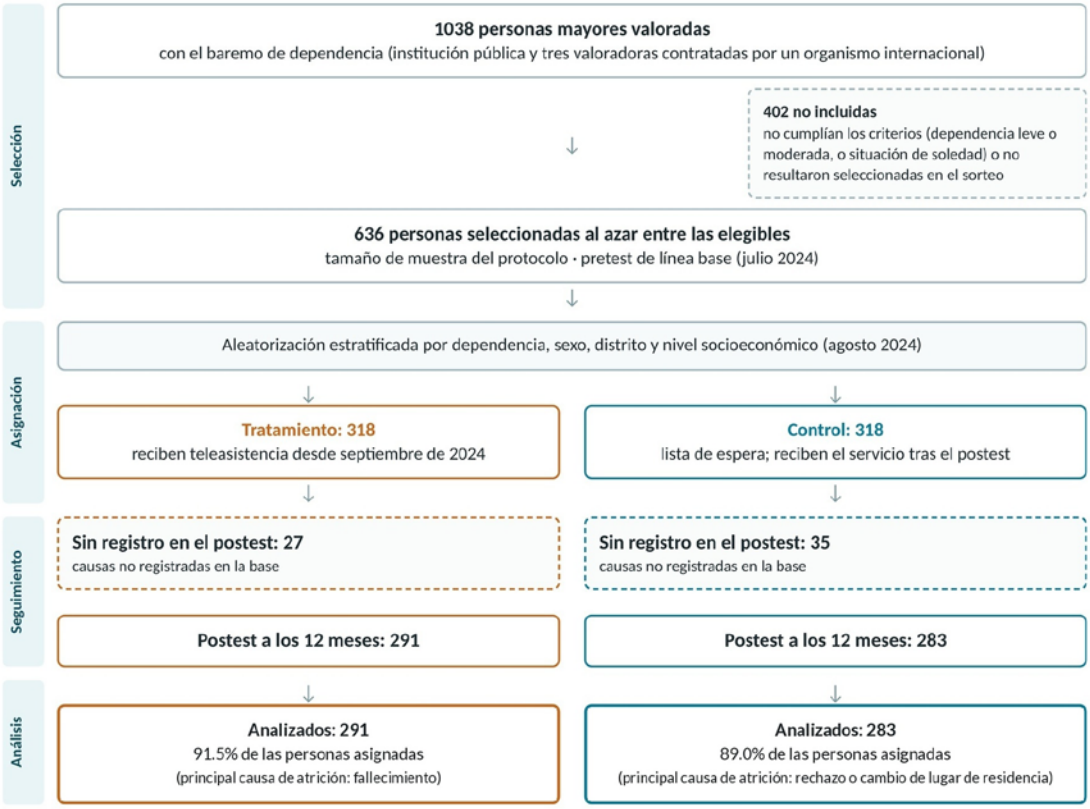
Resultados

Flujo de participantes y atrición

De las 636 personas aleatorizadas, 574 tienen registro en el postest (283 en el grupo control y 291 en el de tratamiento), lo que supone una pérdida de 62 personas (9,7 %) (figura 3).No hay indicios de atrición diferencial: añadir al modelo de permanencia las interacciones entre el grupo y las características de línea base no mejora el ajuste ($\chi^2(7) = 4.72$; $p = .694$). La pérdida, aunque no difiere entre brazos, sí es selectiva: quienes no quedaron en el estudio no difieren de las personas analizadas en edad, sexo ni grado de dependencia, pero tenían con más frecuencia una persona cuidadora identificada en la línea base. En los contactos para aplicar el postest, los hogares informaron de fallecimientos e institucionalizaciones, en su mayoría entre estas personas, lo que contribuye a explicar que sean tan pocas en el análisis.

Figura 3

Flujo de participantes y atrición



Fuente: elaboración propia.

Efectos del servicio

La tabla 3 presenta los efectos estimados y la figura 4 muestra cómo evolucionaron los tres indicadores con efecto. Dos resultados son estadísticamente significativos y se mantienen tras el ajuste por comparaciones múltiples. El servicio redujo en 23,5 puntos porcentuales la proporción de personas que se sienten solas (IC 95 %: −35,0 a −12,0; p ajustado < .001; d = −0,47): en el grupo de tratamiento, esa proporción pasó de 52,7 % a 28,3 %, mientras que en el grupo control se mantuvo en torno a 48 %. En la práctica, por cada cuatro personas que reciben el servicio, aproximadamente una deja de sentirse sola. También mejoró la salud mental en 3,6 puntos en la escala T del componente MCS (IC 95 %: 1,8 a 5,3; p ajustado < .001; d = 0,47), lo que indica un efecto de magnitud moderada. Las llamadas anuales al 911 se redujeron en 0,22 por persona (IC 95 %: −0,40 a −0,03; p = 0,022), pero ese efecto no se mantiene tras el ajuste de Holm (p = 0,108) y debe interpretarse como un indicio. En el grupo de control, las llamadas se mantuvieron prácticamente estables (+0,036 por persona).

Los demás indicadores no muestran efectos estadísticamente significativos. La salud física no cambió (+0,4 puntos; p = .719). Las noches de hospitalización se redujeron en 0,45 en el grupo de tratamiento respecto del control, pero el intervalo de confianza incluye el cero (p = 0,357). En las parejas con persona cuidadora identificada, las horas diarias de cuidado disminuyeron en 2,6 horas (p = 0,163) y la proporción con sobrecarga intensa aumentó en 13,9 puntos porcentuales (p = 0,577). Con esa muestra, la falta de significación no equivale a la ausencia de efecto.

Tabla 3

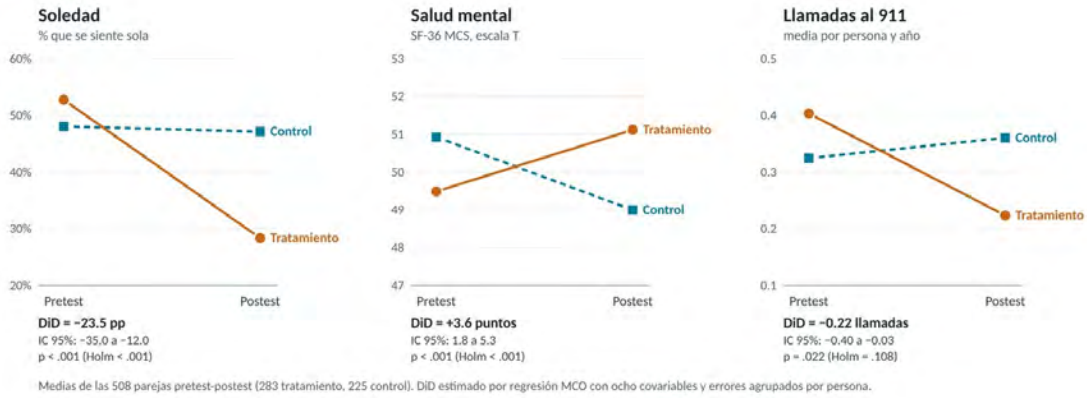
Efectos estimados del servicio de teleasistencia domiciliaria sobre los indicadores evaluados

Indicador	n (T/C)	ΔT	ΔC	DiD [IC del 95 %]	p	p Holm	d	ANCOVA [IC del 95 %]	p
Salud mental (SF-36 MCS)	291/283	+1,633	−1,928	+3,561 [1,83; 5,29]	< .001	< .001	+0,47	+2,280 [0,85; 3,71]	.002
Salud física (SF-36 PCS)	291/283	−1,641	−2,002	+0,361 [−1,60; 2,32]	.719	1,000	+0,05	−0,777 [−2,49; 0,93]	.374
Soledad	291/283	−0,244	−0,009	−0,235 [−0,35; −0,12]	< .001	< .001	−0,47	−0,181 [−0,27; −0,09]	< .001
Noches de hospitalización	291/283	−0,420	+0,027	−0,447 [−1,40; 0,50]	.357	1,000	−0,09	−0,395 [−0,98; 0,19]	.186
Llamadas al 911	291/283	−0,180	+0,036	−0,216 [−0,40; −0,03]	.022	.108	−0,27	−0,187 [−0,33; −0,04]	.011
Horas diarias de cuidado	18/12	−2,111	+0,500	−2,611 [−6,23; 1,01]	.163	.653	−0,67	−2,417 [−4,22; −0,61]	.014
Sobrecarga intensa (Zarit)	18/12	−0,222	−0,083	−0,139 [−0,62; 0,35]	.577	1,000	−0,27	−0,189 [−0,55; 0,17]	.307

Fuente: elaboración propia con datos del pretest y del postest. Nota: n = número de parejas pretest-postest analizadas en el tratamiento (T) y el control (C). ΔT y ΔC = cambio medio pretest-postest en cada grupo. DiD = coeficiente de la interacción grupo × momento en la regresión MCO con covariables y errores estándar agrupados por persona (estimador principal). p Holm = valor p del DiD ajustado por comparaciones múltiples (Holm, 1979). d = DiD dividido por la desviación estándar basal. ANCOVA = efecto sobre el postest ajustado por el pretest y las mismas covariables, con errores HC2 (análisis de sensibilidad). Salud mental y física en escala T de la muestra (media 50, DE 10); soledad y sobrecarga intensa son proporciones. En horas de cuidado y Zarit los modelos no incluyen covariables.

Figura 4

Evolución de los indicadores con efecto en los grupos de tratamiento y control



Fuente: elaboración propia con datos del pretest y postest.

La ausencia de efecto sobre la salud física (SF-36 PCS) es esperable: la teleasistencia es una intervención preventiva y de acompañamiento social, no un tratamiento rehabilitador (Hirani et al., 2014).

Análisis de sensibilidad

Los dos resultados principales son robustos. El ANCOVA estima una reducción de 18,1 puntos porcentuales en soledad (p ajustado < 0,001) y una mejora de 2,3 puntos en salud mental (p ajustado = 0.012), y la reponderación por atrición da 21,9 puntos y 3,4 puntos (ambos con p < .001). El efecto sobre las llamadas al 911 es más frágil: el ANCOVA lo sitúa en −0,19 (p = .011; p ajustado = .055) y la reponderación lo reduce a −0,14 (p = .183). Tras el ajuste por comparaciones múltiples, ningún análisis de sensibilidad hace significativos los indicadores de hospitalización ni los de personas cuidadoras.

Heterogeneidad del efecto (análisis exploratorio)

La tabla 4 analiza si el efecto varía según el sexo, la situación de pobreza o vulnerabilidad y el grado de dependencia en los cuatro indicadores, con muestra suficiente. Dos interacciones son significativas y apuntan en la misma dirección: la mejora en salud mental se concentra en las personas sin pobreza (+5,5 puntos frente a +0,7; p de la interacción = .008) y en las que no tienen dependencia moderada (+4,7 frente a +0,2; p = .042). En soledad, la reducción es mayor en las mujeres (−29,9 puntos porcentuales) que en los hombres (−8,2 puntos porcentuales), aunque la diferencia no alcanza la significación estadística (p = 0,089). Con doce contrastes, estos resultados se presentan como hipótesis para estudios futuros.

Tabla 4

Efectos del servicio por subgrupos (análisis exploratorio)

Indicador	Subgrupos (A / B)	Efecto en A [IC del 95 %]	Efecto en B [IC del 95 %]	p interacción
Soledad	Hombres / Mujeres	−0,082 [−0,290; 0,126]	−0,299 [−0,436; −0,161]	.089
Soledad	Sin pobreza / Pobreza o vulnerabilidad	−0,252 [−0,402; −0,102]	−0,209 [−0,389; −0,029]	.724
Soledad	Sin dependencia o leve / Dependencia moderada	−0,273 [−0,406; −0,140]	−0,095 [−0,322; 0,131]	.186
Llamadas al 911	Hombres / Mujeres	−0,078 [−0,449; 0,294]	−0,276 [−0,484; −0,068]	.361
Llamadas al 911	Sin pobreza / Pobreza o vulnerabilidad	−0,290 [−0,525; −0,054]	−0,091 [−0,381; 0,199]	.297
Llamadas al 911	Sin dependencia o leve / Dependencia moderada	−0,312 [−0,509; −0,115]	+0,095 [−0,420; 0,609]	.149
Salud mental (MCS)	Hombres / Mujeres	+4,095 [0,883; 7,307]	+3,297 [1,236; 5,358]	.682
Salud mental (MCS)	Sin pobreza / Pobreza o vulnerabilidad	+5,529 [3,290; 7,769]	+0,743 [−1,954; 3,440]	.008
Salud mental (MCS)	Sin dependencia o leve / Dependencia moderada	+4,683 [2,695; 6,672]	+0,176 [−3,670; 4,023]	.042
Noches de hospitalización	Hombres / Mujeres	−0,555 [−2,927; 1,817]	−0,406 [−1,298; 0,486]	.908
Noches de hospitalización	Sin pobreza / Pobreza o vulnerabilidad	+0,010 [−1,197; 1,216]	−1,136 [−2,574; 0,301]	.232
Noches de hospitalización	Sin dependencia o leve / Dependencia moderada	−0,348 [−1,320; 0,624]	−0,560 [−3,049; 1,928]	.876

Fuente: elaboración propia. Nota: Efectos DiD del tratamiento en cada subgrupo, estimados con una triple interacción (grupo × momento × subgrupo), con covariables y errores agrupados por persona, con intervalos de confianza del 95 %; p de la triple interacción. Análisis exploratorio sin ajuste por comparaciones múltiples.

Discusión: Implicaciones para la gobernanza local del cuidado

Este manuscrito examina cómo la evidencia de una innovación municipal puede informar el diseño institucional y la escalabilidad de los sistemas nacionales de CLD. Presenta, hasta donde alcanza nuestra búsqueda, el primer ensayo aleatorizado de un programa municipal de teleasistencia en América Latina, con implicaciones para la gobernanza multinivel del cuidado. El ensayo muestra que el servicio reduce la soledad y mejora la salud mental; la reducción de las llamadas al 911 es un indicio que no resiste el ajuste por comparaciones

múltiples. No muestra efectos sobre la salud física ni sobre la hospitalización, y no permite extraer conclusiones sobre la carga de las personas cuidadoras. Esta sección discute esos resultados a la luz de los casos revisados sobre la gobernanza multinivel de los CLD.

Costa Rica en perspectiva comparada

El ensayo de Heredia aporta evidencia causal que Chile, Uruguay y México aún no tienen: la teleasistencia domiciliaria reduce la soledad y mejora la salud mental de las personas mayores con necesidades de cuidado. Ese resultado, sin embargo, no responde a la segunda pregunta del artículo: si el escalamiento puede ocurrir sin fragmentación territorial.

Chile publicó la Ley n.º 21.805 (2026), que reconoce el derecho al cuidado y crea el Sistema Nacional de Apoyos y Cuidados, pero el despliegue de servicios a escala nacional aún no existe; han sido las regiones y los gobiernos locales quienes han desarrollado, de forma limitada, alguna oferta de cuidados (Gobierno Regional del Biobío, 2022; Michel et al., 2025). En 2022, el Gobierno Regional del Biobío financió con recursos propios un programa de teleasistencia limitado a seis comunas ante la ausencia de una estrategia nacional (Gobierno Regional del Biobío, 2022).

Uruguay, en cambio, coordina la teleasistencia a escala nacional mediante subsidios a proveedores acreditados bajo reglas comunes de elegibilidad (Matus-López y Cid Pedraza, 2016); México ensayó, a través del IMSS, un modelo de orientación clínica más cercano al monitoreo médico que al acompañamiento social evaluado aquí (Giraldo-Rodríguez et al., 2013).

Los casos revisados sugieren que la diferencia entre Chile y Uruguay no radica en la efectividad del servicio, sino en la presencia o ausencia de una decisión nacional de coordinarlo para garantizar que el acceso a los cuidados no dependa del lugar de residencia (Rachter et al., 2024). La región comparte, además, los mismos determinantes de fondo: la fragilidad y dependencia funcional siguen patrones comparables en el Caribe (Chaverri-Carvajal y Mejía, 2024), y los determinantes sociales explican buena parte del riesgo de deterioro cognitivo en la vejez (Chaverri-Carvajal et al., 2026). La cuestión para la gobernanza no es, por tanto, solo si la intervención funciona, sino cómo convertir una innovación local en una política nacional sin reproducir desigualdades territoriales. Si la experiencia comparada sirve de guía, su expansión dependerá de que el gobierno nacional asuma funciones de coordinación y financiamiento; de lo contrario, la provisión tenderá a concentrarse en los territorios con mayores capacidades fiscales e institucionales.

La lección comparada: gobiernos locales, rectoría nacional y el riesgo de la «municipalidad de bienestar»

Los estudios revisados sugieren que las diferencias territoriales en el acceso a los cuidados responden menos a las necesidades de la población que a las capacidades fiscales y las decisiones políticas de los gobiernos locales (Needham et al., 2025). Esto ha sido documentado en Suecia (Trydegård y Thorslund, 2001, 2010), Finlandia (Kröger, 2011) e Inglaterra (Fernández y Forder, 2015). Sin embargo, esta literatura describe la desigualdad territorial sin estimar las consecuencias de quedar excluido de una prestación específica. La evaluación experimental de Heredia permite aproximarse a esa cuestión al estimar (tabla 3) que quedar fuera del servicio implica renunciar a una menor soledad y a una mejor salud mental, y posiblemente a un uso algo menor de los servicios de emergencia. Desde esta perspectiva, la fragmentación territorial deja de ser únicamente un problema de acceso y pasa a ser una fuente de desigualdad en resultados. La literatura sobre descentralización sugiere que este riesgo se mitiga sobre todo mediante mecanismos de coordinación intergubernamental y financiación compartida (Costa-Font y Greer, 2013). El caso de Heredia aporta evidencia experimental sobre una parte de las consecuencias individuales que esa fragmentación puede generar.

El precedente de la financiación exclusivamente local: la lección de Tigre

La experiencia del municipio argentino de Tigre ilustra que la efectividad de una innovación local no garantiza su sostenibilidad. El servicio de teleasistencia, desarrollado en colaboración con la Cruz Roja y financiado íntegramente con recursos municipales, no logró mantenerse más allá de la fase piloto (Benedetti et al., 2022). Una intervención efectiva puede seguir siendo institucionalmente frágil cuando depende exclusivamente de la capacidad financiera de un gobierno local. En contraste, los sistemas donde la provisión es local y el financiamiento incorpora mecanismos nacionales de apoyo, como Uruguay y España (Chaverri-Carvajal y Matus-López, 2021), ofrecen mejores condiciones para la sostenibilidad. Los casos revisados sugieren que la permanencia de una innovación depende menos de su efectividad que de la existencia de mecanismos nacionales de coordinación y financiamiento capaces de sostenerla más allá de la capacidad de un único gobierno local (Rachter et al., 2024).

El riesgo de la fragmentación territorial

El desfase entre reconocimiento legal y provisión municipal tiene ahora un costo que puede estimarse. Si el patrón se replica en otros contextos, una población sin acceso al servicio

dejaría de obtener, en promedio, una reducción de 23,5 puntos porcentuales en la proporción de personas que se sienten solas y una mejora de 3,6 puntos en salud mental. Costa Rica cuenta con 84 municipalidades con capacidades fiscales muy desiguales. Esta desigualdad reproduce la brecha entre transferencia de competencias y transferencia de capacidad que la literatura sobre descentralización fiscal documentó para otros sectores sociales de la región (Cabrero, 2006). Sin financiamiento nacional, ese servicio competirá cada año con otras prioridades locales (Trydegård y Thorslund, 2010).

Si la teleasistencia o cualquier servicio del SINCA permanece descentralizado sin mecanismos nacionales de coordinación y financiamiento, enfrenta tres riesgos: fragmentación territorial en el acceso a los servicios, discontinuidad presupuestaria de las iniciativas locales y consolidación de las transferencias monetarias como la única modalidad con desarrollo nacional, en lugar del sistema de cinco prestaciones previsto por la ley (Perna et al., 2025). Este vacío no se distribuye de forma neutra: en territorios sin servicios, el cuidado continúa recayendo sobre las familias, especialmente sobre las mujeres. En este estudio, las horas diarias de cuidado se redujeron en 2,6 horas en las parejas con persona cuidadora identificada. Esto permite plantear como hipótesis que ampliar la oferta de servicios alivie la carga de las cuidadoras, algo que un ensayo con más cuidadoras debería contrastar. Sí es relevante para el argumento de equidad que la reducción de la soledad fuera mayor en las mujeres, que son la mayoría de las personas usuarias, aunque la diferencia con los hombres no alcance la significación (tabla 4).

El análisis exploratorio añade una advertencia. No se observó una mejora estadísticamente significativa en salud mental en las personas en pobreza o vulnerabilidad ni en las que tienen dependencia moderada (tabla 4). Si ese patrón se confirmara, un servicio universal no bastaría por sí solo para reducir desigualdades, y su diseño debería prever apoyos adicionales para esos hogares.

Condiciones institucionales para el escalamiento

Según el protocolo del ensayo (Chaverri-Carvajal y Arguedas, 2024), en 2024 la teleasistencia costaba unos USD 25 mensuales por persona, con equipamiento y personal incluidos, frente a un promedio de USD 673 en atención domiciliaria y USD 804 en atención residencial. La comparación es solo indicativa, porque la teleasistencia complementa a las otras dos modalidades y no las sustituye. España financia el SAAD, del que la teleasistencia forma parte, mediante corresponsabilidad entre el gobierno central y las comunidades autó-

nomas (Chaverri-Carvajal y Matus-López, 2021), aunque arrastra debilidades persistentes de gestión territorial que se traducen en acceso desigual según la comunidad de residencia (Martínez López, 2017). En el Reino Unido, el mayor ensayo de teleasistencia hasta la fecha se financió y coordinó desde el Servicio Nacional de Salud (Hirani et al., 2014; Steventon et al., 2013). En los casos revisados, ningún escalamiento nacional sostenido descansa exclusivamente sobre las finanzas municipales. La coordinación nacional es condición necesaria, pero no suficiente. Requiere capacidad técnica sostenida en cada nivel de gobierno, la misma distinción entre decidir una política e implementarla que documenta la literatura sobre capacidades estatales (Hernández-Bonivento, 2011). Cuando los sistemas de cuidados enfrentan una tensión común entre ampliar cobertura y contener gasto público (Chaverri-Carvajal y Alvarenga, 2026), se requieren instrumentos de coordinación intersectorial explícitos, no solo asignación presupuestaria (Michel et al., 2024).

Para el caso costarricense, esto se traduce en cinco condiciones concretas. Primero, financiar la teleasistencia y todos los servicios del SINCA a escala nacional mediante una combinación de impuestos generales, transferencias intergubernamentales y copagos según los ingresos, un esquema ex ante/ex post ya documentado en otros sistemas (Costa-Font et al., 2015). Segundo, estandarizar protocolos y perfiles profesionales, con el modelo de Heredia como plantilla reproducible. Tercero, invertir en formación y certificación del personal, dado que su escasez es un desafío regional (Organización Panamericana de la Salud y Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2023). Cuarto, fortalecer la integración con el sector salud: el servicio apenas redujo las llamadas de emergencia y no mostró un efecto estadísticamente significativo sobre la hospitalización, lo que sugiere que el vínculo con la atención sanitaria es el que falta. Quinto, preservar el carácter complementario del servicio junto a la atención domiciliaria.

Aportes al debate sobre gobiernos locales en el mundo

El caso de Heredia contribuye a la discusión sobre gobiernos locales en el mundo en un punto que la teoría de la gobernanza multinivel ha señalado como crítico: la distinción entre gobernanza multinivel de tipo I y de tipo II (Hooghe y Marks, 2003). El tipo I organiza la autoridad en jurisdicciones generales, no superpuestas y duraderas, como el municipio en cuanto unidad administrativa completa; el tipo II organiza la autoridad en jurisdicciones específicas de una tarea, superpuestas y flexibles, diseñadas para coordinar una política concreta entre niveles de gobierno. El SINCA opera con arquitectura de tipo I sin ninguna capa de tipo II: la ley reconoce un derecho nacional, pero delega su provisión efectiva a 84 juris-

dicciones que deciden, por su cuenta, si ofrecen o no el servicio. El caso muestra que ese vacío puede llenarse localmente con innovación y rigor metodológico, pero también expone, por contraste, la ausencia de mecanismos de coordinación de tipo II —estándares comunes, financiamiento etiquetado y mecanismos de rendición de cuentas intermunicipal— que la teoría identifica como condición para que la innovación de una jurisdicción se convierta en sistema y no permanezca como excepción (Hanberger y Lindgren, 2018).

Que el problema de coordinación de tipo II emerja también en un Estado unitario con gobiernos locales de capacidad desigual, un contexto más adverso que aquel en que se formuló la tipología (Flyvbjerg, 2006), sugiere que el vacío institucional documentado en este artículo no es una particularidad de los sistemas federales europeos, sino una condición más general de cualquier arquitectura de tipo I sin diseño deliberado de coordinación. El caso costarricense sugiere que las categorías de la tipología también sirven para leer Estados unitarios de capacidad fiscal desigual, una extensión poco explorada por una literatura sobre gobernanza multinivel desarrollada casi enteramente desde casos del norte global, incluso después de tres décadas de expansión conceptual (Papadopoulos et al., 2025). Conviene precisar el alcance de esta afirmación: el experimento prueba la efectividad del servicio, no la tipología. La lectura de gobernanza se basa en un único caso y en el contraste con los casos revisados, y es, por tanto, interpretativa.

Esta limitación estructural resalta la relevancia de la gobernanza experimentalista como alternativa. Como se planteó en secciones previas, esa arquitectura convierte la variación local en aprendizaje mediante metas marco, informes de resultados y revisión conjunta (Sabel y Zeitlin, 2008). Heredia hizo la parte local de ese ciclo: diseñó un servicio, lo evaluó con un diseño experimental y generó resultados comparables. Lo que falta es la parte nacional: no está claramente definido un canal por el cual el SINCA reciba ese resultado, lo revise junto con otros municipios y lo traduzca en estándares o financiamiento. El caso sugiere, por tanto, que sin una coordinación de tipo II que institucionalice este aprendizaje, la innovación local carece de los mecanismos necesarios para integrarse a una política pública nacional. En consecuencia, el éxito de la experiencia municipal corre el riesgo de permanecer como un caso aislado. La pregunta que se deriva de este caso para la agenda comparada sobre gobiernos locales no es si los municipios pueden innovar en cuidados, a lo cual Heredia responde afirmativamente, sino qué transforma una arquitectura de tipo I, intrínsecamente fragmentada, en un sistema con capa de tipo II. Esa es, en los términos de Hooghe y Marks (2003), la pregunta de diseño institucional que separa a los sistemas de cuidados que logran escalar de los que permanecen como una colección de pilotos eficaces pero fragmentados.

Limitaciones

El estudio tiene limitaciones que acotan el alcance de sus conclusiones. La primera es de validez externa. El ensayo se realizó en un solo municipio, elegido porque contaba con una capacidad administrativa superior a la media y experiencia previa de cooperación con instituciones nacionales e internacionales. Es, por tanto, un contexto seleccionado por conveniencia, y los efectos podrían ser menores en gobiernos locales con menos capacidad. La segunda se refiere a la medición. Los indicadores de uso de servicios de urgencia son autorreportados y se refieren al año anterior, lo que puede introducir errores de recuerdo. La soledad se midió con una única pregunta dicotómica y no con una escala validada de varios ítems. La tercera es la atrición. El seguimiento perdió al 9,7 % de la muestra. A ello se suma que el subgrupo con persona cuidadora es reducido, lo que impide extraer conclusiones sobre esos indicadores. La cuarta radica en el seguimiento de doce meses, que no permite conocer la persistencia de los efectos.

Conclusiones

Dos afirmaciones distintas convergen en el caso de Heredia, con evidencia de distinto tipo. La primera, que la innovación municipal puede generar soluciones efectivas, encuentra respaldo experimental: la teleasistencia domiciliaria reduce la soledad y mejora la salud mental de las personas mayores con necesidades de cuidado. La segunda, que ese escalamiento depende de mecanismos de coordinación y financiamiento que eviten la fragmentación territorial, descansa en evidencia interpretativa, no experimental, porque se apoya en la lectura de casos y no en el experimento: la capacidad de un gobierno local para innovar y evaluar con rigor no resuelve, por sí sola, el problema de la gobernanza multinivel de una política pública nueva. Costa Rica reconoció legalmente el derecho al cuidado en 2022 sin construir la arquitectura de coordinación que la teoría identifica como condición de sistema (Hooghe y Marks, 2003): los servicios de atención a la dependencia están hoy en la misma situación que la teleasistencia antes de ser iniciada por Heredia. Tampoco parece una peculiaridad costarricense: la literatura revisada documenta una fragmentación similar en Estados de bienestar consolidados, desde los países nórdicos hasta el sur de Europa. Lo que el municipio de Heredia aporta a esa literatura es una pieza rara: evidencia experimental generada en el punto ciego institucional que la teoría predice: un gobierno local capaz, un sistema nacional sin rectoría y una brecha que mientras tanto sigue llenándose con trabajo de cuidado no remunerado y mayoritariamente femenino.

Quedan abiertas dos preguntas. La primera es empírica: si los efectos observados en Heredia se sostienen en gobiernos locales con menor capacidad administrativa previa, o si esa capacidad institucional es, en sí misma, una condición necesaria para que la innovación produzca resultados de esta magnitud. La segunda es de diseño institucional: ¿qué combinación de reglas de cofinanciamiento, coordinación, estándares comunes y mecanismos de rendición de cuentas permite construir la capa de gobernanza de tipo II sin «recentralizar» la prestación del servicio? La evidencia comparada revisada en este artículo, desde los sistemas nórdicos hasta el Sistema Nacional Integrado de Cuidados de Uruguay, responde a la segunda pregunta de formas distintas. Costa Rica todavía tiene la oportunidad de resolverla antes de que la desigualdad territorial se consolide como rasgo estructural del SINCA.

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Cómo citar este artículo:
Chaverri Carvajal, A., & Alvarenga-Fournier, X. (2026). Innovar localmente, ¿escalar nacionalmente? Gobiernos locales y sistema nacional de cuidados de larga duración. *Revista -del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 157-189. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a961

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REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a975

Municipal Amalgamation in Armenia: Citizen Satisfaction with Local Services and Local Democracy

Fusão municipal na Arménia: satisfação com os serviços locais e democracia local

Amalgamación municipal en Armenia: satisfacción con los servicios locales y democracia local

Recibido: 19/08/2026 - Aceptado: 25/10/2026

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Abstract

This article examines municipal amalgamation in Armenia in relation to citizen satisfaction with local government performance and experiences of local democracy. It combines independent repeated cross-sectional Civic Engagement in Local Governance (CELoG) surveys from 2015 and 2019 with documentary analysis, interviews and focus group discussions undertaken in 2023. The quantitative comparison distinguishes municipalities classified as amalgamated and non-amalgamated in the supplied survey data, while qualitative evidence explores differences between administrative centers and constituent settlements. Mean satisfaction increased from 1.77 to 1.81 in the amalgamated category and from 1.87 to 2.01 in the non-amalgamated category. The difference between these changes was −0.099 points and was not statistically significant in an exploratory municipality-clustered model (p = .518). Qualitative accounts describe both improved administrative access and investment and concerns about resource distribution, representation, and consultation. The evidence suggests heterogeneous

experiences rather than a uniform deterioration. Changes in electoral arrangements and the wider political environment complicate causal attribution. The article highlights the importance of settlement centrality, local administrative capacity, and accountability in interpreting territorial reform.

***Keywords**:* amalgamation, local democracy, satisfaction with service delivery, decentralization, Armenia.

Resumo

Este artigo examina a fusão de municípios na Arménia em relação à satisfação dos cidadãos com o desempenho do governo local e às experiências de democracia local. Combina inquéritos transversais repetidos e independentes do CELoG, realizados em 2015 e 2019, com análise documental, entrevistas e grupos de discussão realizados em 2023. A comparação quantitativa distingue os municípios classificados como fusionados e não fusionados nos dados dos inquéritos, enquanto a evidência qualitativa explora diferenças entre os centros administrativos e as localidades integrantes. A satisfação média aumentou de 1,77 para 1,81 na categoria de municípios fusionados e de 1,87 para 2,01 na categoria de municípios não fusionados. A diferença entre estas variações foi de -0,099 pontos e não foi estatisticamente significativa num modelo exploratório com erros-padrão agrupados por município (p = 0,518). Os testemunhos qualitativos descrevem tanto melhorias no acesso administrativo e no investimento como preocupações relativas à distribuição de recursos, à representação e à consulta pública. Os resultados apontam para experiências heterogéneas, e não para uma deterioração uniforme. As alterações eleitorais e o contexto político mais amplo dificultam a atribuição causal.

Palavras-chave: fusão municipal, democracia local, satisfação com a prestação de serviços, descentralização, Arménia.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la amalgamación municipal en Armenia en relación con la satisfacción ciudadana con el desempeño del gobierno local y las experiencias de democracia local. Combina encuestas transversales repetidas e independientes de CELoG, realizadas en 2015 y 2019, con análisis documental, entrevistas y grupos focales realizados en 2023. La comparación cuantitativa distingue entre los municipios clasificados como amalgamados y no amalgamados en los datos de las encuestas, mientras que la evidencia cualitativa explora

las diferencias entre los centros administrativos y las localidades integrantes. La satisfacción media aumentó de 1,77 a 1,81 en la categoría de municipios amalgamados y de 1,87 a 2,01 en la de municipios no amalgamados. La diferencia entre estos cambios fue de -0,099 puntos y no resultó estadísticamente significativa en un modelo exploratorio con errores estándar agrupados por municipio (p = 0,518). Los testimonios cualitativos describen tanto mejoras en el acceso a la administración y en la inversión como preocupaciones sobre la distribución de recursos, la representación y la consulta. Los resultados apuntan a experiencias heterogéneas, no a un deterioro uniforme. Los cambios electorales y el contexto político más amplio dificultan la atribución causal.

Palabras clave: fusión municipal, democracia local, satisfacción con la prestación de servicios, descentralización, Armenia.

Introduction

The debate about the ideal size of local government units dates back to antiquity but gained renewed prominence in the 1970s through Dahl and Tufte's (1973) *Size and Democracy*. The authors argued that no single size of a political unit is optimal because of the inherent tension between system capacity (effectiveness) and citizen effectiveness (democracy). This tension, known as the Dahl-Tufte dilemma, suggests that while citizens in smaller communities may exercise greater control over political decisions, these communities may lack sufficient capacity to address broader-scale issues. In the decades that followed, this theory received both empirical support and criticism. For example, Mouritzen's (1989) study of local self-government in Denmark found that smaller communities exhibited higher levels of public engagement and local democracy, while Newton's (1982) research in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden suggested that larger communities could provide public services more effectively without compromising democratic values. More recent research by Denters et al. (2014, p. 315) suggests that although "small may not be beautiful, but it has its attractions," there is no consistent evidence that larger communities are inherently more democratic. Although the Armenian case has received relatively limited attention in the literature on decentralization, its significance goes beyond its novelty. Armenia represents a theoretically important case of radical municipal consolidation in a post-Soviet context, where institutional reforms were implemented in the absence of an established legacy of a fully decentralized administrative system. The sharp reduction in the number of municipalities in Armenia, from more than 900 to just 71 in less than three decades, makes it a rare case for testing theories concerning the effects of municipal amalgamation on governance,

particularly in the context of fragile democracies (Gasparyan, 2024). The Armenian case therefore provides an opportunity to refine existing theoretical propositions concerning scale, capacity, and legitimacy, particularly the Dahl-Tufte dilemma, and to assess their applicability in institutionally constrained settings.

Table 1

Number of Municipalities in Armenia

Year	Number (as of December 31)	Year	Number (as of December 31)
1996	919	2009–2015	915
1997	919	2016	793
1998–2002	929	2017–2019	502
2003	930	2020	484
2004–2005	929	2021	79
2006–2008	926	2022	71

Note. Sources: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, Gasparyan (2024).

The history of local self-government reform in Armenia has been characterized by several phases of decentralization and recentralization. The most recent chapter of municipal amalgamation continues these processes, with the aim of finding a balance between local autonomy and administrative efficiency. The country's mountainous terrain and dispersed population made it difficult to ensure the efficient and effective delivery of public services. The merger of smaller units into much larger ones would allow the government to achieve economies of scale, improve public service quality, and lower administrative costs. Another goal of these reforms was to reinforce local democracy by creating more capable local governance units that could better engage with residents and meet their needs.

This article addresses two research questions. RQ1: How did reported satisfaction with local government services change between the 2015 and 2019 CELoG surveys across amalgamated and non-amalgamated municipalities? RQ2: How do citizens and local officials perceive changes in opportunities for participation, representation, and accountability following municipal amalgamation in Armenia? The first question concerns observed differences in repeated cross-sectional surveys; the second concerns perceived institutional change, not a causal estimate of democracy.

The study combines repeated cross-sectional CELoG surveys from 2015 and 2019 with documentary evidence and interviews and focus group discussions conducted in 2023. The surveys describe perceptions at two times, while the later qualitative material explores possible mechanisms and perceived consequences. These sources cannot by themselves isolate

amalgamation from concurrent political and institutional reforms. The findings indicate uneven experiences: mean satisfaction increased slightly in both amalgamated and non-amalgamated groups, while qualitative accounts identify gains in some peripheral settlements and dissatisfaction in some former municipal centers. By analyzing the interconnections between structural reforms, citizen satisfaction, and democratic strength, this research offers a critical perspective on the continuing debate over optimal government size and the effectiveness of decentralization and municipal amalgamation strategies. The conclusions drawn from Armenia's reform experience may have broader relevance for understanding the persistent challenges and opportunities facing local governance in the context of democratization and institutional restructuring.

Institutional and temporal context: The 2015 survey preceded the principal amalgamation phases, whereas the 2019 survey followed some mergers but preceded the completion of the reform program in 2022. The period also encompassed Armenia's 2018 political transition, making it inappropriate to treat the two waves as identical political settings. Post-Soviet legacies of hierarchical administration and dependence on central transfers provide relevant context for local autonomy, but the present data do not identify their independent effects. The 2023 fieldwork captures later retrospective experiences rather than contemporaneous 2019 perceptions. Changes in council electoral arrangements and municipal digital systems also occurred over this broader period and should not be conflated with the territorial merger itself.

Post-Soviet institutional legacies provide a potential explanation for the gap between formal decentralization and lived local autonomy. Centralized decision routines, dependence on higher-level funding and expectations of hierarchical accountability can persist after territorial boundaries change. These are interpretative mechanisms, not variables directly measured by the CELoG satisfaction item. The transition to proportional council elections and council-mediated selection of executives should be described about the applicable legal provisions and implementation dates, rather than treated as an automatic consequence of amalgamation.

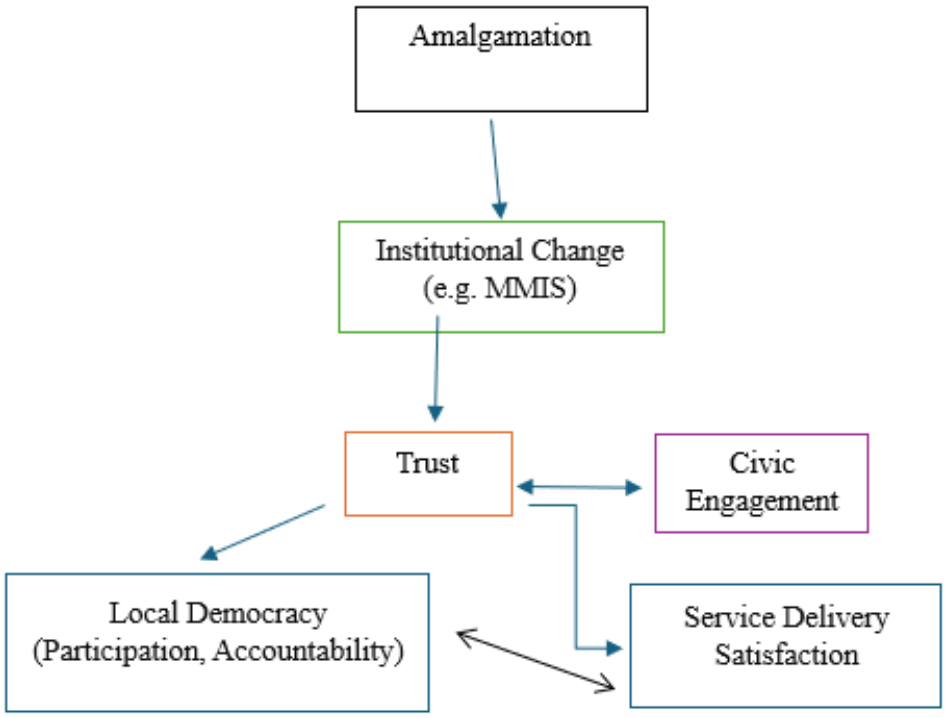
Theoretical Framework

Municipal amalgamation is the horizontal consolidation of previously separate local government units into larger jurisdictions. It differs analytically from vertical decentralization, which reallocates authority between levels of government, although both may occur within the same reform program. Amalgamation may increase administrative capacity and economies of scale, but it may also increase the distance between residents and representatives and

redistribute resources among settlements. The empirical analysis therefore distinguishes territorial restructuring from simultaneous changes in powers, electoral arrangements, and administrative practices. Local democracy depends on citizen participation and trust in local institutions. This section examines the concepts and history of local democracy, particularly the relationship between direct citizen involvement and elected representation. Trust affects government reforms and public perceptions of them, while reforms also affect trust. This reciprocal relationship influences citizen engagement and satisfaction with public services. Public service delivery concerns how local governments provide essential services such as water supply, sewerage, waste management, public transport, and energy. It also explores different ways these services are provided, how institutional reforms affect efficiency, and how public service delivery has changed with New Public Management (NPM) and post-NPM reforms.

Figure 1

Hypothesised Relationships



Together, these concepts provide a framework for studying how municipal amalgamations affect local government in Armenia. This approach links efficient management, citizen involvement, and quality public services. It also provides a basis for future research and a broader perspective on local government reforms in post-Soviet regions.

Amalgamation and Institutional Reforms

Amalgamation reforms are one type of local government reform, although not the most common. Institutional reforms usually follow two directions: vertical and horizontal (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2011). Vertical reforms involve transferring duties and responsibilities from the central government to regional and local authorities and can be divided into "political" and "administrative" decentralization. Political decentralization involves granting political independence to lower levels of government, while administrative decentralization involves transferring administrative tasks. Horizontal (territorial-organizational) reforms take two forms. The "North European" type means combining or merging existing municipalities or administrative areas. The "South European" type keeps municipalities small but creates shared bodies to provide support (Norton, 1994, p. 40).

Although Norton mainly viewed municipal amalgamation within Northern Europe, Vojnovic and Poel (2000) showed that some features of merging municipalities and combining territories had existed in North America since the 1800s. Another key difference is between voluntary and forced (or coerced) amalgamations. Relatively few countries favor voluntary amalgamation. Several authors have assessed the outcomes of these cases positively, especially because voluntary amalgamations can make local governance more efficient by lowering costs (Pupphachai & Zuidema, 2022; Viks et al., 2010). In contrast, much of the scholarship on forced amalgamations is critical, raising concerns about their effects and their ability to achieve the intended goals (Drechsler, 2013). However, this distinction has also been criticized, mainly on the basis of observations that several Southern European countries failed to implement their reforms successfully (Kuhlmann et al., 2022). This study does not intend to weigh the advantages of municipal amalgamation against its drawbacks. Instead, it examines whether the provision of local public services has become more effective and efficient following amalgamation. To this end, both theoretical and empirical studies on municipal amalgamation are reviewed.

Theoretical Studies on Amalgamation

1. Swianiewicz (2010) summarised the main arguments for amalgamation as follows:
2. Larger local governments have more capacity to provide a wider range of functions, so territorial consolidation (amalgamation) allows an allocation of more services to the local level.
3. There is an economy of scale that allows for a less expensive, more effective provision of services in the larger local government units.

4. Since large local governments can provide more functions, it is more likely that citizens will be interested in participation in local politics.
5. Territorial organization with large local governments produces fewer income disparities among municipalities, so there is a diminished pressure for horizontal equalization systems, which may be costly for the national budget and/or a politically sensitive issue.
6. Large local governments can be more effective in planning and in economic development policies.
7. In territorially consolidated (amalgamated) systems it is easier to reduce problems of free-riding, i.e., situations when locally provided services are consumed by residents who live (and pay local taxes) in another jurisdiction. (Swianiewicz, 2010, p. 3)

Recent studies show that amalgamation outcomes depend heavily on several factors, including the process, scale, and institutional context. Efficiency gains and service improvements are generally modest and uneven, while transition costs, heavier staff workloads, and losses of local identity can be substantial (Galizzi et al., 2023). These risks are especially pronounced when consolidation is coerced and local self-government protections are weak (Erlingsson et al., 2021).

Empirical Studies on Amalgamation

Empirical studies in this area have mostly been single-country case studies. Nonetheless, researchers have also identified a number of large-N comparative studies. Research has not focused exclusively on countries with strong institutions and functioning liberal democracies. For instance, such studies have examined reforms in countries such as Zimbabwe (Roe, 1995), Australia (Drew et al., 2016), Sweden (Hanes & Wikström, 2010), Denmark (Blom-Hansen, 2009). These studies had substantially different findings.

Recent scholarship highlights the importance of voluntariness and local adaptability in merger processes. Voluntary mergers, as observed in parts of Germany and the Netherlands, often yield better outcomes in terms of legitimacy, integration, and long-term institutional stability than coercive or top-down reforms (Teles, 2016). It also emphasizes the importance of viewing the effects of amalgamation as conditional and not uniform. The literature links amalgamation reforms to declining turnout, demonstrates the importance of process design and public support for reform consequences, and finds rather modest or uneven efficiency and service gains (Allers et al., 2021; Beeri & Zaidan, 2021; Galizzi et al., 2023; Myksvoll & Broderstad, 2024; Netswera, 2022; Valkama et al., 2022). Similarly, the evidence from

Armenia indicates that amalgamation was perceived as a major reform for local authorities' capacity building while also stressing the continuing needs in participation, fiscal autonomy, and accessibility of local services (Council of Europe, 2022; OECD, 2024; SIGMA, 2025).

The idea that amalgamation would lead to large-scale economic savings is derived from the concept of economies of scale. On this basis, larger municipal units are expected to deliver services and administer municipal affairs more efficiently, lowering costs per person. However, real-world evidence shows mixed results. Studies by Swianiewicz and Łukomska (2019) and Gendźwiłł et al. (2021) demonstrate that some instances of amalgamation save money, but in others municipalities face financial problems. Examining individual services adds complexity because some public services may benefit from being larger, while others may not (Tavares, 2018). While merging can improve management by pooling resources and simplifying operations, it also brings challenges in integrating different administrative cultures and systems (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007). Options such as intermunicipal cooperation can achieve similar efficiencies without the problems of a full-scale amalgamation (Bel & Warner, 2015). Leadership and stakeholder involvement are important for successful reform. Studies from Latvia and Denmark demonstrate the crucial role of local leaders in shaping the outcomes of reforms (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016; Teles, 2016). There is also an ongoing debate on the effect that amalgamation has on local democracy and public participation. Critics argue that it may weaken local representation and reduce engagement, while supporters believe it can improve governance (Dollery et al., 2012). Empirical evidence is mixed: some studies find reduced participation, whereas others find only marginal effects (Lefèvre, 2008). Ways to preserve democracy include keeping local advisory councils, ensuring that diverse voices are heard (Lizundia & Misra, 2022), and improving communication between citizens and elected officials (Mouritzen, 2008).

Financial sustainability is another key issue in the amalgamation debate. Although, in theory, amalgamation promises to improve fiscal indicators, it often does not translate into tangible outcomes. The expenses associated with amalgamation, especially at the initial stages, can be quite substantial, as there is a need to harmonize systems and practices (Hanes & Wikström, 2010). In the long term, sustainability depends on a number of factors, such as improved debt management, more efficient tax collection, and more effective service delivery (Fox & Gurley, 2006). Cases of de-amalgamation also offer valuable insights. Among the main reasons for de-amalgamation is dissatisfaction with service delivery, while other prime reasons include loss of local identity or a lack of impact on fiscal health (de Souza et al., 2015). However, several case studies, including those from Queensland, Australia, show that de-amalgamation also brings complexities and potential unintended consequences (Bell et al.,

2016). These experiences underscore the importance of considering local preferences and the potential for unintended consequences when deciding to launch amalgamation reforms (Aulich et al., 2014).

Local Democracy

Local democracy is an integral part of good democratic governance, highlighting the importance of citizens engaging in everyday politics and trusting local institutions. This section examines local democracy and the role of trust, providing a basis for analyzing how reforms affect local democracy and service delivery in Armenia.

Conceptualizing Local Democracy

Local democracy is crucial because it allows citizens to participate directly in decision-making, promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility. Schaap and Daemen (2012) point out the limitations of established democratic systems and the need for new ideas to ensure wider public engagement. These views are key to understanding how local democracy works in Armenia. Edwards (2012) further examines the conflicts and connections between participatory and representative democracy, offering lessons on integrating new forms of participation into established government systems. These ideas are especially important for Armenia's decentralization efforts, which aim to improve public involvement and government responsiveness. The effect of leadership on local democracy, studied by Bergström et al. (2012), and Irene et al. (2024), adds more complexity. Their findings on how leadership styles can facilitate or hinder democratic processes and citizen involvement apply directly to Armenia's local government.

The Role of Trust in Local Democracy

Trust is a key concept in the discourse about local democracy because it affects how people connect with public institutions and how those institutions work with citizens. At the local level, trust can affect whether people want to take part in decision-making, follow public order, and judge how well local authorities are doing (Bouckaert, 2025). In turn, people's experiences with public institutions, such as regarding their transparency (Almasi & Mohammadi, 2024), the quality and ease of use of public services and the availability of opportunities to participate (Drapalova, 2024), can strengthen or weaken trust (Bastianen & Keuffer, 2024; Verhoest et al., 2024). Trust should therefore be understood both as an outcome of good governance and as a factor in local government functioning and the acceptance of reform (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Gasparyan, 2023, 2026).

Changes in the public sector may also affect how citizens interact with institutions and consequently have an impact on trust, but the opposite may hold true as well: the current level of trust can also affect how reforms are accepted and carried out. Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003) describe trust as both a cause and result of public sector performance and reform. This reciprocal relationship is especially important for amalgamations. Changing territorial boundaries can change how close citizens feel to local leaders, how easy it is to access municipal institutions, and how services are organized. They may determine the relationships within newly created administrations. Trust helps explain how these institutional changes affect how citizens view local democracy.

Participation, Local Autonomy, and State-Society Relations

The growth of local democracy reflects broader political and institutional changes towards more local control and citizen involvement in government. Local governments have become stronger as both service providers and democratic institutions by gaining more independence and as governments have become less centralized across different political systems (Keating, 1995). This perspective demonstrates that local democracy is not just about elections or official representation but that it also involves the influence citizens can exercise over decisions that affect their communities and whether local governments have enough independence to meet local needs. Participatory theories of democracy highlight the importance of citizens being directly involved. Pateman (1970) argues that participation is important not only for individual choices but also because it helps democracy develop. Later research on participatory governance examines systems that give people more direct opportunities to influence public decisions (Fung, 2004) and act as co-creators (Rodriguez Müller et al., 2021). These methods can strengthen representative institutions by giving citizens more ways to express their opinions, hold leaders accountable, and shape policies.

These ideas are closely linked to theories about decentralization and local autonomy. Decentralization aims to move decision-making closer to citizens, so public authorities can better respond to local needs and preferences. More local autonomy can also encourage policy innovation and make services more responsive, but the impact of decentralization depends on the specific institutional and political context in which authority is given (Faguet, 2014). In Europe, the European Charter of Local Self-Government highlights this principle by making local autonomy a key part of democratic governance (Council of Europe, 1985).

The relationship between local authorities and citizens is shaped by more than just formal rules. Civil society groups, grassroots movements, and other forms of civic engagement can influence how local institutions work and how citizens interact with them. Studies on

democratic decentralization show that when public institutions and organized groups work together, they can create new ways for people to participate and hold officials accountable (Heller, 2012). Participatory budgeting illustrates this relationship. In places like Porto Alegre, direct citizen involvement in decisions about public resources has created new ways for people to take part in governance and can help build transparency, accountability, and trust (Wampler, 2012).

Municipal Size, Democratic Engagement, and Governance Quality

The relationship between municipal size and democratic engagement is an important debate in the literature on amalgamation. One of the main questions here is whether larger municipalities possess the administrative capacity required for effective governance to offset the cost of increasing the distance between citizens and local authorities. Research on municipal size has continually examined voter participation, political representation, citizen engagement, and the accessibility of local government as possible indicators of this trade-off (Denters & Rose, 2005).

There is some evidence on voting behavior that supports the idea that smaller municipalities have certain benefits. Studies on voter participation show that smaller municipalities often have higher turnout and stronger connections between citizens and local officials. For example, Frandsen (2002) and Denters *et al*. (2014) found these patterns. This is important for amalgamation, because increasing the size of municipalities can simultaneously make residents feel more distant from decision-makers. However, there is an argument that there are many factors that affect democracy, not just size. Larger municipalities may have more resources, and different ways for people to participate can help reduce the loss of closeness. De Sousa et al. (2021), along with da Cruz et al. (2019), highlight the need to balance different types of legitimacy. Input legitimacy is about giving citizens chances to participate and share their views. Throughput legitimacy focuses on how well, transparently, and responsibly decisions are made. Output legitimacy is about whether institutions deliver good policies and services. Thus, the quality of democracy in local governments depends on more than just participation. A municipality might offer good services but lack participation or transparency, or it might have strong participation but limited administrative ability.

Political leadership also shapes this relationship. Local leaders can influence how much people take part, how open the government is, and how citizens see their local institutions. Populist leaders, for example, may challenge democratic norms by centralizing power or

promoting a more limited idea of citizenship (Mudde, 2007; Paxton, 2020). This means that the quality of local democracy depends on how institutions are organized, what resources are available, the leadership style, and the opportunities for citizen involvement.

Trust, Service Satisfaction, and Institutional Reform

Different dimensions of local governance are connected through the concept of trust. Putnam's (1993) work on social capital emphasizes how trust and networks of civic cooperation can facilitate collective action and reduce the costs of coordination. According to this view, trust is both reinforced by democratic participation and an important element that helps sustain it. In other words, when citizens view local institutions as responsive and legitimate, they may be more willing to participate, while meaningful participation can itself strengthen confidence in those institutions. Trust is also closely connected to how people experience public services. Citizens interact with local government not only through voting and participatory mechanisms but also through their regular experience of services. Earlier research established the link between subjective assessment of services and institutional trust. Recent reports on the Armenian experience further demonstrate that accessibility, responsiveness, participation, and implementation capacity remain central to that relationship (OECD, 2024; SIGMA, 2025).

Public Service Delivery

There is a wide consensus that public services generally refer to water supply, sewage, waste management, public transport, and energy provision (Wollmann, 2015). There are several terms used among scholars. According to Wollmann (2015):

> In Anglo-Saxon terminology they are usually called "public utilities" while for instance they are labelled services publics industriels in French, 'servizi pubblici or servizi di pubblica utilità' in Italian and 'Daseinsvorsorge' (services for the subsistence) in German. (p. 2)

Nevertheless, the most common term used is "public services," which is also how water supply, sewage, waste management, public transport, and energy provision are collectively described. Another term that often goes hand in hand with public services in scientific literature is "personal social services," also known as health services. The European Union labels these services as social services of general interest (SSGI), which denotes "health care, childcare, care for the elderly, assistance to disabled persons or social housing" (European Commission, 2011, p. 2).

Zeithaml (1988, p.3) conceptualizes perceived quality as consumers' overall assessment of a product's excellence or superiority. Applied to public service delivery, this perspective highlights the importance of citizens' subjective assessments of the quality of services they receive. This idea aligns with Oliver's (1980) confirmation/disconfirmation process, in which satisfaction occurs when performance exceeds expectations and dissatisfaction occurs when it falls short (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Schiebler et al., 2025; Setapa et al., 2024).

Parasuraman et al. (1985) first identified ten aspects of service quality, which were later grouped into five main areas in the SERVQUAL model: tangible elements, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These areas help measure the difference between what customers expect and what they experience. According to Selvakumar (2015), all five areas have a strong impact on customer satisfaction and precede it. Customer satisfaction is a key indicator of future behavior. Howard and Sheth (1969) define it as the feeling of being fairly or unfairly rewarded for what you put into a purchase, and recent scholarship further supports this argument (Masitenyane & Mokoena, 2023). Although there is no clear agreement on what leads to service quality and satisfaction, most agree that perceived quality usually precedes satisfaction (Ballart et al., 2024; Rust & Oliver, 1994). There are also studies about decentralization (Wang et al., 2024) and socioeconomic factors (Song et al., 2024), with arguments that these could both reinforce and challenge citizens' satisfaction.

Analytical Expectations

The study evaluates the following expectations, formulated from the theoretical discussion:

H¹: Between 2015 and 2019, the change in mean reported satisfaction with local government performance was less favorable in municipalities subsequently or already amalgamated than in municipalities not amalgamated by the 2019 survey. The expectation concerns a between-group difference in observed change, not an identified causal effect. This is assessed descriptively in the available survey comparison; without a valid counterfactual, the study does not test a causal effect of amalgamation.

H²: Residents of peripheral settlements and residents of former municipal centers experience distinct opportunities for participation, representation and accountability following amalgamation, reflecting changes in administrative proximity and the distribution of decision-making authority. The qualitative evidence examines perceived proximity, consultation and accountability. The role of electoral rules is discussed as a concurrent institutional change rather than assumed to be an effect of amalgamation.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative and qualitative data to analyze government strategies and legislation and examine the implications of amalgamation reform for local governance in Armenia. The text below provides an overview of the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques.

Selection of Public Services

The selection of public services was based on two criteria. First, many municipalities do not provide all public services (some municipalities do not have a sewage system and quite a few are too small for public transportation) while in some cases public service is nationalised (water supply and energy supply) or provided by regional authorities (law enforcement). Second, because this study relies on data from two different sources (municipal reports and household surveys), and the survey grouped some public services together (such as managing the domains of education, culture and sport) the study examined these three areas together with road and bridge maintenance, since these are the services that (almost) all municipalities provide.

Research Design

The mixed-methods research design employed to triangulate the data from quantitative and qualitative approaches allowed for a robust analysis of government strategies and legislation, allowing us to draw insights from multiple data sources. Four distinct approaches were employed in this study. The 2015 and 2019 questionnaires contain comparable questions about satisfaction with local self-government bodies and assessments of municipal activities. The principal quantitative outcome in this article is overall satisfaction with the work of local self-government bodies; it should not be interpreted as a direct measure of the quality of each municipal service. For the principal outcome, the analysis retains valid responses coded 0–4 and excludes blank observations and negative non-response or inapplicable codes. The questionnaires and SPSS metadata were consulted to establish the substantive meaning of the outcome. As the surveys are independent cross-sections, the results compare groups of respondents rather than changes within the same individuals.

Quantitative analysis and inference: The CELoG surveys are independent repeated cross-sections. We compare valid 0–4 responses to question 5.8 (Overall, how satisfied are you with the performance of local self-government bodies?), excluding negative missing

codes and blank values, and distinguish municipality categories 1 (amalgamated) and 2 (non-amalgamated). Standard errors in the exploratory regression are clustered by reported municipality name. Consequently, these tests are indicative rather than design-based population inference; no causal difference-in-differences claim is made.

Document Analysis: Government strategies, policies, and laws were reviewed through careful reading of official documents, white papers, and legislative texts. Academic papers, books, and reliable online sources were also used to support the analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews: We interviewed key officials from various levels of government, such as local administrators from 14 amalgamated municipalities, two regional policymakers (*marzer*[12]), and five central government representatives. The goal was to collect firsthand insights into how government strategies and laws are implemented and their effects.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs brought together opinion leaders and residents from the 14 amalgamated municipalities. Participants came from diverse backgrounds and localities. The conversations focused on how government strategies and laws affect people's daily lives, as well as their experiences and concerns.

For the qualitative analysis, NVivo was used to organize themes. The coding plan was based on key concepts (trust, autonomy, satisfaction) and was refined as new patterns emerged. Consistency was checked by double-coding 20% of the transcripts.

Sampling Strategy

The 14 amalgamated case-study municipalities were selected purposively to capture differences in region, settlement size, settlement centrality, reform phase, and administrative context. This is a maximum-variation logic rather than a probability sample. The choice permits examination of contrasting experiences, especially between former municipal centers and peripheral settlements, but cannot support statistical generalization. The available study materials do not establish a municipality-by-municipality selection matrix, so the precise selection rationale and exclusions require confirmation against the original fieldwork records.

1 According to the law "On Administrative Division" enacted in 1995, Armenia is divided into eleven administrative divisions of which ten are provinces, also known as '*marzer*', while the capital city of Yerevan has a special status.

2 We decided to interview heads of Departments of Education, Culture and Sports as well as of Urban Planning, Land Development and Infrastructure Management from Syunik and Ararat *marzer* because no municipality was selected from the former and only one was selected from the latter.

Data Collection

The data collection process was organized in several steps. First, we reviewed government websites, official databases, and public repositories to identify and review relevant strategies and legislation related to the research topic. Next, a purposive selection of interview participants was conducted, followed by interviews. The main determinants for selection were diversity of roles, experiences, and perspectives within the government structures, as well as direct involvement in policy design or implementation. During the final stage, FGDs were conducted in the 14 amalgamated municipalities. We conducted 17 FGDs in total, including two in each municipality with more than 10,000 residents. Borrowing from the logical framework of prior publications on this topic (Gasparyan, 2023, 2024) and following the arguments by Zheng et al. (2023) as well as Galizzi et al. (2023), this study aims to identify the factors that facilitate or impede the government's strategy in achieving its main goals.

Analysis

Citizen Satisfaction

From 2016 to 2022, the powers of Armenian local self-government bodies changed considerably, especially for mayors and local councils (*avagani*). By the end of 2016, the law "On Local Self-Government" gave mayors 116 direct responsibilities and 34 delegated ones (see Table 2 below). These defined which tasks mayors handled themselves and which they managed for higher authorities. The changes during this time, especially in 2021, aimed to make governance more efficient, involve more citizens, and meet new legal standards. Mayors took on many more direct responsibilities, while the number of tasks delegated from higher levels of government remained about the same. Assigning mayors more direct responsibilities was likely intended to strengthen local governance and increase their influence over municipal policies and services. The steady number of delegated tasks shows that higher government levels kept a consistent approach. Overall, these changes suggest more decentralization and stronger local governance.

Table 2

Number of Mayoral Responsibilities by Year

Year	Direct responsibilities	Delegated responsibilities
2016	116	34
2017	116	34
2018	120	34
2019	121	34
2020	123	35
2021	129	35
2022	130	35

Note. Source: Law "On Local Self-Government."

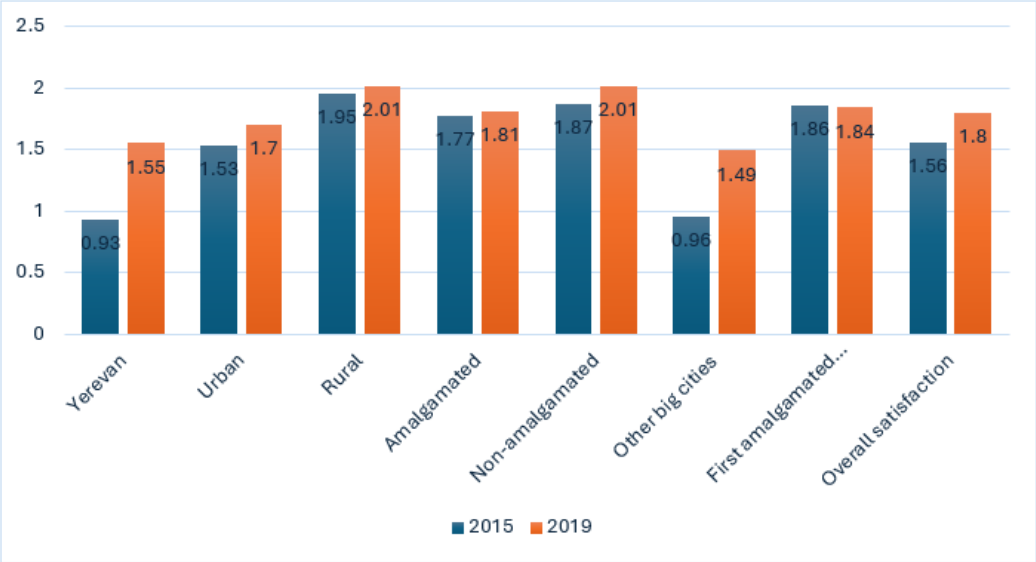
Reanalysis of the CELoG microdata (valid responses to question 5.8) yielded mean satisfaction of 1.77 (n = 391) in 2015 and 1.81 (n = 410) in 2019 for the amalgamated category, compared with 1.87 (n = 544) and 2.01 (n = 523) for the non-amalgamated category. The unadjusted difference in changes was −0.099 scale points. An unweighted linear model with a year-by-group interaction and community-name-clustered standard errors estimated an interaction of −0.099 (95% CI [−0.400, 0.202], p = .518). This comparison is not statistically distinguishable from zero at the 5% level. Because the two waves are independent cross-sections, survey design variables and weights have not been validated, and group composition may change across waves, this is a descriptive association, not a causal estimate of amalgamation.

The second main finding was that interview accounts described concerns about the consequences of amalgamation for some larger settlements. There were several reasons for this. People from the main settlement, where the local administration is based and which usually gives its name to the municipality, often saw other settlements as a burden. For example, one administrator explained that

people worked for our settlement, for the community at that time, and they received, for example, 120,000 drams (~$310 at the time) in salary. Now that the number of settlements has become at least 15, that person still receives the same salary. He says, but my workload has increased five times. But I don't have the budget to even double it.

Figure 2

Mean Overall Satisfaction With Local Self-Government Among Armenian Municipality Categories, 2015 and 2019



Note. Satisfaction was measured on a 0–4 scale. Source: Authors' calculations from CELoG survey microdata.

Second, some respondents in previously large, now-amalgamated municipalities described dissatisfaction. This was mostly because they felt they lost their local identity and had to pay a large share of local taxes without getting much in return. A local administrator in one such settlement said all their plans were canceled after amalgamation, and for two years no projects took place in their area. They said,

I know that while nearby villages do not have a kindergarten, no one will care about our secondary roads and that all these villages are part of our community, our country, but people already started complaining that if there won't be good quality asphalt connecting their house to the school, for instance, they won't pay taxes.

Thus, while it is impossible to speak to overall discontent with service delivery, a clear group feels increasingly frustrated each year. Local administrators also shared this feeling. This distinction between leaders from formerly strong, now non-titular settlements and those from other settlements in amalgamated municipalities was not discussed by Zheng et al. (2023) or Galizzi et al. (2023). To present amalgamation reforms in a positive light, the government established municipal management information systems (MMIS) and citizen service offices (CSOs) in municipalities. Local managers and Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure representatives often mentioned these as examples. While not directly linked

to amalgamation, these changes have had a substantial impact. MMIS and CSOs were designed to provide citizens with access to electronic services and to help municipalities work more efficiently and openly. However, a recent study (Gasparyan, 2024) found that both MMIS and CSOs have efficiency problems, especially MMIS. There is also limited awareness about these systems among local administrators in non-titular settlements and among residents.

Local Democracy

Local democracy is examined here through participation, representation, and accountability rather than a single proxy indicator. The European Charter of Local Self-Government, Article 3(2), requires councils or assemblies chosen through free, secret, equal, direct and universal suffrage and permits executive organs responsible to those councils; it does not require the mayor to be directly elected. Armenia's shift in many municipalities towards proportional-list council elections and council selection of the mayor should therefore be assessed in terms of its practical implications for representation and responsiveness, not described as inherently contrary to Article 3. The electoral changes were introduced alongside, but are analytically distinct from, municipal amalgamation. Some interviewees associated these arrangements with greater distance from local representatives; however, without comparable pre-reform evidence and electoral analysis, the material cannot establish that the rules caused a decline in turnout or participation.

When asked about civic engagement, local administrators said they sometimes gather information on citizens' needs and satisfaction with local services. Almost every municipality has tried at least one way to involve citizens, such as telephone surveys or public hearings. However, very few still use these methods, and only one municipality regularly collects feedback through satisfaction surveys. Most civic engagement now happens through informal conversations. As many administrators put it: "we talk to our residents, we observe their problems, and they know our place; if they have a problem they come here".

Most focus group participants reported feeling left out and not participating in civic engagement activities. Many said that local authorities have not held public hearings or sought public input on important issues recently. One participant said, "They decide for themselves; we hardly do our work; we don't deal with such issues. Perhaps they don't even want to know our opinion." Many others felt the same way. Some pointed out that the *avagani* has become more distant than expected. Before amalgamation, some *avagani* members would share community concerns with the mayor and provide feedback, but this stopped after proportional representation was introduced.

Even though civic engagement is a challenge, some participants expressed satisfaction with formal accountability arrangements. This may be because Article 11 of the law "On Local Self-Government" requires each municipality to have a website with detailed reports on municipal activities, bylaws or strategies adopted by the *avagani*, municipal budgets and budget reports, and information about consultative bodies advising the mayor, among other things. Focus group members who are active in their communities knew that in places with more than 20,000 residents, *avagani* hearings are broadcast so people can follow important discussions. Still, all participants admitted they rarely, if ever, watched these hearings or visited the municipal website. Social media is now the primary channel for municipalities and residents to communicate, and most see it as a better way to share information and interact. However, several participants said municipal staff often lack the skills to manage social media effectively, leading to delays or mistakes in sharing important information and a greater focus on less important topics.

Center-periphery relations and digital governance: Amalgamation combined settlements with unequal fiscal resources, political visibility, and administrative capacity. Accounts from previously larger centers describe increased workloads and redistribution of resources, while some smaller settlements report new investment and access to services. These experiences should not be treated as a universal center-versus-periphery divide: benefits and costs vary by local context. MMIS and citizen service offices may reduce the burden of distance by standardizing transactions and extending access, but their benefits depend on internet connectivity, digital literacy, staff assistance, and physical accessibility. The available qualitative material supports identifying these mechanisms as possibilities; it does not establish a measured digital divide or the net effect of digital tools.

Discussion

Interpretation must distinguish the 2015–2019 survey contrast from changes caused by municipal amalgamation. The 2018 political transition, evolving electoral arrangements, other public investments, and changes in the surveyed municipal population all constitute plausible alternative explanations. A single pre-reform survey wave cannot demonstrate parallel pre-trends. Accordingly, the analysis assesses observed patterns and plausible mechanisms rather than attributing a quantified causal effect to territorial reform.

Citizen Satisfaction with Service Delivery

The survey means do not support a claim that satisfaction declined overall in amalgamated municipalities. They show a smaller descriptive increase than in the non-amalgamated comparison category, but the difference between changes is not statistically distinguishable from zero in the exploratory community-clustered specification (p = .518). H_1 is therefore directionally consistent with the observed means but is not statistically corroborated. These patterns cannot establish an effect attributable to amalgamation.

Local Democracy

The qualitative evidence indicates divergent experiences of participation, representation, and accountability, which are analytically distinct dimensions of local democracy. Some respondents report more administrative resources and service improvements, while others describe reduced proximity to decision-makers, limited consultation, or weakened identification with the new municipality. This offers qualified, context-dependent support for H_2 rather than a uniform democratic deterioration. Changes in the electoral system require separate analysis: Article 3(2) of the European Charter of Local Self-Government allows councils elected by direct suffrage to have executive organs responsible to them and does not itself mandate direct mayoral elections.

Conclusions

The study identifies heterogeneous experiences accompanying Armenia's municipal amalgamation program. Between 2015 and 2019, descriptive mean satisfaction increased in both the amalgamated and non-amalgamated categories, with a smaller increase in the former. Qualitative accounts reveal differences in administrative access, territorial resource distribution, and perceived opportunities for democratic engagement. These observations do not establish that amalgamation caused the differences. The broader reform environment, including Armenia's 2018 political transition, must be considered in interpreting them.

The article contributes to comparative debates by showing why municipality size alone is an insufficient account of reform outcomes: settlement centrality, inherited administrative practices, representation, and uneven capacity may mediate how reform is experienced. Policy implications include transparent allocation of resources across constituent settlements, accessible local consultation, support for in-person and digital services, and monitoring of satisfaction by settlement type. Limitations include independent cross-sectional surveys,

uncertain harmonization and survey design, potentially changing municipal coverage, the absence of a validated counterfactual, purposive qualitative sampling, and retrospective accounts. Future work should use documented sampling weights and primary sampling units, verified municipality-level reform timing, harmonized geographic identifiers, and repeated pre-reform observations where available.

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How to cite this article:
Gasparyan, A. (2026). Municipal Amalgamation in Armenia: Citizen Satisfaction with Local Services and Local Democracy. *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 190-218. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a975

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REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a946

De la dotación a la práctica: activación e innovación pública en municipios argentinos

From Endowment to Practice: Activation and Public Innovation in Argentine Municipalities

Da dotação à prática: ativação e inovação pública nos municípios argentinos

Recibido: 06/07/2026 - Aceptado: 04/11/2026

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Tipología del artículo: investigación.

Resumen

Un importante corpus de literatura sobre innovación pública sostiene que cuanto mayor es la capacidad organizacional de los gobiernos locales, mayor es la innovación. A partir del análisis de 123 municipios argentinos, este artículo pone en cuestión ese argumento, puesto que los municipios medianos (50 000–100 000 hab.) tienen una tasa de innovación (80,8 %) superior a la de las grandes ciudades (71,4 %). Este resultado se inscribe en un cuerpo de literatura que desafía la relación lineal entre tamaño y una mayor innovación en los gobiernos (Damanpour, 1992; Demircioglu & Audretsch, 2019). Para desentrañar este no determinismo de la escala, el artículo propone el concepto de capacidad de activación: la habilidad del gobierno local para poner en movimiento los recursos institucionales disponibles para sostener una práctica de innovación, mediada por agencia política situada. El concepto se inserta en la literatura sobre arreglos de implementación y activación de capacidades estatales (Pires & Gomide, 2016, 2024), y se traslada aquí al nivel local en un

contexto federal fragmentado. Solo el 19,5 % de los municipios relevados (24 de 123) logra institucionalizar sus innovaciones, y, según la evidencia exploratoria, lo que los distingue es la activación que demuestran: liderazgo político sostenido, orientación estratégica y articulación relacional con actores externos.

Palabras clave: gobierno local, innovación pública, capacidad estatal, agencia política, institucionalización, Argentina.

Abstract

A significant body of literature on public innovation argues that greater organizational capacity in local governments leads to greater innovation. Based on an analysis of 123 Argentine municipalities, this article calls this argument into question, as medium-sized municipalities (50,000–100,000 inhabitants) have a higher innovation rate (80.8%) than large cities (71.4%). This finding aligns with a body of literature that challenges the linear relationship between size and greater innovation in government (Damanpour, 1992; Demircioglu & Audretsch, 2019). To unravel this nonlinear relationship between scale and innovation, the article proposes the concept of activation capacity (the local government's ability to mobilize and utilize available institutional resources to develop a sustained innovation practice, mediated by situated political agency). This concept of activation capacity is embedded in the literature on arrangements for implementing or activating state capacities (Pires & Gomide, 2016, 2024). This approach is applied at the local level within a fragmented federal context. Only 19.5% of the municipalities surveyed (24 of 123) institutionalize their innovations, and, according to the exploratory evidence, what distinguishes them is the activation capacity they demonstrate (sustained political leadership, strategic orientation, and relational articulation with external actors).

Keywords: local government, public innovation, state capacity, political agency, institutionalization, Argentina.

Resumo

Uma quantidade significativa de literatura sobre inovação pública argumenta que uma maior capacidade organizacional nos governos locais leva a uma maior inovação. Com base em uma análise de 123 municípios argentinos, este artigo questiona esse argumento, visto que municípios de médio porte (50 000 a 100 000 habitantes) apresentam uma taxa de inovação mais alta (80,8 %) do que grandes cidades (71,4 %). Essa constatação está em consonância com a literatura que questiona a relação linear entre tamanho e maior inovação no governo

(Damanpour, 1992; Demircioglu e Audretsch, 2019). Para desvendar esse não determinismo de escala, o artigo propõe o conceito de capacidade de ativação: a habilidade do governo local de mobilizar os recursos institucionais disponíveis para sustentar uma prática de inovação, mediada pela atuação política situada. O conceito se insere na literatura sobre arranjos de implementação e ativação de capacidades estatais (Pires e Gomide, 2016, 2024), e se desloca aqui ao nível local em um contexto federal fragmentado. Apenas 19,5 % dos municípios pesquisados (24 de 123) conseguem institucionalizar suas inovações, e, segundo a evidência exploratória, o que os distingue é a ativação que demonstram: liderança política sustentada, orientação estratégica e articulação relacional com atores externos.

Palavras-chave: governo local, inovação pública, capacidade estatal, agência política, institucionalização, Argentina.

Introducción

Parte de la literatura sobre innovación pública asocia tradicionalmente la innovación con la presencia de recursos organizacionales, financieros, profesionales y estructuras administrativas que acompañen el proceso —una idea meramente gerencial, derivada de la Nueva Gestión Pública (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992)— e involucra el modelo denominado lineal (Grandinetti, 2018a), ya criticado por quienes cuestionan los marcos importados del sector privado (Hartley, 2005; Windrum & Koch, 2008) y por los modelos de innovación abierta, que ponen el foco en el aprendizaje institucional y en la cooperación externa. Aun así, incluso dentro de la lectura lineal persisten posiciones contradictorias. Así, por ejemplo, Damanpour (1992) sostiene la existencia de una correlación positiva entre tamaño e innovación, aunque esta relación presenta importantes matices según el tipo de innovación, el sector u otras características organizacionales. Mientras tanto, estudios recientes no parecen confirmar esa relación. En esta línea, el análisis de Demircioglu y Audretsch (2019) en organizaciones públicas no encuentra correlación estadísticamente significativa entre el tamaño de la organización y la innovación.

En la literatura sobre capacidad estatal se detectan posiciones similares. Varias operacionalizaciones habituales en el nivel subnacional suelen considerar la capacidad estatal como una cuestión de recursos organizacionales y técnicos de los que dispone una institución, enfoque que Cingolani (2013) identifica como recurrente en medidas fiscales y administrativas, y cuyas limitaciones reaparecen en los indicadores de capacidad de innovación por región (Parano, 2026). No obstante, marcos conceptuales más finos suavizan

esta posición, por ejemplo, la diferenciación entre el poder despótico y el poder infraestructural (Mann, 1986), o los abordajes que incorporan aspectos ambientales, organizacionales y relacionales (Díaz et al., 2002). Evidentemente, los recursos no son suficientes para explicar los resultados. En América Latina, municipios con características formales similares tienen comportamientos muy diferentes (Cravacuore, 2016; Grandinetti, 2018b; Nari et al., 2022). No solo importa lo que un municipio tiene, sino también lo que hace con esos recursos, lo cual ha dado lugar a un área de investigación sobre gestión local de políticas públicas en Argentina en continua construcción (Grandinetti, 2023), coetánea con los replanteos sobre capacidades institucionales para innovar en la región (García-Vegas, 2025).

Este artículo relaciona ambos campos de estudio. Al analizar datos primarios de 123 municipios argentinos, evidencia que la innovación pública municipal no es proporcional a el tamaño de la organización y la provisión de recursos. Así, los municipios medianos (50 000–100 000 habitantes) superan en innovación (80,8 %) tanto a las grandes ciudades (71,4 %) como a las ciudades intermedias-grandes (58,8 %). Sin embargo, la brecha que revela esa evidencia es más conceptual que empírica. Conceptos análogos reconocen el problema: abarcan desde la función de institucionalización en el marco de la capacidad de innovación pública (Meijer, 2019), hasta la tensión que existe entre explotar y explorar las capacidades ambidiestras (Grandinetti, 2020). Ninguno propone una operacionalización municipal, basada en dimensiones comparables y cuantificables, de cómo una capacidad formal se transforma en capacidad innovadora en un lugar y no en otro.

El concepto de capacidad de activación se propone aquí como la habilidad del gobierno local para fomentar y dirigir los recursos institucionales disponibles hacia una innovación sostenible, mediante la acción política situada, en diálogo con la literatura ya consolidada en Brasil sobre los arreglos de implementación y la activación de las capacidades estatales (Pires & Gomide, 2016, 2024), que muestra cómo la interacción entre actores e instrumentos activa o no las capacidades de los programas federales. Ese enfoque se traslada aquí al ámbito de los gobiernos locales de un país fragmentado que carece de las capacidades técnico-administrativas iniciales presupuestas por la literatura brasileña sobre implementación federal.

Esto nos lleva a las siguientes preguntas: ¿Por qué la relación entre la innovación municipal y el tamaño del municipio no es lineal? ¿Qué diferencia a los municipios que han hecho efectivas sus innovaciones de aquellos que las han dejado en el ámbito de la retórica?

Para abordar estas cuestiones, empleamos un diseño de investigación de métodos mixtos (investigación basada en cuestionarios, análisis documental y codificación cualitativa de narrativas institucionales) en 123 gobiernos locales de Argentina, relevados en 2021 sobre experiencias desarrolladas entre 2015 y 2020. Nuestros hallazgos revelaron que la relación entre la innovación y la escala municipal no es lineal; que solo el 19,5 % de los municipios relevados (el 27,3 % de los que reportaron innovaciones) logró institucionalizarlas; y que las innovaciones institucionalizadas aparecen asociadas a una mayor capacidad de activación por parte de los gobiernos que las impulsan. Esta capacidad se basa en la confluencia de un liderazgo político sostenido, una orientación estratégica y vínculos relacionales. El texto se estructura en las siguientes secciones: marco teórico, metodología, resultados, discusión y conclusiones.

El informe *Panorama de la gestión pública en América Latina y el Caribe, 2025* (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe [CEPAL], 2025) identifica el fortalecimiento de capacidades estatales para innovar como uno de los desafíos centrales de la gestión pública regional. El sistema municipal argentino ofrece un escenario propicio para este análisis. Sus más de 2 300 gobiernos locales (municipios, comunas, comisiones de fomento y otras figuras que define cada régimen provincial) varían en tamaño, autonomía, capacidad fiscal y contexto regional (Cravacuore, 2016). Esa heterogeneidad es el resultado de un proceso histórico de descentralización desigual y recentralización selectiva, que ha profundizado las asimetrías en las capacidades organizativas y en los perfiles del personal estatal entre municipios (Rodríguez, 2026). Solo una minoría cuenta con carta orgánica que le otorga plena autonomía normativa; la mayoría opera bajo marcos provinciales que restringen sus márgenes administrativos. Esta heterogeneidad institucional, junto con una desigualdad regional persistente, convierte a Argentina en un escenario productivo para estudiar la innovación bajo condiciones adversas, una condición que describe a numerosos gobiernos locales del mundo.

Marco teórico

Innovación pública: el vínculo cuestionado entre tamaño y capacidad de innovar

Dentro de la literatura sobre innovación pública, en particular en estudios realizados en países de la OCDE, la innovación suele entenderse como la introducción de nuevos elementos en la provisión de valor público e incluye cambios en los servicios, los procesos

de entrega y los mecanismos de gobernanza (Hartley, 2005; Moore, 1995; Windrum & Koch, 2008). Según Hartley (2005), la evaluación del potencial de innovación pública debería tener en cuenta su capacidad para crear y mantener el valor público a lo largo del tiempo, más allá de su originalidad. Moore (1995) añade una consideración política, a saber, que el valor es resultado de la negociación, por más óptima que sea la innovación técnicamente. Además, un postulado central de este enfoque mayoritariamente gerencial y vinculado a la Nueva Gestión Pública (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) es que la capacidad de innovar es función del número de recursos disponibles a nivel organizacional, incluidos el personal especializado y los presupuestos adecuados, y de estructuras que permitan el cambio. En consecuencia, se esperaría que organizaciones más grandes innoven en mayor grado.

Ahora bien, en el caso de las regiones periféricas y los gobiernos locales que operan bajo escenarios de escasez de recursos e inestabilidad política (Andrews et al., 2017; Grindle, 2004; Nari et al., 2022), dicha lógica es problemática. En estos contextos, innovar supone trabajar con la falta de capacidades organizacionales como problema principal. En los municipios argentinos, Grandinetti y Miller (2020) encuentran una disparidad entre el discurso del gobierno abierto y la construcción efectiva del andamiaje que lo sostenga en el tiempo. Grandinetti (2018b) identifica el caso de iniciativas denominadas innovadoras que, en realidad, replican la administración tradicional con nuevos nombres. En términos generales, una de las contribuciones a la discusión académica de este artículo radica en la identificación de una tensión entre aquella innovación que se declara públicamente y aquella innovación efectivamente institucionalizada, lo cual dialoga con aportes recientes como los de García Delgado y Casalis (2023), que analizan las dificultades de los municipios argentinos para dar respuesta a las nuevas agendas, o los de Grandinetti y Nari (2023), quienes señalan que el escenario pospandemia expuso el frágil estado organizacional de gran parte del sector público municipal en Argentina.

España-Ruiz et al. (2025), con un enfoque de métodos mixtos metodológicamente cercano al de este artículo, combinan revisión documental y encuestas, y concluyen que los funcionarios de gobiernos locales en Chile perciben la voluntad política y la inversión como facilitadores centrales, y el trabajo administrativo rutinario y la carencia de habilidades para el manejo de la innovación como barreras principales. En la misma línea, Gullmark (2021) y Gullmark y Clausen (2023) muestran que existen dos formas en las que la administración local desarrolla su capacidad de innovación: una basada en habilidades individuales y liderazgo político, y otra en la rutina y la estructura organizacional. De manera similar, Meijer (2019) menciona la movilización y la institucionalización como funciones específicas y diferenciadas

de la capacidad de innovación. No obstante, estos trabajos se basan en municipios europeos que cuentan con bases institucionales más sólidas. El presente estudio llega a conclusiones similares, desde un escenario propio caracterizado, más bien, por la fragilidad organizacional.

Capacidad estatal a nivel local: de la dotación a la activación

El concepto de capacidad estatal ha sido originalmente un constructo orientado al nivel nacional (Evans et al., 1985; Mann, 1986). Cuando se conceptualiza a nivel subnacional, el supuesto subyacente sigue siendo similar. En particular, la capacidad estatal se ha equiparado con los recursos organizacionales y técnicos que la institución tiene disponibles. Bertranou (2015) define la capacidad estatal como la capacidad instrumental de las organizaciones públicas para lograr los objetivos asignados, y la conceptualiza a través de la relación Estado-sociedad, la legitimidad estatal y los arreglos organizativos, así como los interorganizacionales. Grindle (1996) identifica cuatro dimensiones diferentes de la capacidad estatal: institucional, administrativa, técnica y política. A su vez, Andrews et al. (2017) distinguen entre la capacidad formal y la capacidad adaptativa iterativa centrada en el problema.

Dos dinámicas siguen siendo válidas para el nivel local. Las investigaciones en contextos de la OCDE relacionan la capacidad local con la autonomía tributaria, la profesionalización de las burocracias y el tamaño de la población (Dollery & Robotti, 2008; Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). Las investigaciones en América Latina muestran que estos factores importan, pero explican menos de lo esperado. Existe una brecha entre la capacidad formal y el desempeño observado empíricamente, lo que pone de relieve un componente que las medidas de recursos no captan.

Hay, sin embargo, una concepción relacional de la capacidad estatal que sostiene lo contrario (Evans, 1995; Migdal, 2001). Un trabajo reciente sobre el Gran Buenos Aires ratifica la vigencia renovada de esta discusión. Díaz Rosáenz y Schneider (2024) revisitan el concepto de capacidades estatales para los gobiernos locales argentinos, señalando su recuperación y relevancia teórica tras la pandemia. Las capacidades son configuraciones que se moldean según cómo los recursos institucionales interactúan con actores políticos y sociales (y no atributos fijos que las instituciones simplemente poseen). Lo que un municipio puede hacer depende de quién activa esos recursos, cómo y hacia qué fines, tanto como de lo que posee.

Esta perspectiva relacional se cruza con una tradición ya consolidada en la literatura brasileña sobre implementación de políticas públicas. Pires y Gomide (2016) desarrollaron

el enfoque de los *arranjos de implementação*, arreglos institucionales que estructuran cómo se articulan actores e instrumentos en la implementación de una política pública específica, y mostraron, a partir de un análisis comparado de programas federales, que la capacidad estatal se compone de dos dimensiones: una técnico-administrativa, asociada a la existencia de burocracias profesionalizadas y recursos organizacionales, financieros y tecnológicos; otra político-relacional, asociada a la capacidad de incluir de forma articulada a múltiples actores sociales y políticos en los procesos de política pública. En un desarrollo más reciente de esa agenda, Pires y Gomide (2024) profundizan específicamente en los procesos de *ativação* (activación) de capacidades estatales, mostrando cómo la interacción entre actores e instrumentos determina si las capacidades existentes se activan o permanecen latentes en la implementación de programas federales. Cabe hacer una salvedad: ese trabajo se concentra en programas federales brasileños, comparados mediante estudios de caso, un punto sobre el que volvemos en el apartado "Implicancias para la teoría de la capacidad estatal".

La agencia política como factor constitutivo: la propuesta de capacidad de activación

Los enfoques de innovación pública y capacidades estatales abordan la agencia política como contexto de ocurrencia más que como causa: los factores políticos se asumen en tanto controles y las situaciones favorables como contextos que posibilitan la capacidad, la cual resulta en innovación. Sin embargo, ¿se explica realmente la diferencia entre quién innova y quién no con la estructura? ¿Por qué algunos municipios, estructuralmente débiles, logran innovar y otros no, a pesar de tener estructuras fuertes? Si la variable estructural no explica la diferencia, ¿qué lo hace? Nuestra hipótesis, que se contrasta con los datos en el apartado "Hallazgos II: la agencia política como activación", es que buena parte de la respuesta gira en torno a las decisiones que toman los intendentes y sus equipos para utilizar lo que tienen. Es decir, se trata de un tipo de agencia relacional, basada en el uso de los recursos institucionales disponibles, el reconocimiento de cuáles se pueden activar y la construcción de las alianzas necesarias, elementos fundamentales para convertir esa capacidad potencial en realidad. Esto va en sintonía con enfoques como los de Grindle (2004), quien ha presentado el concepto de *good enough governance*, el cual destaca que los resultados significativos pueden lograrse con mínimos niveles de dotación si los gobiernos se concentran en problemas factibles de resolver y los abordan de manera consistente. Por otro lado, el enfoque PDIA desarrollado por Andrews et al. (2017) descansa también sobre premisas similares. Sin embargo, este enfoque no es del todo explícito acerca de cómo la política endógena interactúa con las intervenciones externas para facilitar u obstaculizar la acción.

Ante estos antecedentes, y en diálogo explícito tanto con la tradición de Pires y Gomide sobre activación de capacidades estatales como con un trabajo previo que analiza cómo interactúan la innovación pública, las capacidades estatales y la gobernanza, específicamente a nivel local latinoamericano (Rodríguez, 2025), planteamos aquí la noción de *capacidad de activación*, entendida como la habilidad del gobierno local para movilizar y dirigir los recursos que tiene a su alcance, tanto en términos de organización como de insumos fiscales y redes relacionales, hacia procesos de innovación sostenibles y duraderos. Esta capacidad varía con el liderazgo político y con el balance entre agencia ejecutiva, maduración organizacional y contacto con agentes externos, y media entre la dotación y el resultado. Puede reconocerse en tres dimensiones (activación ejecutiva, orientación estratégica y articulación con actores) y, dentro de cada una, en la distancia que existe entre lo que el gobierno declara y lo que logra documentar.

Datos y métodos

Este estudio se basa en datos originales de 123 municipios argentinos, recolectados en el marco de un proyecto de investigación nacional sobre capacidad de gestión pública local (Programa PISAC-COVID 19). La recolección de datos tuvo lugar en 2021 y abarcó innovaciones implementadas durante el período 2015–2020, recorte prepandémico para evitar que el contexto de emergencia alterase los incentivos y la propia noción de innovación. En este sentido, el bloque de preguntas sobre innovación remitía al período previo a la pandemia (hasta febrero de 2020) y se diferenciaba de otro dedicado a la gestión durante la emergencia, lo cual permitió dejar fuera de los relatos analizados a la gran mayoría de las experiencias surgidas a partir de esta. Estudios sobre el mismo universo de municipios documentaron cómo la pandemia aceleró procesos de digitalización que en muchos casos partían de bases organizacionales muy desiguales (Cao et al., 2023; Grandinetti et al., 2023; Moreira Slepoy et al., 2023), lo cual refuerza la pertinencia de aislar el período prepandémico para estudiar la dinámica ordinaria de la innovación municipal.

Estrategia muestral y representatividad

232 gobiernos locales fueron seleccionados con muestreo intencional y estratificado, según cinco criterios: tipo de gobierno local, tamaño poblacional, región geográfica, condición de capital de provincia y presencia o no de carta orgánica. En adelante, el término municipio se utiliza de forma genérica para referirse a los distintos tipos de gobierno local que integran la muestra. El relevamiento alcanzó al 53 % de la muestra prevista, lo cual permitió conformar

una muestra efectiva de 123 gobiernos locales distribuidos en 21 de las 23 provincias del país; San Luis y Salta no pudieron incluirse en el análisis final por falta de respuesta de los gobiernos locales seleccionados. La muestra final cubre las principales regiones del país (el Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires, Pampeana, Centro, Cuyo, NOA, NEA y Patagonia) y seis estratos poblacionales, desde menos de 5 000 habitantes (M6) hasta más de 250 000 (M1). La Tabla 1 detalla esta distribución.

Tabla 1

Estratos poblacionales y distribución de la muestra

Estrato	Rango poblacional	Municipios	% de la muestra
M1	> 250 000	21	17,1 %
M2	100 001–250 000	17	13,8 %
M3	50 001–100 000	26	21,1 %
M4	10 001–50 000	34	27,6 %
M5	5 001–10 000	11	8,9 %
M6	1–5 000	14	11,4 %
Total		**123**	**100 %**

Nota. Elaboración propia.

No se llevó a cabo una comparación formal de respondientes y no respondientes, salvo en su distribución regional y por estratos. Al tratarse de un muestreo no probabilístico, que además cubre el 53 % de los casos previstos, la muestra no reproduce la composición del universo (los estratos de mayor tamaño se encuentran sobrerrepresentados) y sus resultados no pueden generalizarse estadísticamente al conjunto de los municipios argentinos. Por esa misma razón tampoco se aplicaron ponderadores, puesto que no se cuenta con probabilidades de selección conocidas; es decir, las cifras que se presentan describen a la muestra y no constituyen estimaciones para el país. Asimismo, no se descartan sesgos de autoselección vinculados a la voluntad de participar en este tipo de investigaciones.

Instrumentos de recolección

El estudio se compuso de tres componentes: i) un cuestionario estandarizado aplicado mediante entrevistas estructuradas en formato virtual a funcionarios municipales, que permitió recolectar información relativa a experiencias de innovación, instituciones, recursos, orientaciones, etc.; la gradación de las respuestas para las preguntas actitudinales consistió en una escala de Likert de cinco puntos, mientras que el relato de iniciativas particulares se basó en preguntas abiertas. Para este artículo se trabajó con la pregunta abierta en la que se solicitaba

describir una innovación implementada en la localidad y con cinco afirmaciones, las tres de orientación estratégica que se presentan en la Tabla 5 junto con “el gobierno involucra a actores heterogéneos en la creación de servicios y/o políticas” y “el gobierno transforma las ideas en prácticas sistematizadas”. El mismo relevamiento aportó, además, los datos estructurales de cada caso (población, presupuesto con base en 2019, dotación de personal, existencia de carta orgánica, etc.). ii) notas tomadas durante las entrevistas y verificación documental (sitios web, cartas orgánicas, normativa local, planes estratégicos y de gestión, informes, notas de prensa, actas oficiales, etc.), que sirvieron para cotejar las respuestas sobre las iniciativas reportadas. En los gobiernos locales que no declararon ninguna experiencia, la información documental no se utilizó para atribuirles innovaciones, en coherencia con el criterio de autoidentificación descripto en el apartado “Construcción de la tipología de innovación”, ya que reconocer como innovadora una iniciativa que el propio municipio no identifica como tal habría supuesto imponer una definición externa. Por lo tanto, la categoría “sin innovación” da cuenta de la ausencia de iniciativas declaradas, lo cual no equivale necesariamente a su inexistencia. La información de los casos que se detallan en el apartado “Hallazgos II: la agencia política como activación” proviene de las mismas fuentes. Vale aclarar que funcionan como ilustraciones analíticas antes que como estudios de caso en sentido estricto, y que fueron seleccionados por la riqueza de la información disponible y por presentar trayectorias de activación contrastantes, sin pretensión de representatividad estadística. iii) El tercer elemento es una codificación cualitativa de las narrativas recogidas en la encuesta que abordamos en tres dimensiones: el tipo de innovación, el grado de institucionalización de la innovación y la manifestación de agencia política. Creamos una escala de cuatro categorías, asignadas a partir del relato de la entrevista cotejado con la documentación disponible, para diferenciar entre innovaciones sistematizadas (con una estrategia explícita y mecanismos de continuidad, como estructuras formales, equipos responsables o seguimiento, que superan la lógica del proyecto aislado; sin fijar un período mínimo, se requirió evidencia de permanencia más allá de la implementación inicial), implementaciones puntuales (acciones aisladas, sin evidencia de continuidad), casos indeterminados (aquellos en que la información disponible no permite comprobar ni la continuidad ni la interrupción de la experiencia) y casos sin innovaciones reportadas.

Construcción de la tipología de innovación

La tipología de innovaciones utilizada en el análisis emergió de forma inductiva a partir de esta codificación. El procedimiento consistió en la codificación abierta de las 88 narrativas de municipios con al menos una innovación, identificando componentes recurrentes

(herramientas digitales, mecanismos participativos, reestructuración interna) y agrupando los casos según su combinación. De esa codificación surgieron cuatro categorías: innovaciones tecnológicas, centradas en herramientas digitales y sistemas de gobierno electrónico; innovaciones relacionales o colaborativas, que incluyen mecanismos participativos y arreglos de coproducción; innovaciones organizacionales, que involucran reestructuración interna sin soporte tecnológico; e innovaciones mixtas, que combinan dos o más de estas dimensiones. Las categorías reflejan las formas de innovación más frecuentes en la muestra; es decir, no se trata de una tipología derivada a priori de un marco teórico externo. Respecto de qué se consideró innovación, se incorporaron todas las iniciativas que los propios gobiernos locales identificaron como tales. Se trata de un criterio amplio, que admite que parte de lo reportado corresponda a procesos de modernización o a mejoras incrementales de rutinas existentes. Por ese motivo, el análisis no se detiene en lo declarado y distingue entre innovación declarada, implementada e institucionalizada (apartado “La brecha de institucionalización”), en línea con autores como Hartley (2005) y Moore (1995), para quienes la innovación pública debe evaluarse, más allá de su originalidad, por su capacidad de generar valor público y sostenerse en el tiempo.

Estrategia de análisis

El análisis combina estadística descriptiva, tabulaciones cruzadas e interpretación de casos. Dado el carácter exploratorio de varios de los constructos que se ponen en juego, buscamos identificar patrones y excepciones, sin que la identificación causal entre en el alcance del diseño. Los municipios se identifican por su nombre cuando se citan sus experiencias, con el consentimiento informado de los participantes.

Para identificar la capacidad de activación, se recurrió a sus tres dimensiones. La activación ejecutiva se aproximó a partir de la codificación de la agencia política en las narrativas y de la antigüedad de la gestión; la orientación estratégica, a partir de los tres ítems del cuestionario referidos a visión, recursos y espacios de experimentación colaborativa; y la articulación con actores, a partir del ítem sobre involucramiento de actores heterogéneos, contrastado con la evidencia narrativa. Luego, estas dimensiones se cruzaron con el grado de institucionalización de las innovaciones (apartado “Hallazgos II: la agencia política como activación”).

Los datos se enmarcan en el proyecto PISAC-COVID-19, sistematizado luego en publicaciones sobre capacidades estatales y agenda municipal pospandemia (Nari et al., 2022, 2023). Dado que el estudio involucró respuestas de funcionarios públicos en el

ejercicio de sus funciones institucionales, sin datos personales sensibles ni identificación de participantes, no se requirió aprobación de un comité de ética; la participación fue voluntaria y se contó con el consentimiento informado de los participantes.

Hallazgos I: la innovación registrada y la paradoja de escala

Qué innovan los gobiernos locales argentinos

Del total de 123 municipios estudiados, 88 (71,5 %) reportaron haber implementado al menos una innovación en el período en análisis. Esos 88 municipios abarcan todos los estratos poblacionales, lo que confirma que se reporta innovación en todos los tamaños, incluso en los municipios más pequeños y con menos recursos. Los 35 restantes (28,5 %) no reportaron innovaciones. El proceso de tipificación arrojó cuatro categorías de innovación que presentan un predominio de innovaciones mixtas, que combinan tecnologías e innovación participativa, así como innovación organizacional e interfaces digitales, con 48 (39,0 %) casos. Siguen las innovaciones tecnológicas, vinculadas a la digitalización de trámites y de la gestión y al despliegue de aplicaciones y plataformas de gobierno electrónico, con 27 casos (22,0 %). Le siguen las innovaciones relacionales o colaborativas, como presupuestos participativos, consejos vecinales y acuerdos de coproducción, con 10 casos (8,1 %), y, finalmente, las innovaciones organizacionales, de reordenamiento interno de estructuras sin componente tecnológico ni participativo, con apenas 3 casos (2,4 %). Para más detalles, véase la Tabla 2.

Tabla 2

Distribución de innovaciones según tipo predominante

Tipo de innovación	N	%
Mixta	48	39,0 %
Sin innovación	35	28,5 %
Tecnológica	27	22,0 %
Relacional / colaborativa	10	8,1 %
Organizacional	3	2,4 %
Total	**123**	**100 %**

Nota. Elaboración propia.

El predominio de innovaciones mixtas sugiere que la mayoría de las innovaciones municipales conjugan distintos tipos de recursos de forma simultánea, sin adherirse a una lógica particular de innovación. Mercedes (Pampeana, 50 000–100 000 habitantes), por ejemplo, instaló un vivero biotecnológico municipal que conjugó innovación ambiental con

cooperación educativa; General Pico (Pampeana, 50 000–100 000 hab.) articuló un espacio de innovación ciudadana con distintos actores y organizaciones civiles de la comunidad que incluyó una política de coproducción. Se trata de innovaciones híbridas que constituyen respuestas a los recursos y oportunidades presentes en sus contextos locales: montadas con los insumos disponibles, no replicadas desde una fórmula uniforme.

La brecha de institucionalización

De los datos compilados, y considerando un sesgo de optimismo inherente al autorreporte, un número reducido de municipios (24; 19,5 % del total relevado y 27,3 % de los 88 que reportaron innovaciones) muestra innovaciones con características de praxis sistematizada: estructuras formalizadas, continuidad registrada y supervivencia a la implementación inicial. En contraste, un número aún menor (2; 1,6 %) presenta innovaciones espasmódicas, es decir, intervenciones aisladas sin permanencia. Finalmente, un grupo extenso (62; 50,4 %) se ubica en un área ambigua: sus integrantes reportan sus acciones de modo que se alude a una implementación, pero sin registros consistentes que corroboren su sistematicidad (véase la Tabla 3). Es decir, la información disponible no permite comprobar su continuidad, cuestión que no debe leerse como evidencia de interrupción.

Tabla 3

Grado de institucionalización de las innovaciones

Nivel de institucionalización	N	%
Indeterminado / ambiguo	62	50,4 %
Sin innovación	35	28,5 %
Sistematizada / institucionalizada	24	19,5 %
Implementación puntual	2	1,6 %
Total	**123**	**100 %**

Nota. Elaboración propia.

Es decir, en el grupo indeterminado, las prácticas se enuncian con un vocabulario repetitivo (modernización, proximidad, transparencia, optimización, etc.), pero sin especificar con qué mecanismos se sostienen en el tiempo. Por su parte, en los municipios sistematizados, se describe cómo se desarrollan las prácticas y se identifica a los actores, lo que invita a pensar en el marco de Meyer y Rowan (1977) para problematizar el mecanismo en cuestión. Este sostiene que las organizaciones adoptan estructuras que expresan adhesión a patrones institucionalizados y legítimos, de modo que la necesidad de legitimarse ante públicos externos incentiva la adopción, sin afectar necesariamente al desempeño. En lo que respecta

a los gobiernos locales en Argentina, las presiones isomórficas (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) son preponderantes. Las políticas nacionales, las redes de cooperación internacional y la comparación entre pares fomentan el uso de un discurso de gobierno digital y gobernanza abierta. Desde esta perspectiva, resulta más sencillo asumir el discurso que proponer la estructura requerida. Dadas las tendencias descriptas, se registran tres modalidades de innovación: a) innovación institucionalizada, que concentra a los 24 municipios (19,5 %) con innovaciones que presentan formalidad estructural y registros de continuidad, indicando estructuras organizacionales consolidadas; b) innovación adaptativa, perfil predominante que agrupa a los 64 municipios (52,0 %) cuyas innovaciones quedaron como indeterminadas o puntuales, y que corresponde a innovaciones reactivas, que se construyen sobre la marcha, en respuesta a la demanda y que se sostienen en articuladores relacionales, sin estructuras formales; y c) innovación performativa, que se vincula con los 35 municipios sin innovación reportada, entre los cuales conviven discursos de modernización, participación y transparencia sin los soportes institucionales subyacentes y casos de simple ausencia de iniciativas declaradas. Para esta clasificación, cada municipio se ubicó en el modo que mejor sintetiza su situación predominante. Por supuesto, los tres modos de innovación son construcciones permeables. La mayoría de los casos combina más de una modalidad.

La escala no basta para predecir la innovación

En la Tabla 4 se muestran las tasas de innovación reportadas por estrato municipal. Estas tasas cuestionan la idea de que los municipios más grandes con mayor cantidad de recursos tendrían necesariamente más innovación.

Tabla 4

Tasas de innovación por estrato poblacional

Estrato	Rango poblacional	Con innovación (%)	Sin innovación (%)
M1	> 250 000	71,4 %	28,6 %
M2	100 001–250 000	58,8 %	41,2 %
M3	50 001–100 000	80,8 %	19,2 %
M4	10 001–50 000	79,4 %	20,6 %
M5	5 001–10 000	72,7 %	27,3 %
M6	1–5 000	50,0 %	50,0 %

Nota. Elaboración propia.

M3 (50 000–100 000 hab.) lidera con el mayor porcentaje (80,8 %), aunque son solo 26 casos, y M4 (10 000–50 000 hab.) le sigue con 79,4 %. Los municipios M1 (> 250 000 hab.),

en cambio, apenas alcanzan 71,4 %, y las ciudades M2 (100 000–250 000 hab.) registran tan solo un 58,8 %, la tasa más baja después de la de M6 (50,0 %).

Se produce algo similar con los presupuestos: hay municipios con los presupuestos más altos per cápita (algunos con más de 200 000 pesos per cápita) que no declaran innovación, y hay varios municipios con los presupuestos más bajos per cápita (menos de 5 000 pesos per cápita) que mantienen iniciativas de innovación en curso. Barrancas (región Centro), con 166 millones de pesos de presupuesto anual, desarrolló un programa de separación y reciclado de residuos; Chamical (NOA), con cerca de 91 millones de pesos, digitalizó trámites administrativos y de servicios; Salliqueló (Pampeana) instaló un sistema automatizado de alumbrado público, coordinando con proveedores de servicios externos, sin contar con un numeroso equipo técnico propio.

Así, mientras en una gran ciudad M1 como Santiago del Estero, con carta orgánica, un aparato burocrático consolidado y un presupuesto importante, no se reportó ninguna innovación en el período analizado, una pequeña comuna M6 como Macachín, sin carta orgánica y con escaso personal, logró construir un plan de recolección diferenciada de residuos.

No obstante, no se trata de un dato atípico de la realidad argentina; por el contrario, consideramos que dialoga con la bibliografía internacional sobre tamaño e innovación. La relación positiva entre tamaño e innovación ya había sido discutida en el metaanálisis mencionado, en el que Damanpour (1992) muestra que depende del tipo de innovación, el rubro y la composición organizacional del caso, en lugar de ser una relación lineal en sí misma. Cuando se analizan específicamente las organizaciones públicas, Demircioglu y Audretsch (2019) comprueban que tampoco existe una relación estadísticamente significativa entre tamaño e innovación. En este sentido, la evidencia municipal argentina constituye un nuevo caso empírico que cuestiona la relación directa entre mayor tamaño y mayor innovación. Vale precisar, de todos modos, el alcance de esta lectura. Los datos permiten identificar diferencias entre estratos, aunque no establecer relaciones explicativas, y tampoco descartan la incidencia de las condiciones estructurales; en todo caso, dan cuenta de que esas condiciones no alcanzan por sí solas para anticipar qué municipios innovan.

Interpretando la paradoja

Hay tres razones posibles (complementarias) para entender este patrón. La primera es organizacional, porque las organizaciones grandes sufren costos de coordinación crecientes

(Downs, 1967), rigidez de procedimientos y acumulación de complejidad. Los grandes municipios tienen jerarquías estratificadas, reglamentaciones sindicales de asignación de personal y disputas políticas que vuelven conflictivo cualquier cambio organizacional; los medianos cuentan con recursos suficientes para sostener proyectos, con estructuras livianas que permiten redirigirlos con más agilidad.

La segunda razón son los incentivos políticos. En los grandes municipios, dado el volumen de servicios que se prestan, los logros de reformas aisladas pueden volverse invisibles. En los municipios medianos, en cambio, un sistema digital o un programa participativo exitoso resulta visible y políticamente imputable, lo que genera dividendos que motivan la inversión. Esto coincide con los estudios sobre desempeño que muestran la mayor importancia de la calidad de gestión y la movilización de recursos frente al tamaño organizacional (Boyne, 2003).

Una tercera explicación introduce la tesis central de este artículo: los municipios medianos permiten con mayor facilidad que los líderes políticos transformen recursos institucionales en acciones orientadas. La cadena jerárquica entre el intendente, los técnicos y la ciudadanía es más acotada y se reducen los costos de coordinación para implementar e instrumentar nuevas prácticas.

Restricciones estructurales y respuestas endógenas

El análisis de las restricciones evidencia cómo esta falta de ventajas se va sumando a lo largo de tres ejes: material (con bajo presupuesto per cápita y con un mínimo de personal), organizacional (con poca institucionalidad interna, procesos descontinuados y dependientes del liderazgo) y territorial (en regiones tradicionalmente postergadas como el NEA y NOA). Cuando la combinación de las tres limita a las localidades (dieciséis casos), se cierra todo espacio de posibilidades. Los procesos de innovación son descontinuados y sujetos a los cambios de gestión.

El mayor conjunto de municipios, cuarenta y nueve, presenta exclusivamente restricciones organizacionales, es decir, que la gestión en términos de recursos y contexto es favorable, pero los procesos son débiles y poco controlados. La debilidad organizacional se extiende a lo largo de toda la distribución de recursos hasta aquellos municipios relativamente favorecidos en recursos y personal. La minoría de municipios, veinte, no manifiesta restricciones (con estos indicadores), manteniendo procesos de innovación más sostenidos, respaldados por planes a mediano plazo y capacidad técnica incorporada. Por cierto, esta

minoría es reducida y, con esta construcción basada en el autorreporte, probablemente se tienda a la sobreestimación.

Hallazgos II: La agencia política como activación

Componentes de la capacidad de activación

La activación concierne a tres dimensiones del gobierno: activación ejecutiva, orientación estratégica y articulación con actores. Estas dimensiones dialogan con el trabajo de Pires y Gomide (2016) sobre arreglos de implementación, capacidades técnico-administrativas y político-relacionales, aunque aquí se apliquen a otro nivel de gobierno y a puntos de partida donde la fragilidad institucional es la regla.

La activación ejecutiva alude a la prioridad otorgada a la innovación en el gobierno, al liderazgo político y al tiempo adecuado para el desarrollo de estos procesos. En contextos de institucionalidad débil, el impacto del despacho del intendente es notorio para que los procesos innovadores se inicien y se sostengan en el tiempo. Los ocho gobiernos que iniciaron su gestión antes de 2015 cuentan con trayectorias más prolongadas y, por lo tanto, con mayores posibilidades de consolidar sus innovaciones, en tanto el tiempo transcurrido en el gobierno facilita el fortalecimiento de equipos, la maduración de procesos y la construcción de experiencia. En la misma dirección, de la codificación de las narrativas surge que solo 10 municipios (8,1 %) presentan una agencia legible en términos de planificación estratégica, frente a 77 (62,6 %) en los que la agencia aparece ambigua o insuficiente. Sin embargo, entre los 24 municipios con innovaciones sistematizadas, 9 (37,5 %) se asocian con planificación estratégica, una proporción que más que cuadruplica la del conjunto.

La orientación estratégica concierne a si la prioridad mencionada se halla presente como visión declarada, con dedicación de recursos específicos y generación de espacios para la experimentación colaborativa. Los resultados del cuestionario muestran una cascada sistemática, expuesta en la Tabla 5.

Tabla 5

Orientación estratégica hacia la innovación: distribución de niveles de acuerdo

Afirmación	Acuerdo bajo	Acuerdo medio	Acuerdo alto
"El gobierno tiene una visión clara que estimula la innovación"	7	46	69
"El gobierno destina recursos específicos a la innovación"	20	47	55
"El gobierno sostiene espacios de experimentación colaborativa"	47	41	34

Nota. Elaboración propia. N = 123 municipios. Un municipio se registró como "no definido" en cada ítem.

No es lo mismo proclamar una visión que destinar recursos, y no es lo mismo destinar recursos que sostener espacios de trabajo colaborativo. Es decir, existen distintos grados de compromiso. La distancia entre aquellos 69 municipios que en el autorreporte se adjudican un alto grado de acuerdo en torno a una clara visión para la innovación y los 34 municipios que reportan sostener espacios colaborativos de experimentación, en cierto modo, representa los pasos que debe dar la capacidad de activación.

Queda la tercera dimensión, el alcance relacional, que se registra en los vínculos con universidades, organizaciones de la sociedad civil, otras agencias y actores privados. Setenta y un municipios reportan niveles altos de involucramiento de actores diversos en el diseño e implementación de políticas. En cambio, si preguntamos por espacios de experimentación colaborativa sostenidos, ese número se reduce a 34 municipios. Y al cotejar los autorreportes con los datos narrativos, el porcentaje de casos documentados de práctica colaborativa sostenida se reduce a menos del 10 %.

Cuando la activación supera las restricciones estructurales

Reconquista (provincia de Santa Fe, estrato M3, 50 000–100 000 habitantes), con una gestión en el poder desde 2015, ilustra lo que el compromiso ejecutivo sostenido produce en la práctica. El municipio desarrolló un proceso de planificación participativa organizado en torno a reuniones vecinales que agregan demandas ciudadanas y reconfiguran prioridades, y así modifican las rutinas de intervención. Sin la estructura legal de un presupuesto participativo formal, opera de manera similar, pues enlaza actores y genera conocimiento situado, y así modifica cómo el aparato municipal toma decisiones. En Reconquista la clave fue mantener esa constancia. Hubo un trabajo de liderazgo político que le otorgó estructura

y aprendizaje simultáneamente. Se generó un círculo virtuoso en el que cada año las reuniones partieron desde el nivel de compromiso del año anterior, algo que implicó redefinir rutinas entre el personal técnico y prioridades para el Ejecutivo. La acumulación de tiempo organizacional hizo que el proceso fructificara en múltiples ciclos presupuestarios, resistiendo el punto en el que se suele desvanecer el impulso político inicial.

San Nicolás de los Arroyos (Buenos Aires) desarrolló un proceso diferente, que tomó elementos preexistentes (tránsito, obras públicas, espacios verdes) y los combinó en un nuevo sistema de atención ciudadana, con una línea de reclamos vinculada a esos servicios preexistentes bajo un esquema de atención al vecino. No se pensaron nuevos dispositivos, sino que se usaron los existentes bajo el nuevo enfoque. La definición estratégica estuvo a cargo del Poder Ejecutivo local y el soporte técnico le dio persistencia; por eso es un proceso sistematizado. Siguiendo a Meijer (2019), esa sistematización se debe a la institucionalización de las prácticas.

En Hernando (Córdoba), la estabilidad política (2015 en adelante) permite reconstruir una secuencia de planificación local a partir de registros de reuniones periódicas de planificación participativa con los actores locales. En este caso no existen dispositivos formales de un laboratorio, pero sí se opera de esa manera: se habilita la coordinación de los actores y la generación de conocimiento que transforma las prácticas de gestión. La clave en este caso es el tiempo de organización, la práctica sistemática que va conformando el capital de confianza.

En Resistencia (NEA, estrato M1, más de 250 000 habitantes) se implementó un programa informático de turnos en los servicios municipales; un proceso de modernización en toda su amplitud, pero sin un dispositivo de monitoreo, sin un equipo asignado y sin una política explícita al respecto. La política es difusa: existe un discurso de compromiso, pero no se tradujo en recursos ni en el soporte que lo consolide: un proyecto indefinido, implementado, pero no consolidado. El contraste con el caso de Reconquista, de tamaño bastante menor (en gasto y equipo), permite focalizar en la variable político-organizacional. En un caso se trata de un proceso consolidado a partir de la acumulación de prácticas; en el otro, de una acción única que no se profundiza, y la administración siguió adelante.

Estos cuatro casos, tres “activados” y uno “no activado” con mayores recursos, dan cuenta de que, dentro de una misma muestra y entre municipios con recursos similares o incluso mayores, como Resistencia frente a Reconquista, la capacidad de activación diverge. En Reconquista y Hernando pueden reconocerse la activación ejecutiva sostenida y la

articulación con actores locales; en San Nicolás, una orientación estratégica definida desde el Ejecutivo que se tradujo en soporte técnico; mientras que en Resistencia el compromiso declarado no llegó a traducirse en recursos asignados ni en un equipo responsable, por lo que la innovación quedó sin continuidad documentada.

La brecha entre aspiración y práctica como rasgo sistémico

Junto a cada dimensión de activación, se observa un patrón similar: existe una ruptura entre la articulación declarada y la documentada. En la dimensión de actores, por ejemplo, la autopercepción de un fuerte involucramiento de actores extralocales pocas veces se traduce en una especificación de mecanismos de colaboración. En la dimensión de dirección, una visión articulada apenas se relaciona con la especificación de decisiones de asignación de recursos. En la dimensión de la praxis, lejos de articularse, los relatos sobre espacios de experimentación describen más talleres y charlas puntuales que formas institucionales estables.

Ese abismo entre lo declarativo y lo documentado puede explicarse por la lógica isomórfica (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) mencionada en el apartado “Hallazgos I: la innovación registrada y la paradoja de escala”, en la que las narrativas de gobernanza participativa o innovación digital son moneda de cambio para el posicionamiento de legitimidad de los gobiernos locales.

En sí, esto habilita un modo específico del actuar innovador en el que los gobiernos tienen estructuras formales y compromisos retóricos, pero la praxis operativa no se modifica mayormente. Esa separación entre lo declarado y lo implementado se conoce como *decoupling* (desacoplamiento) (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) y se ha reportado en estudios comparados de gobierno abierto en América Latina (Grandinetti & Miller, 2020) o de reformas de gestión del desempeño en general (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). En el caso local argentino, cruzar el análisis de encuesta con la codificación narrativa permite precisar empíricamente dónde se produce ese *decoupling*.

Discusión

Tres hallazgos, un argumento

En suma, los tres hallazgos señalan que la capacidad local medida en recursos no se corresponde con la innovación. La paradoja del tamaño muestra que los *insumos* y dotaciones no alcanzan para anticipar los niveles de innovación: los municipios medianos reportan más innovación que los grandes pese a contar con menos *insumos* organizacionales

por cualquier indicador convencional. La brecha de institucionalización muestra que, aun cuando la innovación ocurre, rara vez se sistematiza como práctica organizacional estable. Que la innovación sistematizada alcance apenas el 19,5 % de los municipios se asocia con la alta rotación de las elites políticas, la fragilidad de las estructuras organizacionales y los designios isomórficos que impulsan la innovación discursiva por encima de la organizacional. Y el análisis de la agencia sugiere que lo que separa las innovaciones sistematizadas de las indeterminadas es, en buena medida, la capacidad de activación: un liderazgo político sostenido que traduce la visión en asignaciones de recursos y construye vínculos relacionales.

Proponemos, entonces, pensar la capacidad de gobierno local en términos dinámicos antes que como dotación, porque, según los datos, la activación aparece asociada a las condiciones institucionales que sostienen la innovación en el tiempo.

Implicancias para la teoría de la capacidad estatal

La concepción hegemónica para operacionalizar la capacidad de los gobiernos locales opera, equívocamente, con indicadores de recursos. La plantilla de personal, los montos presupuestarios y la autonomía institucional marcan el círculo de acciones posibles, pero no determinan qué acciones se toman, con qué regularidad ni con qué propósito. Según Bertranou (2015), la capacidad política y organizacional son las manifestaciones básicas de la capacidad estatal; sin embargo, el autor no especifica los elementos activadores de la agencia política sobre estas condiciones estructurales.

Se puede establecer una analogía similar con la *autonomía enraizada* (*embedded autonomy*; Evans, 1995) en el ámbito nacional. La combinación de un Estado socialmente integrado y a la vez aislado de la captura particularista genera una capacidad de desarrollo que no alcanzan ni la pura jerarquía ni el puro enraizamiento social. El equivalente local es un gobierno que recurre a universidades, sociedad civil y otros organismos, pero conserva la coherencia interna para orientarlos hacia un objetivo específico. Sin embargo, a diferencia de los Estados desarrollistas nacionales de Evans, la capacidad de activación es contingente. Requiere un liderazgo sostenido, que la política de los gobiernos locales en Argentina no siempre está en condiciones de proporcionar. Por lo tanto, los casos que presentan esta combinación particular (en nuestros datos, Reconquista, San Nicolás y Hernando) constituyen una minoría en la muestra y ayudan a identificar las condiciones particulares, difíciles de transferir, en las que la activación es posible.

Se puede establecer una segunda analogía con Pill (2024), quien defiende la multiplicidad y la relacionalidad de la capacidad estatal local, trascendiendo los recursos institucionales formales y considerando las prácticas cotidianas mediante las cuales los gobiernos locales interactúan con las comunidades. Nuestro marco se suma a ese enfoque relacional y especifica además mediante qué mecanismos políticos esas relaciones se concretan, algo que los contextos estructuralmente frágiles ilustran con particular claridad.

Esta interpretación se conecta, además, con la tradición de Pires y Gomide (2016, 2024). Frente a ese marco, construido sobre programas federales brasileños, este artículo aporta tres desplazamientos: lo aplica a un nivel de gobierno distinto y a un país con capacidades técnico-administrativas de partida sustancialmente menores; arroja luz sobre la falta de activación dentro de una muestra amplia de casos similares, en lugar de reconstruir el mecanismo a partir de casos ya exitosos; y lo descompone en tres dimensiones observables (activación ejecutiva, orientación estratégica y articulación con actores), en cada una de las cuales se mide la distancia entre lo declarado y lo documentado, lo que permite identificar en qué punto se interrumpe la activación.

Implicancias para la innovación pública en contextos periféricos

Concebir la innovación solo en términos de instituciones formales o programas certificados subestima la innovación en entornos de recursos limitados y la sobreestima en aquellos de recursos abundantes con arquitectura organizacional débil.

Que un frágil aparato organizacional se observe en todos los estratos de recursos, como muestran los cuarenta y nueve municipios con limitaciones exclusivamente organizacionales (apartado “Restricciones estructurales y respuestas endógenas”), es una constatación importante. La limitación más extendida para la innovación sostenible parece residir, entonces, en el desarrollo organizacional antes que en el volumen de financiamiento. Esa arquitectura es difícil de desarrollar por otra razón: la innovación sostenible requiere a la vez explotar conocimientos existentes (mantener servicios garantizados) y explorar nuevas soluciones, un desafío bien ilustrado por el concepto de capacidades ambidiestras (Grandinetti, 2020). La escasa institucionalización que revela este estudio podría deberse tanto a la insuficiencia de recursos como a la dificultad de sostener ese doble requisito. Los programas de fortalecimiento de capacidades deberían dirigirse a esa limitante. Este razonamiento, formulado para programas nacionales de fortalecimiento de capacidades (Andrews et al., 2017), parece válido también a nivel municipal.

No basta con que exista agencia política; es crucial que sea de calidad y con un enfoque orientado al largo plazo. De La O (2024) identifica gobiernos locales clientelistas en México dedicados sistemáticamente a la creación de burocracias poco calificadas, capaces de desarrollar políticas distributivas, pero no en condiciones de sostener políticas de desarrollo; una trampa burocrática que refuerza las condiciones de su propia reproducción. Activar la capacidad requiere liderazgos capaces de priorizar el aprendizaje organizacional sobre el sesgo de ganancia política a corto plazo.

Limitaciones y agenda de investigación futura

Estos hallazgos tienen limitaciones. El uso de información autorreportada sesga al alza las tasas de innovación. Este sesgo se ha atenuado mediante la codificación narrativa; sin embargo, no fue posible verificar parte de la información documental disponible. No ha sido posible hacer un análisis formal de los no respondientes, lo que limita las conclusiones sobre la representatividad de los hallazgos a la cobertura por estrato y región reportada en el texto. A ello se suma que, al no atribuirse innovaciones a los casos que no las declararon, puede subestimarse la innovación en estructuras grandes, en las que el entrevistado puede tener una visión parcial del aparato municipal; de allí que las diferencias por estrato deban leerse como tendencias. El periodo del estudio (2015–2020) no cubre el periodo de pandemia, que condujo a una reorganización institucional importante a nivel municipal. Analizar la permanencia de la paradoja de escala en condiciones de emergencia es un asunto para trabajos futuros. Por último, dado el carácter exploratorio del diseño, las asociaciones entre activación e institucionalización no habilitan afirmaciones causales; contrastarlas requeriría diseños longitudinales o comparaciones sistemáticas de casos.

El enfoque de capacidad de activación propuesto en el presente trabajo ofrece un mecanismo, sin determinar las condiciones que lo originan. Comprender la manera en que los intendentes construyen las condiciones organizacionales para la activación, qué intervenciones favorecen la aceleración del proceso y hasta qué punto las rotaciones de liderazgos corroen sistemáticamente la capacidad de activación son líneas de interés para investigaciones futuras. La comparación con países federales con sistemas municipales fragmentados (Brasil, México, India) puede contribuir a comprender si la forma en que la literatura de *arranjos de implementação* lo describe tiene correlatos en otros sistemas municipales.

Conclusión

En síntesis, el grado de innovación que reportan los municipios relevados excede los pronósticos que la literatura sobre fragilidad institucional anticiparía y se diferencia de los indicadores de recursos de capacidad. Concretamente, el 71,5 % de los municipios relevados reportó haber realizado algún tipo de innovación en políticas o acciones, incluidos municipios de menos de 5 000 habitantes y con presupuestos anuales por debajo de los 100 millones de pesos.

Sin embargo, la innovación reportada no se asemeja a la institucionalizada, que arrojó una tasa de sistematización del 19,5 % sobre el total relevado (27,3 % entre los municipios que innovan). Estas innovaciones reportadas son mayoritariamente episódicas, dispersas o atadas a la permanencia de algunos actores políticos iniciales en el proceso.

A partir de los datos puede sugerirse que es la capacidad de activación la que acorta la brecha entre la innovación reportada y la institucionalizada. Reconquista y San Nicolás ilustran cómo la activación puede habilitar procesos de innovación que se institucionalizan y se sostienen.

En definitiva, tomar la activación de capacidades como un factor clave implica repensar cómo entendemos y medimos la capacidad estatal local: desde las agendas de investigación (enfatizando mucho más en el análisis longitudinal y por procesos de la capacidad organizacional fortalecida) hasta las políticas públicas (enfatizando mucho más en la arquitectura organizacional, más allá de las transferencias técnicas).

Lo más destacado que nos aportó esta investigación fue constatar que los municipios medianos (M3 y M4) reportan tasas de innovación superiores a las de los grandes centros urbanos, mientras que los más pequeños (M6) presentan la más baja, algo que quizás responda a la dinámica organizacional que promueve el aprendizaje y el liderazgo político en jurisdicciones de escala intermedia. El diálogo con Pires y Gomide (2016, 2024), que inspiró este análisis, nos lleva a preguntarnos si la activación opera también en otros niveles de gobierno y contextos nacionales de la región.

Declaración de conflicto de intereses

El autor declara no tener ningún conflicto de intereses potencial.

Financiamiento

Esta investigación se realizó en el marco del Programa PISAC-COVID 19, financiado por la Agencia Nacional de Promoción de la Investigación, el Desarrollo Tecnológico y la Innovación (Agencia I+D+i). El autor desarrolló este trabajo durante una beca doctoral del CONICET.

Declaración de disponibilidad de datos

El conjunto de datos de los 123 municipios argentinos relevados en el marco del Programa PISAC-COVID 19 (2021–2022) está disponible en el repositorio institucional del CONICET (CONICET Digital): http://hdl.handle.net/11336/284797.

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Cómo citar este artículo:
Rodríguez, E. D. (2026). De la dotación a la práctica: activación e innovación pública en municipios argentinos. *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 219-248. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a946

REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a973

Why Do Local Governments Enter Into Cooperative Intermunicipal Agreements?[1]

¿Por qué los gobiernos locales celebran acuerdos de cooperación intermunicipales?

Por que os governos locais celebram acordos de cooperação intermunicipal?

Recibido: 07/08/2026 - Aceptado: 05/11/2026

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Tipología del artículo: investigación.

Abstract

Intermunicipal collaboration enables local governments to address collective action problems that transcend jurisdictional boundaries while preserving local autonomy. The conditions that encourage collaboration may vary according to the purpose and transaction costs of cooperative arrangements. This paper examines the factors associated with Mexican municipalities' participation in three types of intermunicipal agreements: urban planning; programming, funding, and execution of public works; and common service delivery. Using data from Mexico's National Census of Municipal Governments and Territorial Demarcations of Mexico City (CNGMD), the study presents multivariable logistic regression models incorporating metropolitan and urban status, fiscal capacity, socioeconomic conditions,

1 The authors wish to acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the preparation of this article. *Consensus* was used to help identify peer-reviewed academic papers for the literature review. *NotebookLM* was used to assist in organizing and reviewing the referenced literature. *ChatGPT 5.6 Sol* was used to generate the abstract and translate text into Portuguese. All AI-generated and assisted content was revised, corrected, and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the manuscript's final version.

economic output, population, and population density. Results show that intermunicipal collaboration is task-specific rather than a uniform institutional response. Metropolitan location and economic capacity facilitate cooperation in planning and public works, whereas urban status is particularly relevant for planning and shared services. Socioeconomically marginalized municipalities are less likely to participate in planning and service delivery agreements, but more likely to enter into public works agreements. Additionally, greater municipal revenue reduces incentives to share services. These findings extend institutional collective action theory by showing that collaboration depends on the interaction between transaction costs, municipal capacity, socioeconomic need, and the specific function being jointly undertaken.

Keywords: intermunicipal collaboration, institutional collective action, local governments, metropolitan governance, transaction costs

Resumen

La colaboración intermunicipal permite a los gobiernos locales atender problemas de acción colectiva que trascienden sus límites jurisdiccionales sin renunciar a su autonomía. Las condiciones que incentivan la colaboración pueden variar según el propósito y los costos de transacción de los acuerdos celebrados. Este estudio examina los factores asociados a la participación de los municipios mexicanos en tres tipos de acuerdos intermunicipales: planeación urbana; programación, financiamiento y ejecución de obras públicas; y prestación de servicios comunes. Utilizando datos del Censo Nacional de Gobiernos Municipales y Demarcaciones Territoriales de la Ciudad de México (CNGMD), se estimaron modelos de regresión logística múltiple que incorporan la condición metropolitana y urbana, capacidad fiscal, condiciones socioeconómicas, producción económica, población y densidad poblacional. Los resultados muestran que la colaboración intermunicipal depende del tipo de actividad. La localización metropolitana y la capacidad económica favorecen la cooperación en planeación y obra pública, mientras que la condición urbana resulta particularmente relevante para la planeación y los servicios compartidos. Los municipios marginados socioeconómicamente tienen menos probabilidades de participar en acuerdos de planificación y prestación de servicios, pero más probabilidades de cooperar en acuerdos de obras públicas. Asimismo, unos mayores ingresos municipales reducen los incentivos para compartir servicios. Estos hallazgos amplían la teoría de Acción Colectiva Institucional al mostrar que la colaboración depende de la interacción entre costos de transacción, capacidad municipal, necesidad socioeconómica y función compartida.

Palabras clave: colaboración intermunicipal, acción colectiva institucional, gobiernos locales, gobernanza metropolitana, costos de transacción.

Resumo

A colaboração intermunicipal permite que os governos locais enfrentem problemas de ação coletiva que ultrapassam seus limites jurisdicionais, preservando simultaneamente sua autonomia. As condições que incentivam a colaboração podem variar conforme a finalidade e os custos de transação dos acordos. Este estudo examina os fatores associados à participação dos municípios mexicanos em três tipos de acordos intermunicipais: planejamento urbano; programação, financiamento e execução de obras públicas; e prestação de serviços comuns. Utilizando dados do Censo Nacional de Governos Municipais e Demarcações Territoriais da Cidade do México (CNGMD), foram estimados modelos de regressão logística múltipla que incorporam condição metropolitana e urbana, capacidade fiscal, condições socioeconômicas, produção econômica, população e densidade populacional. Os resultados mostram que a colaboração intermunicipal depende do tipo de atividade. A localização metropolitana e a capacidade econômica favorecem a cooperação em planejamento e obras públicas, enquanto a condição urbana é particularmente relevante para o planejamento e os serviços compartilhados. Municípios socioeconomicamente marginalizados apresentam menor probabilidade de participar de acordos de planejamento e prestação de serviços, mas maior probabilidade de cooperar em acordos para obras públicas. Além disso, receitas municipais mais elevadas reduzem os incentivos para o compartilhamento de serviços. Esses resultados ampliam a teoria da Ação Coletiva Institucional ao mostrar que a colaboração depende da interação entre custos de transação, capacidade municipal, necessidade socioeconômica e função compartilhada.

Palavras-chave: colaboração intermunicipal; ação coletiva institucional; governos locais; governança metropolitana; custos de transação.

Introduction

The wave of decentralization and devolution of processes from central to local governments in Latin America has been intended to strengthen democracy and facilitate context-specific delivery of public services (Ramírez de la Cruz, 2026). However, decentralizing authority to the local level in urban areas produces spillovers and creates challenges for achieving economies

of scale (Grin & Abrucio, 2018; Warner, 2017). Responses to these institutional collective action dilemmas have varied widely across the globe (Tavares & Feiock, 2018). These trends toward decentralization and devolution to subnational governments are reflected across Latin America. Many of Latin America's largest metropolises face significant governance challenges due to excessive fragmentation, with monocentric metropolitan regions constituting the exception, either by intentional design (Lima) or because of the historical dominance of the central city (Bogotá) (Ramírez de la Cruz, 2026).

Although some aspects of metropolitan governance problems in Latin America resemble those in the Global North, others are unique. For example, limited professionalization, particularly in less developed cities; spoils systems; corruption; limited financial resources; national government involvement; and political risk aversion among local officials are often more salient in urban regions of Latin America than in developed countries. One focus of the institutional collective action (ICA) approach has been identifying factors that influence municipalities' choices of collaboration mechanisms. Efforts to increase local capacity, leverage economies of scale, and improve local service delivery have spawned various different arrangements for the organization and governance of metropolitan areas, ranging from highly decentralized to consolidated systems.

Intermunicipal collaboration agreements in Latin America have the potential to create networks of horizontal interactions among local governments, fostering collaboration and information exchange among public managers. These networks provide both collaborative and informational benefits, building trust and reciprocity, reducing risks, and lowering future cooperation costs, thereby enhancing local government performance even beyond the intermunicipal agreements' primary goal. The specific benefits sought often include achieving cost efficiency through economies of scale, pooling resources, specialization, and reducing implementation costs for public services (Muraoka & Avellaneda, 2021).

Local governments establish intermunicipal collaboration agreements for a variety of reasons, often rooted in pursuing efficiency, internalizing externalities, mitigating risks, leveraging existing relationships, responding to external mandates or influences, reinforcing interlocal economic competitiveness, and preserving local autonomy. These agreements, a vital part of local governments' strategies, allow jurisdictions to address shared challenges and achieve mutual benefits (Bel et al., 2024). Cooperation, particularly through municipal agreements, is pursued as a flexible means to preserve autonomy and avoid more rigid

forms of integration, such as full consolidation. Although consolidation can address collective action problems, it often faces political resistance and entails a loss of local control. The ICA framework helps explain these motivations by emphasizing how local governments weigh the costs and benefits of cooperation within their specific institutional, social, and political contexts (Bel et al., 2024; Fan et al., 2026; Feiock, 2007, 2009; Hansen et al., 2020; Woods & Bowman, 2018).

The ICA framework posits that local governments act as rational agents, pursuing mutually beneficial agreements and aligning priorities only when expected benefits outweigh the transaction costs of collaboration (Bel et al., 2024; Castillo, 2019). Transaction costs manifest in intermunicipal collaboration as decision costs involving information search and negotiation to reconcile conflicting development goals (Carr & Hawkins, 2013). They also include autonomy costs associated with ceding control over local decisions, such as urban planning, as well as “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) opposition to projects and fear of “outsider” influence (Ramírez et al., 2022; Tricaud, 2025). Additionally, division costs emerge as barriers to the equitable sharing of project expenses among partners (Carr & Hawkins, 2013; Davis & Gough, 2019), and administrative intensity increases through the organizational costs of governing complex regional institutions (Aldag et al., 2020; Carr & Hawkins, 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2012).

Complexity and asset specificity also translate into transaction costs. The former appears as measurement difficulty, where hard-to-quantify outcomes create information that require expensive monitoring systems and restrictive contracts, leading public officials to retain in-house production to maintain better control over service quality (Carr & Hawkins, 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2012). Asset specificity manifests when specialized investments, such as unique sites, technical skills, or dedicated infrastructure, cannot be easily redeployed for other uses. Specialized assets create bilateral monopolies that lock partners into relationships that escalate free-riding risks and potential vendor opportunism (Carr & Hawkins, 2013). To mitigate these frictions, municipalities rely on institutional frameworks such as detailed contracts and regional governance bodies, as well as social capital and professional networks, which foster trust and reciprocity and lower negotiation and enforcement burdens (Carr & Hawkins, 2013; Mikušová Meričková et al., 2026; Robb et al., 2023). Furthermore, planning and financial centralization can also mitigate these burdens by absorbing research and contractual risks, as costs rise with jurisdictional fragmentation and a higher number of partners (Aldag et al., 2020; Davis & Gough, 2019).

Formal rules and positive economic or legal incentives can help reduce transaction costs, but they remain contingent on informal political relationships and the willingness of local actors to comply. Partisan rivalry or personal conflict prompts local officials to exploit institutional ambiguities to protect their jurisdictional autonomy or avoid shared responsibilities despite attractive economic incentives (Cabrero Mendoza, 2010; González-Vázquez et al., 2024). Likewise, institutional mandates alone do not guarantee institutional compliance. It requires supportive informal political conditions and mutual alignment that motivate leaders to voluntarily commit to joint decision-making and collaborative governance (Eisenstadt, 2004; Pírez, 2025). Therefore, the effectiveness of formal intermunicipal rules hinges on informal trust, political willingness, and aligned incentives among participating authorities.

In Latin America, a primary driver for cooperation has been the pursuit of cost efficiency and resource optimization (Muraoka & Avellaneda, 2021). Municipalities often face insufficient human and material resources, limiting their capacity to respond to local demands on their own. These agreements allow them to reduce implementation costs through economies of scale, resource pooling, and specialization, making public service provision more efficient (Muraoka & Avellaneda, 2021). This applies to capital-intensive projects such as infrastructure, land development, or recreational amenities that might be infeasible for a single municipality, reducing per capita costs and standardizing services. Such joint efforts can also create jobs and alleviate negative economic conditions (Bel et al., 2024). In Brazil, for instance, cooperative provision of services such as social assistance, culture, and housing has been shown to be less expensive than standalone provision, particularly benefiting smaller and medium-sized local governments by boosting their technical and financial capacities (Muraoka & Avellaneda, 2021).

In summary, our research investigates the determinants and effects of intermunicipal collaboration, first from a general perspective and then from the specific case of the Mexican experience. There is already a substantial body of literature on specific cases that have produced valuable insights on the dynamics of interlocal collaboration in contexts such as Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, and Chile (Arias-Yurisch et al., 2019, 2024; Carrera Hernández, 2005; Castillo, 2019; Cravacuore, 2025; Grin & Abrucio, 2017; López-Rodríguez, 2021; Mendo Gutiérrez, 2016; Meza et al., 2018; Muraoka & Avellaneda, 2021; Ramírez de la Cruz, 2012, 2026; Rodríguez-Oreggia & Tuirán Gutiérrez, 2006). This paper addresses a central question: Why do Mexican municipalities choose to enter into collaboration agreements with other municipalities? This research expands our understanding of the various forms of intermunicipal cooperation and their causes in Latin America. Using an

underexplored data source from the National Census of Municipal Governments and Territorial Demarcations of Mexico City, we examine how transaction costs relate to local government collaboration patterns in developing contexts.

Intermunicipal Collaboration in Mexico

Mexico has 92 metropolitan areas that include 421 municipalities, which are home to 65.5% of the country's population (Consejo Nacional de Población [CONAPO], 2023). In this context, the study aims to understand the creation of intermunicipal association agreements for territorial development, which, in turn, seek to fulfill three purposes: strengthen urban planning processes; program, fund, and execute activities and works; and deliver common services.

The creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the country's interdependence with the United States forced it to adopt new regional development policies. NAFTA and the accelerated growth of Mexican urban areas led to the adoption of decentralization policies, with negative effects in rural areas, including the fragmentation of localities, environmental deterioration, and social inequalities. These negative consequences have created regional disparities that require the federal government's participation to support territorial planning and urban development (Gobierno de México, 2021).

In strict legal terms, the federal government adopts and implements land-use regulations and strategies to foster the rational use of land to advance the comprehensive development of the country. This strategy seeks to define strategic metropolitan zones (geographically and conceptually) to foster national economic development and reduce regional inequalities. Likewise, it is intended to create activities for the sustainable development of the country, based on its natural resources, productive activities, and the equilibrium between human settlements and their environmental conditions. It is also meant to propose rules for the provision of infrastructure, equipment, and essential installations for the development of the country's regions (Congreso de la Unión, 2016). According to the National Census of Local Governments and Territorial Demarcations of Mexico City (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2022a), of the 2,469 municipalities existing in 2020, only 392 (16%) carried out activities in urban planning, urban development, and territorial management. These activities, aligned with the national strategy established in the General Law on Human Settlements, Territorial Management and Urban Development, are reflected in the Census as three forms of intermunicipal coordination: urban planning; programming, funding, and execution of activities and works; and common services provision.

Article 115 of the Mexican Constitution grants local governments the authority to coordinate and associate with each other to improve public services. This was expanded in 1999 to allow associations between municipalities from different states, subject to approval by state legislatures. However, implementing this constitutional right depends heavily on state legislation, which may pose a significant barrier (Carrera Hernández, 2005; Rodríguez-Oreggia & Tuirán Gutiérrez, 2006). In many cases, state legislation restricts municipal autonomy by requiring state legislative approval for associations within the same state (Carrera Hernández, 2005). In addition, intermunicipal coordination in Mexico aligns mainly with the federal government's vision of land development, ingrained in the General Law on Human Settlements, Territorial Management and Urban Development (Congreso de la Unión, 2016) or the National Program for Territorial Management and Urban Development (Gobierno de México, 2021).

Several internal factors within municipalities act as incentives or deterrents to collaboration under this legal arrangement. Economic benefits are a primary incentive, as joint action can create economies of scale, eliminate duplication, and enable investments in infrastructure and technology that single municipalities could not afford. Financial pressure, such as high debt levels, also increases the likelihood that a municipality will seek cooperative arrangements (Rodríguez-Oreggia & Tuirán Gutiérrez, 2006). The availability of information, technical assistance, and training from national or international organizations serves as another significant incentive. External support, such as federal funds from programs like the Fondo Metropolitano (Metropolitan Fund), also encourages cooperation (Ramírez de la Cruz, 2012; Rodríguez-Oreggia & Tuirán Gutiérrez, 2006).

Mexican municipalities also often cooperate to address complex metropolitan and regional problems that no single jurisdiction can solve (Ramírez de la Cruz, 2012). For instance, in metropolitan areas, urban growth, functions, and activities physically and functionally integrate several municipalities, making coordinated planning essential. In the Guadalajara Metropolitan Area, municipalities collaborated on a territorial ordering plan (POTmet) to address a 33-year institutional lag and build a shared vision for the city, focusing on sustainability, housing, and infrastructure. This type of collaboration is considered necessary to achieve sustainable human settlements and requires cooperation among local authorities, the private sector, and social representatives (Mendo Gutiérrez, 2016).

Furthermore, institutions and other external political incentives can encourage collaboration. State legislation favorable to intermunicipal associations has been shown

to increase the likelihood of municipalities cooperating (Rodríguez-Oreggia & Tuirán Gutiérrez, 2006). Also, intermunicipal agreements can serve as a strategy to strengthen local governments' institutional and political influence. By working together, municipalities can become more effective negotiators with state and federal authorities, fostering a more balanced model of intergovernmental relations (Carrera Hernández, 2005). This collective action enhances their ability to manage complex metropolitan challenges, from coordinating land-use planning to promoting regional economic development and addressing social disparities (Mendo Gutiérrez, 2016; Ramírez de la Cruz, 2012). The goal is often to create a shared metropolitan vision and uniform policies that can address regional issues, which individual municipalities cannot address alone (Mendo Gutiérrez, 2016).

On the other hand, numerous factors hinder intermunicipal collaboration in Mexico, including legal frameworks, political dynamics, subnational administrative capacities, and socioeconomic disparities. The first obstacle is the inherent nature of local governments as self-contained, decision-making institutions. Each municipality develops its own institutionalized set of practices, rules, and ideologies tailored to its specific jurisdiction. These internal structures are resistant to change, especially when imposed from the outside. Collaboration is often not an available option within these established rules, meaning a "willingness to collaborate" cannot simply be activated when priorities align. Attempts to force collaboration through legal means or external incentives often fail if they do not develop from within the known institutional rules of the participating governments (Castillo, 2019).

Although formal rules can help reduce transaction costs, they do not automatically increase the chances of collaboration. Decentralization in Mexico is an example of this. The 1999 constitutional reform did not correct the asymmetrical institutional architecture that made municipalities dependent on fiscal centralism (Cabrero Mendoza, 2010). This heterogeneity favored increased jurisdictional fragmentation, differences in administrative capabilities and rising negotiation costs among governments that cannot contribute equally to shared responsibilities (Arellano Ríos, 2025). Rather than mitigating collective action dilemmas through voluntary intermunicipal agreements, decentralization created new incentives to shield territories from free-riding and protect earmarked financial transfers in an environment of fiscal dependence. Decentralization ended up encouraging institutional autarky and territorial defense, creating a system of "multiplied centralisms" that obstructs enduring intermunicipal collaboration. The basis of this multiplicity is a problem of “barbed-wire federalism”, where authorities at each jurisdictional level maximize their own narrow autonomy and isolate their

territories (Cabrero Mendoza, 2010).

State and municipal administrative capacities shape the viability and endurance of intermunicipal collaboration and influence institutional limits to joint-governance initiatives. Subnational jurisdictions need to accompany authority devolution with capacity-building strategies that bridge bureaucratic performance gaps at least within the same state (Cabrero Mendoza, 2004, 2010). Metropolitan municipalities, for example, often have access to university-trained staff and better technical planning bodies, whereas small and rural municipalities lack these and other resources, such as clear regulatory frameworks and digital management systems. Fiscal centralism and heavy reliance on transfers further restrict municipal autonomy and make it difficult for them to commit funds for long-term regional infrastructure. Altogether, capacity shortcomings reduce the municipalities' ability to negotiate, implement and uphold long-lasting collaboration agreements (Cabrero Mendoza, 2004, 2010).

Furthermore, differences in economic, social, and institutional capacities create substantial barriers to cooperation (Rodríguez-Oreggia & Tuirán Gutiérrez, 2006). Collaboration is less likely when municipalities have dissimilar decision-making institutions and management capabilities, as this can lead to divergent priorities and a risk of miscommunication. This problem is particularly acute in metropolitan areas, where wealthier jurisdictions are often resistant to redistributive policies that would subsidize poorer ones, making it difficult to address issues such as social development, housing, and health on a regional scale (Castillo, 2019; Ward et al., 2015).

Political factors also play a crucial role in obstructing collaboration. The desire to maintain local autonomy and control is strong, and political actors, as well as homeowners, often resist urban consolidation efforts, fearing a loss of influence on public works (Castillo, 2019; Ramírez et al., 2022). Partisan politics and rivalries frequently undermine cooperative initiatives, as local political leaders prioritize power continuity and electoral survival over regional efficiency. Rival parties across neighboring jurisdictions often fear that joint governance will expose their voters to policies from other municipalities, possibly influencing a change in their electoral preferences (Pírez, 2025). Contiguity is important to copartisan networks because fiscal support and policy decisions spread faster across politically aligned neighbors, prompting rivals to resist their advance through isolation and institutional blockages (Benton, 2026; Varela Álvarez & Barral Buceta, 2025).

Across horizontal collaboration, municipalities exhibit greater willingness to associate when dealing with shared service provision and regional externalities, but agreeing on the terms

can be difficult if local councils are dominated by different parties with contrasting views on redistribution, local taxation, and development (Unda-Gutiérrez & Reyes, 2024). At any branch of local government, persistent political conflict and partisan distrust hinder policy incentives, leading local governments to establish and preserve strict jurisdictional fragmentation despite the clear economic advantages of coordination (Arellano Ríos, 2025; Cabrero Mendoza, 2010). But even when political circumstances seem favorable, collaboration is not guaranteed; for example, when the same party governed most municipalities in the Guadalajara Metropolitan Area from 2006–2009, little progress was made on metropolitan issues (Mendo Gutiérrez, 2016). Furthermore, political incentives are often short-term, and collaborative projects that do not yield results within a single mayoral term are politically unattractive, leading to short-lived agreements that new administrations do not renew, as seen in the Puebla metropolitan area (Carrera Hernández, 2005; Castillo, 2019; Ward et al., 2015).

The legal and institutional framework for intermunicipal collaboration is often inadequate. Much state-level legislation restricts local governments' autonomy to associate, creating a significant obstacle to developing and consolidating intermunicipal bodies (Carrera Hernández, 2005). The absence of clear legal guidelines, instruments, and mechanisms for the formalization and operation of these associations is also a problem. Although reforms in 1999 improved the conditions for fostering collaboration, an aversion to it persists, indicating that addressing legal challenges alone is insufficient (Carrera Hernández, 2005; Castillo, 2019).

Finally, poverty, financial and technical deficiencies, and a lack of trained personnel weaken the municipalities' decision-making institutions and isolate them (Carrera Hernández, 2005, 2016; Rodríguez-Oreggia & Tuirán Gutiérrez, 2006). Municipalities often have limited financial capacity and depend heavily on federal transfers, with little margin to invest in collaborative projects aligned with their own priorities. This lack of resources and institutional capacity makes it difficult for them to engage in the complex, long-term work required for successful intermunicipal cooperation (Carrera Hernández, 2005, 2016).

In summary, collaboration is a way to address complex problems that transcend municipal boundaries, particularly in metropolitan areas. This is reflected in shared motivations to tackle issues such as urban planning, infrastructure, and the provision of common services on a regional scale. However, municipalities often have limited financial and human resources, making collaboration a way to achieve economies of scale, pool resources, and reduce implementation costs for public services. Additionally, external factors can also encourage

collaboration in Mexico. In general, municipalities are often dependent on financial transfers and grants from higher levels of government, and incentives from central governments can motivate them to cooperate. In both regions, a key driver of collaboration is the desire to preserve local autonomy by choosing a flexible, collaborative approach over a more rigid, politically challenging full consolidation.

Hypotheses

Initiating collaborations requires significant financial, human, and technical resources. Although large differences in prosperity between communities can hinder cooperation, in some contexts, higher gross domestic product per capita can be positively associated with intermunicipal cooperation. Paradoxically, economic competition among municipalities can also foster collaboration, because local governments that pursue development policies more intensively are more likely to form joint ventures to find efficient and less burdensome ways to achieve their economic goals (Chung & Deslatte, 2026; Hansen et al., 2020; Ki, 2023; Meza et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the economic output of the formal economy (often proxied by the share of the population employed in a legal, taxed business and fiscal capacity) is a major driver for collaboration when municipalities seek to exploit economies of scale. By aggregating production volume, municipalities can dilute high fixed costs and lower marginal expenses for capital-intensive services like water provision and drainage. This allows fragmented jurisdictions to overcome technical inefficiencies and address negative externalities (Ramírez de la Cruz, 2026). Geographically, the agglomeration of industries and the embeddedness of production and services create regional spillovers and externalities that demand integrated governance (Feiock, 2007). Likewise, the industrial structure of space creates needs across municipal borders that encourage collaboration on issues such as zoning compatibility, infrastructure and utility expansion, and pollution management (Hawkins et al., 2016). The development of a regional economy creates incentives to maintain an attractive business environment, in which investors, owners, and chief executive officers also become political actors demanding solutions to basic public problems (Hawkins et al., 2016). This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The higher a municipality’s economic output, the more likely it is to enter into collaboration agreements, given the pressures of economic forces.

Fiscal dependence on central or state governments also motivates collaboration, as municipalities often rely on transfers and grants, and central government incentives can induce cooperation (Muraoka & Avellaneda, 2021). Thus, the relationship between collaboration and municipal revenue can be interpreted in different ways. One perspective suggests that a greater capacity to generate revenue may enhance a municipality's ability and willingness to engage in intermunicipal collaboration by reducing its dependence on higher-level resources (Meza et al., 2018). There is, however, an alternative view that suggests that a higher rate of local revenue could actually decrease the likelihood of collaboration. This might occur because larger governments, often with more resources, may feel less compelled to collaborate, believing they can undertake initiatives independently, while smaller communities with limited capacity may be more reliant on collaboration (Ki, 2023; Meza et al., 2018). This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The larger the municipal revenue of a municipality, the more collaborative the municipality will be.

Mexico's metropolitan phenomenon has evolved in multiple ways. Some urban areas have grown by expanding into adjacent municipalities, driven by high population density, economic vitality, and the supply of common public goods and services. Other urban areas remain constrained by municipal borders but stay relevant as population and political centers. Geographical proximity and shared socio-territorial characteristics are strong motivators. Municipal associations are often formed around shared concerns and proximity (Muraoka & Avellaneda, 2021). Being part of an urban agglomeration increases the likelihood of cooperation due to a heightened perception of common problems and the potential for spillover effects, as evidenced in contexts like Bahia, Brazil, and Santiago, Chile (Arias-Yurisch et al., 2019, 2024; Ramírez de la Cruz, 2026). Another reason is fragmented governance, which creates collective action dilemmas and externalities that transcend local boundaries (Bel et al., 2024; Fan et al., 2026; Feiock, 2007; Hansen et al., 2020; Ki, 2023). Such reasons foster a common operational understanding of problems and approaches to solutions.

Due to geographic proximity, the interconnectedness of issues in metropolitan areas reduces information costs, provides frequent opportunities for interaction, and fosters social capital, trust, and norms of reciprocity among officials, making it easier to negotiate and sustain agreements, as well as mitigating the risks of opportunism or conflict. This leads to the next hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Municipalities within metropolitan areas are more likely to collaborate than those outside metropolitan areas.

Urban municipalities are also more likely to collaborate, given that they have broader needs and more resources to enter into collaborative agreements, a point already reflected in Hypothesis 3, which explains why geographic proximity entices collaboration. The institutional collective action framework posits that local governments engage in cooperation when potential benefits outweigh the transaction costs of bargaining, information, agency, division, and enforcement. Furthermore, the need to mitigate collaboration risks also favors more formal and binding mechanisms, which are seen as less politically costly and more flexible alternatives to full governmental consolidation, while still addressing shared problems (Bel et al., 2024; Chung & Deslatte, 2026; Feiock, 2007; Hansen et al., 2020; Shrestha & Feiock, 2011). Their broader needs and greater resources reduce transaction costs, making formal, binding mechanisms more attractive. From this, we can derive:

Hypothesis 4: Urban municipalities are more likely to engage in collaborative agreements than nonurban municipalities.

Densely populated municipalities often face complex challenges across service delivery and resource management, necessitating greater intermunicipal cooperation. Issues such as traffic, waste management, and urban planning may require coordinated efforts beyond a single municipality. Therefore, they cooperate at higher rates because they are often "full-service" cities capable of selling excess service capacity to less developed, neighboring jurisdictions. This implies that while formal collaboration agreements might be less frequent, other forms of cooperation could still be prevalent in denser areas. Additionally, geographic proximity among local governments, common in densely populated metropolitan areas, generally facilitates intermunicipal collaboration by providing more opportunities for formal and informal interaction, information exchange, and the development of strong network ties and social capital. These close relationships can also reduce transaction costs and foster a shared understanding, thereby promoting joint ventures (Bel et al., 2024; Shrestha & Feiock, 2011). From this, we can derive:

Hypothesis 5: The more densely populated a municipality is, the more likely it is to enter into collaboration.

Smaller jurisdictions are normally more inclined to collaborate because they seek to

achieve economies of scale, reduce costs, or compensate for their limited capacity to provide extensive services on their own. Conversely, larger local governments are less likely to collaborate as they tend to possess more resources and may prefer to operate autonomously. Additionally, the similarity in population size among potential partners facilitates interlocal cooperation, as it can reduce informational and divisional transaction costs and suggest shared economic agendas and policy preferences, aligning with the “homophily” argument that similarity promotes collaboration (Fan et al., 2026; Ki, 2023). Consequently:

Hypothesis 6: The larger the population of a municipality, the less likely it is to seek collaboration agreements with other municipalities.

A common issue in urban areas is marginalization, a phenomenon that encompasses the deprivation faced by each municipality's population. Still, the relationship between poverty and intermunicipal collaboration varies by context. For instance, in United States cities, the difference between a community’s and its county’s poverty rates was found to have no effect on the likelihood of cooperation (Hawkins, 2010). In Brazil, research suggests that higher relative metropolitan poverty levels can be positively associated with intermunicipal collaboration, indicating that poorer municipalities may face a lower “bargaining entry cost” for collaboration. This is further supported by the observation that municipalities with high poverty rates often struggle to serve their populations and, consequently, adopt intermunicipal cooperation arrangements to address social problems and meet service demands. Thus, for poorer municipalities, collaboration can be a pragmatic necessity, sometimes entailing a “take-it-or-leave-it” negotiation due to their limited resources (Ki, 2023; Meza et al., 2018).

England, Scandinavia, and Northwest Ohio exemplify how affluent municipalities avoid cooperating with less wealthy ones when the latter face fiscal constraints or lack resources, technical assets, or administrative capacity. This creates a dynamic where the benefits of collaboration accrue disproportionately to wealthy areas (Bel et al., 2025; Rubado et al., 2025). Indeed, wealthier jurisdictions often view collaboration with lower-income municipalities as an undesirable burden that would require them to share resources or pay for infrastructure that primarily benefits marginalized communities. Elected officials also view these partnerships as politically costly, as constituents may resist policies perceived as subsidizing other municipalities rather than providing local benefits (Davis & Gough, 2019; Ramírez de la Cruz, 2026). This leads to:

Hypothesis 7: The more poverty there is in a municipality, the more it will seek to collaborate with others.

Data and Analysis

The National Census of Municipal Governments and Territorial Demarcations of Mexico City 2021 collected data on intermunicipal collaboration practices in Mexico. According to the Census, 392 municipalities—out of 2,252 observations—reported entering into at least one collaborative agreement with other municipalities. However, some municipalities reported entering into more than one agreement. The first type of collaboration was urban planning, intended mainly to share information to analyze current urban conditions and forecast future development scenarios (n = 228). The second type of collaboration involved jointly defining objectives, preparing projects, estimating costs and resources, obtaining funding, and scheduling activities for specific projects—that is, the programming, funding, and execution of public works (n = 214). Finally, the third type of collaboration was intended to allow municipalities and boroughs to deliver shared public services (n = 146).

We created three dichotomous variables corresponding to each type of collaboration. Using these variables as the dependent variables, we estimated multivariable logistic (logit) regression models to analyze the factors associated with municipalities' willingness to enter into collaboration agreements.

The first independent variable included in the model captures whether the municipality is in a metropolitan area (metropolitan municipality). A total of 421 municipalities are recognized as part of a metropolitan area as defined by the federal government (CONAPO, 2023). A municipality is considered metropolitan if it is part of a group of two or more municipalities that includes a city with 100,000 or more residents, where functions and activities extend beyond a single jurisdiction and incorporate neighboring municipalities within their direct area of influence, yielding a high degree of socioeconomic integration (CONAPO, 2023). The second explanatory variable is urban municipality, another dichotomous indicator identifying predominantly urban municipalities. This variable equals 1 for municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants.

Per capita municipal revenue was created using INEGI's (2022b) and Secretaría de

Administración y Finanzas (2022) data on municipal revenues (taxes, contributions, and intergovernmental transfers). Revenues were expressed per capita and log-transformed to mitigate skewness and reduce the influence of outliers—an approach that typically improves linearity in regression settings.

The marginalization index captures the extent of structural social deprivations in a municipality. This variable was constructed from an index that incorporates multiple dimensions such as education, housing quality, population distribution, and income to assess the intensity of social exclusion (CONAPO, 2021). For comparability, the index was standardized using a 0–1 scale, where 0 represents the municipality with the highest quality of life, and 1 represents the municipality with the lowest quality of life. This places all municipalities on a common scale, avoiding distortions caused by differences in magnitude.

Per capita gross census value added (GCVA) serves as a proxy for municipal-level economic output. It is used because measuring local gross domestic product is infeasible, given the lack of statistics or registries on municipal imports and exports, or on the scale of the municipal informal economy. Arithmetically, the GCVA is obtained by subtracting intermediate consumption from total gross product. It differs from the national value because it only considers formal and semiformal economic units and therefore does not capture all data from the informal economy. In economic terms, the GCVA represents the value of production generated during the work process through the creative and transformative activity of employed personnel, capital, and organizational structure (the factors of production), applied to the materials consumed in carrying out the economic activity. In other words, gross census value added represents the amount of value produced within a municipality—excluding the trade balance and the informal economy—that would correspond to each resident if distributed equally over the course of a year (Instituto Municipal de Planeación de Morelia [IMPLAN Morelia], 2024). We calculated this variable using data from the 2019 Economic Census and the 2020 National Census of Population and Housing by INEGI (2020, 2021).

We included two controls. Population density (people/km²) indicates that densely populated municipalities face more complex challenges (e.g., traffic, waste management, and urban planning) that may necessitate intergovernmental coordination. Density was computed by dividing municipal population (INEGI, 2021) by territorial area, using datasets compiled by Centro de Estudios de Desarrollo Regional y Urbano Sustentable (CEDRUS, 2019). Population (total inhabitants, INEGI, 2021) was also included because it varies substantially across municipalities and influences service provision, planning, and political decision-making.

Population is regularly and consistently measured, aiding interpretability and reliability.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Observations	Missing Values	Missing Values (percentage)	Mean	Minimum Value	Maximum Value	Standard Deviation
Intermunicipal Coordination (Dichotomous)	2,469	0	0.00%	0.159	0	1	0.366
Metropolitan Municipality (Dichotomous)	2,469	0	0.00%	0.169	0	1	0.375
Urban Municipality (Dichotomous)	2,469	0	0.00%	0.181	0	1	0.385
Per Capita Municipal Revenue (Natural logarithm)	2,266	203	8.22%	8.6	6.438	11.753	0.498
Marginalization Index (Standardized)	2,469	0	0.00%	0.794	0	1	0.095
Population Density (Continuous)	2,458	11	0.45%	0.419	0.0001	80.553	2.439
Population (Continuous)	2,469	0	0.00%	5.104	0.008	192.252	14.699
Per Capita GCVA (Natural Logarithm)	2,456	13	0.53%	1.967	−3.543	7.967	1.501

Note. Compiled by the authors.

Results

Results indicate that the predictors of the probability of entering intermunicipal collaboration agreements vary depending on the specific type of cooperation among local governments. Thus, the three dependent variables considered in this study—the probability that a municipality participates in (1) collaboration for urban planning, (2) collaboration for the programming, funding, and execution of public works, and (3) collaboration for common services delivery—are significantly associated with different independent variables.

Table 2 presents the main findings. The first type of collaboration primarily aims to share information, which implies very low transaction costs. For this type of collaboration, urban and metropolitan municipalities are more likely to collaborate when they have sufficient resources

to foster collaboration and face less social marginalization. The second type of collaboration is riskier, as it involves redistributing resources, for example, from wealthier municipalities to less wealthy ones and may also involve a commitment. In this case, metropolitan municipalities collaborate if they have sufficient resources and even if their partners face marginalization problems. Finally, the third type of collaboration involves functional consolidation and implies long-term commitments; for this reason, it is the riskiest of the three types and entails the highest transaction costs. For this type of collaboration, urban municipalities refrain from participating when they are fiscally autonomous and face marginalization problems.

Table 2

Results of Models for Specific Types of Collaboration

	Dependent variable					
	Collaboration for Urban Planning		Collaboration for Programming, Funding and Execution of Public Works		Collaboration for Common Services Delivery	
	Coeff.	Average Marginal Effects	Coeff.	Average Marginal Effects	Coeff.	Average Marginal Effects
Metropolitan Municipality	0.510** (0.200)	0.041	0.358* (0.215)	0.029	0.041 (0.246)	0.002
Urban Municipality	0.987*** (0.202)	0.079	0.128 (0.222)	0.010	0.593** (0.244)	0.033
Per Capita Municipal Revenue	−0.001 (0.170)	−0.000	−0.173 (0.172)	−0.000	−0.443** (0.218)	−0.025
Marginalization Index	−2.573* (1.343)	−0.021	1.960** (0.978)	0.160	−3.148* (1.649)	−0.177
Per Capita GCVA	0.116* (0.070)	0.009	0.197*** (0.065)	0.016	0.091 (0.086)	0.005
Population Density	0.011 (0.019)	0.000	0.018 (0.020)	0.001	0.018 (0.020)	0.001
Population	−0.004 (0.004)	0.000	−0.000 (0.005)	−0.000	−0.002 (0.005)	−0.000
Intercept	−5.035** (1.794)	−0.402	0.209 (1.686)	−0.017	−1.918 (2.287)	−0.108
Observations McFadden Pseudo-R^2	2,252		2,252		2,252	
Log Likelihood	−641.707		−673.548		−491.758	
Akaike Information Criterion	1,299.413		1,363.097		999.517	
Note.	*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.					

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The results also present significant findings regarding the hypotheses tested on factors influencing collaboration. First, urban planning agreements are strongly associated with urbanization and metropolitan embeddedness. On average, being located in a metropolitan area increases the probability of planning collaboration by 4.1 percentage points. However, the average marginal effect of urban municipalities indicates that their probability of entering planning cooperation agreements is 7.9 percentage points higher than that of nonurban municipalities. Both results are consistent with studies suggesting that metropolitan and urban localities are more likely to collaborate because of geographic proximity, but also because they face broader needs and larger collective action dilemmas that collaboration can address by reducing the costs of individual action. Together, these variables describe “functional regions”, where municipalities that are both urban and embedded in a larger metropolitan system have the highest incentives to institutionalize joint planning.

Per capita GCVA is positive and significant, indicating that a one-unit increase in this variable raises the probability of planning collaboration by 0.9 percentage points. This is consistent with the expectation that higher economic pressures increase the probability of collaboration, while also reducing the administrative and transaction costs of interlocal planning bodies. Likewise, socioeconomic need, captured by the normalized marginalization index, is negative and statistically significant. On average, vulnerable municipalities are less likely to join planning agreements, with a decrease of 2.1 percentage points per one-unit increase in the index. This result rejects the hypothesis that the poorer a municipality, the more it will seek to collaborate with others.

In the case of collaboration for public works projects, the variable Metropolitan Municipality retains a positive and statistically significant association with the dependent variable. On average, these municipalities increase the probability of collaboration on capital projects and infrastructure by 2.9 percentage points. This is reasonable because many infrastructure needs, such as sewage treatment, roads, and public lighting, operate at metropolitan scales; it also means municipalities within metropolitan areas are more likely to collaborate. However, in contrast to the planning model, the results suggest that simply being urban is not sufficient to predict participation in infrastructure collaboration agreements. Decision-making and benefit-sharing for infrastructure may be a metropolitan issue, rather than a purely local one.

The marginalization index is positive and significant, with a large average marginal effect of 16 percentage points, which means that more vulnerable municipalities are more likely to participate in, or be included in, joint public-works collaboration agreements. The likely

reason is that capital projects impose higher fixed costs related to the development of public works projects that the marginalized municipalities struggle to meet themselves. On average, a one-unit increase in the marginalization index means a 16-percentage-point increase in the probability of collaborating for public works. Meanwhile, per capita GCVA is positive and highly significant. Each one-unit increase in GCVA increases the probability of forming or joining a public works collaboration agreement by 1.6 percentage points, conforming to the expectation that external or pooled resources might lower barriers to multijurisdictional infrastructure, such as matching funds, pre-investment studies, and procurement capacities.

Lastly, for collaboration on joint service provision, urban municipalities again have a positive and statistically significant effect. On average, urban status raises the probability of service collaboration by 3.3 percentage points. This magnitude is smaller than in the planning model (7.9 percentage points), but still meaningful, consistent with an interpretation in which denser service demand facilitates collaboration. In contrast, the metropolitan municipality variable is small and not significant, suggesting that economies of scale for services can be realized outside formal metropolitan frameworks, as periurban municipalities may also establish collaboration agreements or share the responsibility of providing services through service districts without requiring a metropolitan designation.

Per capita municipal revenue is negative and significant, with a one-unit increase in revenue associated with an average decrease of 5 percentage points in the probability of collaboration. This is consistent with the notion that municipalities with ample autonomous revenue prefer to provide routine services alone. The marginalization index is negative and statistically significant, with an average marginal effect of -0.177. This means that highly marginalized municipalities are less likely to share common services, with a decrease of 17.7 percentage points, even though collaboration offers immediate, visible gains and reduced costs in contexts where fiscal and technical capacities are limited.

In summary, urbanization consistently raises the probability of collaboration for planning and common services, while metropolitan status is essential for planning and meaningful for public works. Per capita GCVA enables collaboration where upfront costs and coordination problems are greatest, such as in planning and especially public works. In contrast, fiscal strength dampens the incentive to share routine services. Socioeconomic need mobilizes cooperation for infrastructure but is a barrier for urban planning and common services. Together, these results make clear what municipalities seek to do together, under what conditions they collaborate, and under what fiscal, economic, and social arrangements.

A caveat of this study is that the econometric models cannot fully capture the broader political dynamics shaping intermunicipal collaboration. Decisions to allocate resources to long-term projects may depend on the number and configuration of political parties competing in elections. Moreover, the distribution of clientelist resources among competing parties, party-system fragmentation and discipline, and the balance of power between executive and legislative actors can shape incentives for cooperation (Geddes, 1994). These political relationships shape municipalities' incentives to collaborate.

In addition, as noted by Cabrero Mendoza (2004), politics can act as a major constraint on the adoption of technically sound decisions, such as intermunicipal collaboration. Local actions do not take place in a political vacuum; power dynamics, intergovernmental dependencies, and the incentives of various actors can discourage the use of technical criteria to guide governmental decision-making. In the Mexican context, for instance, the historical subordination of subnational governments to federal and state authorities has provided little incentive for these entities to develop their own capacities or engage in intermunicipal collaboration. However, from the perspective of transaction costs, these conditions are particularly relevant because collaboration entails political risks for municipalities, such as a loss of autonomy, dependence on other actors, an unequal distribution of costs and benefits, or the political appropriation of outcomes, all of which increase the costs of negotiating, establishing, and sustaining intermunicipal agreements (Ramírez de la Cruz, 2026). For these reasons, the analysis presented above can only partially explain the decision to collaborate; it struggles to fully capture the power dynamics, clientelist exchanges, intergovernmental dependencies, risk perceptions, and strategic calculations that shape how local actors weigh the political costs and benefits of collaboration.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results provide strong evidence that intermunicipal collaboration in Mexico is task-specific rather than generic, with important implications for ICA theory, polycentric governance, metropolitan governance, and collaborative governance research. The ICA framework conceptualizes interlocal cooperation as the outcome of strategic decisions made by jurisdictions navigating transaction costs, uncertainty, incentives, and risk in fragmented systems. Much of the existing literature treats collaboration as a relatively uniform institutional response to collective action dilemmas. The results here suggest instead that the type of collective problem being addressed (i.e., planning, infrastructure, or service delivery) fundamentally conditions both incentives and barriers to collaboration.

The ICA framework argues that collaboration emerges when the benefits of cooperation outweigh the costs of bargaining, coordination, and lost autonomy. The differentiated patterns across the three models indicate that these costs and benefits vary systematically by type of collaborative effort. Results show that transaction costs increase when collaboration moves from urban planning to public works management and execution, and then to common services delivery. The literature suggests two potential reasons for the increase in transaction costs across collaboration types in Mexico and other developing countries.

The first is asset specificity and complexity. Both are present in all modes of collaboration but become more pressing as municipalities deal with localized issues and projects whose characteristics make it difficult to redeploy resources. This translates into more restrictive agreements, stronger oversight mechanisms, costlier governance structures, greater difficulty aligning policy goals, harder measurement, and more NIMBY opposition. All of them threaten the potential benefits of collaboration. The second reason is centralization. As Mexico shows, municipalities may face lower transaction costs under an institutional framework that reduces entry barriers in the early stages of planning. Under the National Program for Territorial Management and Urban Development, regional strategies are defined using technical expertise and outreach campaigns that reduce research costs and align municipal choices with national goals. Even if the state-level framework for intermunicipal collaboration is inadequate, the national planning system allows the federal and state governments to assume a significant share of transaction costs, alleviating municipalities' concerns about political friction, NIMBYism, financial uncertainty, and administrative intensity.

Thus, a cost-reducing coordinating system can foster collaboration in urban planning and public works, both of which are associated with metropolitan embeddedness and higher economic capacity. However, collaboration for service delivery, which is correlated with urbanization and negatively correlated with socioeconomic marginalization, is often costly and difficult, depending on highly complex, context-specific, and politically contested issues. This implies that ICA dilemmas are not uniform across functions; they are more severe for capital-intensive, long-horizon activities and more surmountable for routine, divisible services. Therefore, ICA dynamics are task-contingent, supporting the argument that collaboration is shaped by the complexity and indivisibility of the good being produced rather than simply by interdependence. For example, collaboration may be easier in planning because it involves sharing information, which is facilitated by coordination mechanisms set by centralizing authorities at the state and federal levels. It becomes costlier and more difficult for public works because it requires a sustained commitment to joint projects, and even harder in shared service delivery because it requires continuous coordination and reduced local autonomy.

The results also contribute to our understanding of polycentric governance theory by showing that the scale of the problem also matters for institutional choice in developing countries. Polycentricity suggests that overlapping authorities can produce adaptive governance, but only when institutional arrangements align with problem scale. Metropolitan status is strongly associated with collaboration in planning and infrastructure, but not in service delivery, while urban status alone predicts collaboration in the latter. This suggests that collaboration tends to emerge when the governance scale matches the spatial scale of externalities, a core proposition of both ICA and polycentric governance. Planning and infrastructure generate metropolitan-scale externalities, whereas routine service delivery may be shared through smaller cooperative arrangements or interlocal service contracts outside formal metropolitan institutions. These results therefore qualify the assumption that metropolitan governance is universally central; instead, polycentric institutional architectures are layered and function-specific.

The interaction between capacity and need offers additional, and perhaps the most important, insights into the relational architecture of ICA networks. Per capita GCVA increases collaboration in activities with high fixed and transaction costs (planning and public works), suggesting that capacity-enabling mechanisms shape collaboration in these domains. The negative effect of marginalization in planning and service delivery, but its positive effect in infrastructure, underscores that socioeconomic need can mobilize or constrain collaboration depending on institutional demands. This contributes to collaborative governance theory by showing that participation is not equally accessible to all actors in polycentric systems; marginalized municipalities may find themselves less likely to collaborate in low-barrier arrangements and are also structurally disadvantaged in high-cost collaborations, such as shared service delivery, but socioeconomic need compels them to seek collective action to remedy infrastructure problems. This lends empirical support to critiques of polycentric governance that highlight power asymmetries and stratified collaboration, rather than the purely efficiency-based dynamics often emphasized in normative accounts.

The negative association between municipal revenue and service collaboration indicates that municipalities with greater fiscal autonomy prefer to provide routine services unilaterally. This finding reinforces ICA's arguments that collaboration involves autonomy costs and connects with Tiebout-style incentives in which wealthier jurisdictions seek to retain control and claim political credit for service provision. From the perspective of metropolitan governance, this suggests that regional coordination may be systematically undermined by the exit options available to fiscally strong municipalities, potentially reinforcing inequalities in service access across urban systems. Collaborative governance is therefore not only

conditioned by interdependence but also by strategic withholding of cooperation by resource-rich actors.

The findings call for a theoretical reframing of intermunicipal collaboration as purpose-specific institutional design rather than a single governance choice. ICA theory has emphasized the calculus of costs and benefits; our results indicate that these costs and benefits are endogenous to the type of task pursued, the socio-territorial context, and the distribution of capacities. Polycentric systems do not simply allow "more collaboration"; instead, they enable different forms of collaboration for different functions. Metropolitan governance theory should thus pay closer attention to functional differentiation within metropolitan systems—planning, infrastructure, and service delivery do not emerge through the same coalitional logics or institutional arrangements. Collaborative governance scholarship, in turn, should engage more directly with exclusion, unequal capacity, and task-specific barriers, moving beyond the assumption that all actors can participate equally in joint decision-making.

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How to cite this article:
Ramirez de la Cruz, E. E., Vargas Pineda, L. R., & Barron Reyes, M. X. (2026). Why do local governments enter into cooperative inter-municipal agreements?. *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 249-279. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a973

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Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a974

The Limits of Local Government Reform and the Subversion of Local Democracy in South Africa

Los límites de la reforma del gobierno local y la subversión de la democracia local en Sudáfrica

Os limites da reforma do governo local e a subversão da democracia local na África do Sul

Recibido: 07/08/2026 - Aceptado: 06/11/2026

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Tipología del artículo: Artículo de reflexión

Abstract

A central principle in political and administrative theory is that decision-making on local matters should be devolved to improve accountability and tailor services to community needs. In much of Africa, however, local governments remain limited in political, administrative, and fiscal authority. Post-apartheid South Africa is an exception, with its Constitution recognizing local government as a distinct sphere and assigning municipalities extensive functions supported by fiscal transfers and reforms. Despite this, many municipalities are in crisis. This paradox is explored through a critical review of reforms since 1994, showing that the focus has been on organizational and administrative reforms. These formal decentralization efforts have failed to address inherited spatial and fiscal inequalities or protect municipalities from informal political economies characterized by patronage, partisan appointments, rent-seeking, unstable coalitions, and weak sanctions. These factors undermine administrative capacity,

financial management, oversight, and citizen participation. The 2025 White Paper on Local Government recognizes these challenges and proposes measures to improve municipal performance. However, reforms are unlikely to succeed unless they alter political incentives and enforce accountability, alongside building technical capabilities, to truly strengthen local government effectiveness.

Keywords: local government reform; South Africa; political economy; patronage; local democracy.

Resumen

Un principio central en la teoría política y administrativa es que la toma de decisiones sobre asuntos locales debe descentralizarse para mejorar la rendición de cuentas y adaptar los servicios a las necesidades de la comunidad. En gran parte de África, sin embargo, los gobiernos locales siguen teniendo una autoridad política, administrativa y fiscal limitada. La Sudáfrica posterior al apartheid es una excepción, ya que su Constitución reconoce al gobierno local como una esfera distinta y asigna a los municipios amplias funciones respaldadas por transferencias fiscales y reformas. A pesar de ello, muchos municipios se encuentran en crisis. Esta paradoja se explora a través de una revisión crítica de las reformas emprendidas desde 1994, la cual demuestra que el enfoque se ha centrado en reformas organizativas y administrativas. Estos esfuerzos formales de descentralización no han logrado abordar las desigualdades espaciales y fiscales heredadas ni proteger a los municipios de economías políticas informales caracterizadas por el clientelismo, los nombramientos partidistas, la búsqueda de rentas, las coaliciones inestables y la debilidad de las sanciones. Estos factores socavan la capacidad administrativa, la gestión financiera, la supervisión y la participación ciudadana. El Libro Blanco sobre el Gobierno Local de 2025 reconoce estos desafíos y propone medidas para mejorar el desempeño municipal. Sin embargo, es poco probable que las reformas tengan éxito a menos que alteren los incentivos políticos y hagan cumplir la rendición de cuentas, además de desarrollar capacidades técnicas, para fortalecer verdaderamente la eficacia del gobierno local.

Palabras clave: reforma del gobierno local; Sudáfrica; economía política; clientelismo; democracia local.

Resumo

Um princípio central na teoria política e administrativa é que a tomada de decisões sobre assuntos locais deve ser descentralizada para aprimorar a responsabilização (accountability) e adaptar os serviços às necessidades da comunidade. Em grande parte da África, contudo, os governos locais permanecem limitados em sua autoridade política, administrativa e fiscal. A África do Sul pós-apartheid é uma exceção, pois sua Constituição reconhece o governo local como uma esfera distinta e atribui aos municípios amplas funções respaldadas por transferências fiscais e reformas. Apesar disso, muitos municípios estão em crise. Esse paradoxo é explorado por meio de uma revisão crítica das reformas desde 1994, demonstrando que o foco tem recaído sobre reformas organizacionais e administrativas. Esses esforços formais de descentralização não conseguiram enfrentar as desigualdades espaciais e fiscais herdadas nem proteger os municípios de economias políticas informais caracterizadas por clientelismo, nomeações partidárias, busca por rendas (rent-seeking), coalizões instáveis e sanções frágeis. Esses fatores minam a capacidade administrativa, a gestão financeira, a fiscalização e a participação cidadã. O Livro Branco sobre o Governo Local de 2025 reconhece esses desafios e propõe medidas para melhorar o desempenho municipal. Entretanto, é improvável que as reformas tenham êxito a menos que alterem os incentivos políticos e assegurem a responsabilização, juntamente com o desenvolvimento de capacidades técnicas, para fortalecer verdadeiramente a eficácia do governo local.

Palavras-chave: reforma do governo local; África do Sul; economia política; clientelismo; democracia local.

Introduction

The devolution of authority to the local level has long been regarded in the political and public administration literature as a cornerstone of democratic government. The normative understanding has been that government that is closer to citizens will possess better information about local preferences, be more accountable, and create more accessible opportunities for participation (World Bank, 2000). In the Global North, the systems of intergovernmental relations that accompanied this process of devolution generally evolved incrementally, shaped by historical circumstances, political struggles, constitutional reform, referenda and changing conceptions of the appropriate distribution of state power. In much of the Global South, and particularly in Africa, decentralisation followed a markedly different

trajectory. Rather than emerging primarily through an endogenous and evolutionary process, decentralisation in the post-colonial era was introduced precipitously and frequently as a conditionality of donor assistance, particularly during the structural adjustment and good-governance reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Conyers, 2007; Crook, 2003; Ndegwa, 2003).

Yet, despite the apparently compelling democratic and administrative rationale for political and administrative devolution, decentralisation in many African states has proceeded slowly and unevenly. The powers transferred to local authorities have often remained circumscribed, fiscal transfers inadequate and municipal institutions weak. In many instances, consequently, formally constituted local authorities have remained little more than shell structures, lacking the administrative and financial capacity necessary to deliver basic services.

This underscores the reality that democratic decentralisation depends on considerably more than the formal creation of a local legislature and institutions for local administration. In this respect, Kersting et al. (2009) identify three trajectories necessary to promote the process of local government reform: the first of these relates to territorial, functional and fiscal reforms which form part of the decentralisation process; the second relates to participatory reforms which focus on the system of representative democracy, public participation, and party-based democracy; while the third refers to political–administrative reforms which include the reconfiguration of local leadership roles, human resource development, and the strengthening of public institutions and oversight structures. At the same time, local authorities require meaningful decision-making powers, predictable fiscal resources, capable administrations and institutions through which citizens can authorise, scrutinise and, when necessary, sanction decision makers. In this respect, Olowu (2012) argues that the constitutionalising of local government is a necessary precondition for the effective decentralisation of decision-making in that it entails the transfer of four key elements of government from central to local administrations, namely responsibility, authority, resources, and accountability arrangements. Where national executives retain effective control, transfers are inadequate or local offices are captured by dominant elites, decentralisation may reproduce hierarchy rather than disperse power (Jütting et al., 2005; Makara, 2018; Ribot, 2002; Smoke, 2015). The question is therefore not simply whether authority has been devolved, but how formal rules are established to interact with political incentives and social structures.

Further contemporary international evidence confirms that decentralisation outcomes are shaped by the political and fiscal incentives surrounding implementation. Research from

Honduras finds that municipal control of decentralised service delivery can heighten corruption risks where local institutions are susceptible to capture, although appropriately structured non-state participation may mitigate these risks (Zarychta et al., 2024). Studies in Ghana and Brazil similarly demonstrate that intergovernmental transfers can weaken local fiscal discipline or generate perverse spending incentives, with outcomes mediated by political alignment, electoral competition, and the design of transfer systems (Alves & Araujo, 2024; Obeng & Aazam, 2025). Evidence from China and the United States further shows that officials' career incentives and political connections distort procurement and public-resource allocation (Aobdia et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2025). Conversely, causal evidence from the Philippines indicates that credible convictions of corrupt local officials improve financial management and reduce subsequent corruption (Axbard, 2025). These findings suggest that local government reform is unlikely to succeed through institutional restructuring alone unless it also changes political incentives and establishes credible mechanisms of accountability and sanction.

Post-apartheid South Africa is a particularly interesting case because devolved authority appears to meet most of the institutional conditions missing elsewhere on the African continent. At the same time, although the introduction of a comprehensive system of local government in the country was similarly precipitous, it differed fundamentally from decentralisation programmes elsewhere on the continent. To begin with, the decision to undertake a comprehensive reform of its system of local government was never imposed as a conditionality of aid. Rather, following the end of authoritarian and oppressive apartheid rule and the transition to democracy in 1994, the extensive reforms introduced by the newly installed African National Congress (ANC) government reflected an ideological commitment to establishing an inclusive system of democracy at national and local levels, and to ensuring effective delivery of basic services, especially to the poor who had hitherto been excluded by the racist policies of the previous regime. Through this process, considerably more autonomy and access to finance and resources were assigned to municipalities in South Africa than in most other nations in Africa.

Under apartheid, the Black population, who constitute the vast majority of the country's inhabitants, had effectively been excluded from democratic processes and from meaningful citizen participation in municipal government. Furthermore, the local authorities which did exist were racially segregated, irrespective of the geographic or economic integrity of an area, and whilst municipalities catering for the White population had limited originating powers, those catering for other racial groups had no more than administrative responsibilities. The incoming

democratic government was thus confronted with the task not merely of reforming an existing system but of constructing an inclusive system of local government capable of overcoming the institutional, spatial and fiscal legacies of apartheid.

Despite the critical importance of municipal government in improving the livelihoods of the poor, the substantial constitutional, legislative and fiscal resources assigned to municipalities, and the aspirations of these reforms, much of South Africa's local government system is now widely acknowledged to be in crisis, even after repeated attempts at reform.

This article examines this paradox. It asks why successive institutional and administrative reforms have produced limited systemic improvement and, more specifically, how formal reform measures have interacted with political incentives, patronage networks and inherited structural inequalities. It analyses the trajectory of local government reform in post-apartheid South Africa and identifies the factors that have undermined the establishment of an effective and substantively democratic system of local governance. Administrative incapacity and weaknesses in institutional design are treated as important but incomplete explanations. The article evaluates the proposition that the formal architecture of decentralisation has increasingly been compromised by an informal political economy characterised by patronage, factionalism, corruption, rent-seeking and weak political accountability, interacting with unresolved structural inequalities inherited from apartheid.

Methodology and Analytical Approach

The article adopts an interpretive critical-review methodology to examine the trajectory and outcomes of local government reform between 1994 and 2025. It triangulates constitutional and legislative texts, national reform policies, Auditor-General and National Treasury evidence, nationally representative public-opinion data and peer-reviewed scholarship on decentralisation, municipal governance and state capture. Policy initiatives are examined in chronological sequence to identify their diagnoses of municipal dysfunction, their principal reform instruments and the extent to which they address administrative capacity, political incentives and enforceable accountability.

South Africa is treated as a theoretically significant case because its constitutional recognition of local government, extensive municipal functions, fiscal-transfer system and participatory institutions approximate many of the conditions conventionally associated with successful decentralisation. Its continuing municipal difficulties therefore provide an

opportunity to examine the limits of explanations focused predominantly on formal institutional design. Significant variation among municipalities is retained as an analytical qualification and as a check against treating the proposed mechanisms as uniform across the country.

Contribution

The article makes three related contributions. First, it offers a longitudinal political-economy interpretation of South Africa's local government reform trajectory, showing that successive interventions have concentrated predominantly on institutional architecture, administrative capacity, coordination, and compliance while having less success in altering the incentives governing appointments, procurement, and enforcement. Second, it challenges the conventional separation between political dysfunction and administrative incapacity by arguing that municipal capacity is not always an exogenous technical constraint but may itself be politically mediated. Third, it connects municipal performance to substantive local democracy by showing how persistent service failure, corruption and ineffective participation can weaken downward accountability, alienate citizens from formal institutions and encourage protest to substitute for institutionalised engagement.

The Political Economy of Post-Apartheid Reform

Although the collapse of apartheid, the transition to democracy, and Nelson Mandela's accession to the presidency were heralded by many as a political miracle, the disjuncture between economic power and political power presented a significant challenge to the incoming ANC government because the commanding heights of the economy remained under the control of a small White elite and levels of inequality were, and continue to be, amongst the highest in the world. A Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) policy paper published by the ANC (then a government in waiting) in 1994 initially envisaged the creation of an interventionist social-democratic state, loosely modelled on the East Asian developmental states, which would play a leading role in steering the economy and the development of a more just society. The policy paper stated:

> Reconstruction and development will be achieved through the leading and enabling role of the State, a thriving private sector and active involvement by all sectors of civil society… In a wide range of areas, the (Government) . . . will take the lead in reforming and addressing structural conditions. (Office of the President, 1994, [secs. 3.1.2–3.1.3])

However, scarcely two years after an RDP white paper was published, it was replaced by the neoliberal Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic strategy. A key tenet of the strategy was the inescapable influence of market forces and the need for greater openness and competitiveness in economic policy, both of which called for an enabling rather than interventionist state (Department of Finance, 1996).

This shift in economic policy has been attributed partly to the determination of the ANC government to rapidly revive a depressed economy and reintegrate South Africa into the global community, and to the fact that it believed (or had been convinced) that the pursuit of neoliberalism was a prerequisite for the development of a modern state. At the time, the government was also exposed to an array of (often unsolicited) advice from bilateral development agencies, international financial institutions (the World Bank in particular), independent consultants, academics and others who stressed the importance of creating a deregulated economy, receptive to foreign direct investment and open to global markets (Gumede, 2005). A key component of the new economic strategy was the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) as a mode of governance and, with it, the privatisation and outsourcing of public services. This initiative, as will be discussed, opened opportunities for corruption in procurement processes and especially in awarding tenders for large state projects at all levels of government.

At the same time, successive ANC governments sought to transform the racial structure of ownership and management in the economy. In an attempt to establish a Black capitalist class in the upper echelons of the economy, the Thabo Mbeki administration (which succeeded that of Mandela) attempted a settlement between the White-dominated corporate sector and an aspirant Black middle class. This involved the introduction of a series of measures, including the Black Economic Empowerment and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment policies and preferential access to state tenders. Whilst this approach succeeded to a limited extent in that it created a very small Black elite, it failed to create wider opportunities in the economy for a much larger segment of the population (Von Holdt, 2023). With their aspirations thus frustrated, members of this incipient middle class looked to the state as a means of accumulation. Although accumulation initially took place within the confines of legislation, adherence to legal constraints progressively eroded following the ascent of Jacob Zuma to the presidency in 2009 and the emergence of what has become known as a process of state capture (Buthelezi & Vale, 2023). State capture involved a wide network of patronage, a systematic dismantling of oversight institutions, and extensive and fraudulent manipulation of

state tenders through the preferential awarding of contracts, inflated prices, and kickbacks in what has been characterised as a form of primitive accumulation (Tinel, 2024).

Moreover, the widespread corruption and flouting of laws during the roughly 10-year period of state capture were never confined to the national level. Networks of patronage, both personal and political, extended to provincial and local levels. At the local level, their effects were amplified by weak administrative capacity, unstable political leadership and inconsistent oversight by provincial and national government. The municipal crisis therefore cannot be understood simply as a problem of deficient technical capacity. It must also be understood as the product of an interaction between formal democratic institutions and an increasingly entrenched informal political economy.

The analysis, however, does not attempt to estimate the independent causal effect of corruption, patronage or any single institutional variable. Rather, it evaluates whether evidence from different sources is consistent with the proposition that informal political incentives mediate the implementation of formal reform. Audit reports are used as evidence of financial governance, compliance and institutional control; public-opinion surveys are used to assess reported attitudes and perceptions; and case studies are used to identify plausible mechanisms rather than to establish their prevalence across all municipalities. Fiscal constraints, inherited spatial inequality, skills shortages and institutional design are treated as interacting and potentially competing explanations.

Before analysing these dynamics in greater detail, it is useful to review the successive waves of local government reform introduced since 1994. This history demonstrates that the government has repeatedly recognised municipal dysfunction and has attempted to address it. It also reveals, however, that successive interventions have concentrated primarily on institutional architecture, administrative capacity and coordination, while proving much less successful in confronting the political incentives and patronage structures that undermine these institutions.

Local Government Reform in the Democratic Era

The adoption of a new Constitution in 1996 established South Africa as a unitary state and delineated the roles and responsibilities of three levels of government: national, provincial, and local. Although narrowly defined, the Constitution assigned a limited degree of autonomy to municipalities and “the right to exercise any power concerning a matter reasonably necessary for, or incidental to, the effective performance of its functions” (Republic of South Africa,

1996, sec. 156[5]). Municipalities also have the right to "make and administer by-laws for the effective administration of the matters which it has the right to administer" (Republic of South Africa, 1996, sec. 156[2]. The Constitution also made provision for the national and provincial governments to intervene in cases where a municipality cannot or does not fulfil an executive obligation in terms of legislation (either by issuing a directive or by assuming responsibility for the relevant obligation). However, Chapter 3 of the Constitution, on Co-operative Governance, suggests a less hierarchical state structure in which the "national, provincial, and local spheres of government … are distinctive, interdependent and interrelated" (Republic of South Africa, 1996, sec. 40(1)). Under the principles of co-operative government and intergovernmental relations, the Constitution stipulates the following requirements for all spheres of government:

> respect the constitutional status, institutions, powers and functions of government in the other spheres; not assume any power or function except those conferred on them in terms of the Constitution; (and) exercise their powers and perform their functions in a manner that does not encroach on the geographical, functional or institutional integrity of government in another sphere. (Republic of South Africa, 1996, sec. 41(1)(e)–(g))

This provision has, in some instances, been interpreted to mean that higher orders of government may only intervene in the affairs of local government as a last resort, and then only under clearly defined legal terms, and for a limited duration. Notwithstanding this contention, the national and provincial governments still retain significant legislative authority to discipline municipalities which fail to fulfil their constitutional mandates.

The First Wave of Reform

The 1998 *White Paper on Local Government*, which derived much of its orientation from the UK New Labour government's white paper *Modern Local Government: In Touch With the People*, published in the same year (cited in Harrison, 2006, p. 197), defined the roles and responsibilities of municipalities more clearly and stressed their "central role in promoting local democracy" and in the provision of essential services "such as water, sanitation, local roads, stormwater drainage, refuse collection and electricity" (Ministry for Provincial Affairs and Constitutional Development, 1998, secs. 1.3 and 2.1). Prior to this, the process of local government reform had commenced with the establishment of 843 municipalities which covered the entire country. However, a substantial proportion of these municipalities were created de novo and existed in little more than name, in that they lacked qualified staff, appropriate office space and other facilities necessary to perform their duties. In attempting to

redress these shortcomings, and to establish more operationally functional entities, a further re-delimitation was undertaken in the late 1990s, reducing the number of municipalities to 283. This programme served to aggregate the many small municipalities into a series of larger structures, assuming that greater economies of scale (in terms of human resources, revenue generation, and infrastructure) would promote a more effective system of administration. Whilst the process of aggregation did achieve some economies of scale, it did little to address the serious human resource challenges that continued to face most municipalities. Significantly, the Local Government White Paper was published shortly after the announcement of the GEAR macroeconomic growth strategy and its principles were incorporated into municipal management.

From the outset, government policy, backed by relevant legislation, provided funding to support the new mandates of local government. Under this system, municipalities have the authority to generate their revenue from various sources. These include revenue derived from local taxes and levies for the delivery of basic services (such as water, electricity, and refuse removal), from rates imposed on property owners, from car licensing, and from various fines. In addition, municipalities are eligible to receive several conditional and unconditional grants from the national and provincial governments. A key source of grant revenue is derived from an equitable share mechanism, in which national revenue is distributed to all three echelons of government according to a fixed formula (Republic of South Africa, 2022). Municipal Infrastructure Grants (MIG) provided by the central government are a further form of conditional grants assigned to municipalities specifically for the maintenance of infrastructure, such as roads, pipes, and wastewater treatment plants. Whilst municipalities have increasingly complained about the inadequacy of funding at their disposal, a more serious challenge, as will be discussed below, relates to the mismanagement of the finances allocated to them.

The Second Wave of Reform

Within a decade of the establishment of the new system of local government, serious concerns about the performance of municipalities had begun to emerge, and in 2009 the national Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), charged with municipal oversight, warned that “Nine years into the new Local Government system there are worrying trends and signs that are undermining the progress and successes achieved thus far. The country faces a great development risk if Local Government fails” (COGTA, 2009, p. 3). In response, a Local Government Turnaround Strategy (LGTS) was launched as the first of several attempts to improve the performance of local government. The

LGTS acknowledged that municipalities were not working properly, that they were failing the poor, were unaccountable to their citizens, were “marred by excessive levels of corruption, fraud, (and) maladministration” and that they were “centres of factional conflicts, political infighting and patronage” (COGTA, 2009, p. 18).

Despite recognising the poor performance of municipalities, however, the strategy interpreted many of these problems as difficulties associated with ongoing evolution and implementation of a fundamentally sound system which was always intended to be phased in over time. In that vein, it concluded that “Notwithstanding certain changes that may have to be effected, the overall architecture of the system of local government is still sound” (COGTA, 2009, p. 5). The proposed remedies, consequently, concentrated primarily on improving implementation: ensuring that municipalities met communities' basic service needs; strengthening efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability; and improving provincial and national support and oversight. The underlying assumption remained that better implementation of the existing institutional model could restore municipal functionality.

The Third Wave of Reform

Scarcely five years later, it was apparent that the turnaround strategy had not resolved the crisis, and a review conducted by COGTA in 2014 found that only 37% of municipalities were getting the basics right “even though they still (had) much to do”. A second group, comprising 32% of municipalities, were found to be almost dysfunctional and in need of assistance to get the basics right, whilst the remaining 31% of municipalities were considered to be “dysfunctional and significant work would be required to get them to get the basics right” (COGTA, 2014, p. 6). This latter group of municipalities, it was stated, included those with “endemic corruption, dysfunctional councils, no structured community engagement and participation systems, and poor financial management leading to continuous negative audit outcomes” (COGTA, 2014, p. 6).

In response to these shortcomings, the government formulated a Back to Basics strategy which committed all three levels of government to overcome the service delivery challenges faced by municipalities and “ultimately … to rebuild the trust of our people in the system of local government” (COGTA, 2014, p. 6). To this end, COGTA established a “war room” and a national monitoring system to oversee the reform process and committed all three levels of government to cooperate in improving the performance of municipalities, in ensuring good governance, sound financial management, and effective service delivery (COGTA, 2014, p.

13). Crucial to this new approach, it was stated, would be “a system of reporting on, and being accountable for, performance”. Once again, however, the approach concentrated primarily on ensuring compliance with existing institutional and administrative requirements. Although corruption and political dysfunction were acknowledged, the programme did not introduce clear mechanisms capable of changing the political incentives governing appointments, procurement and enforcement.

The Fourth Wave of Reform

With little indication that the previous two interventions had succeeded in improving the performance of local government, a further reform measure was announced in 2019 in the form of a District Development Model (DDM), which represents an attempt to incorporate municipal planning and service delivery into a broader intergovernmental framework. Launched under the slogan “One District, One Plan and One Budget”, the DDM is further reminiscent of the “joined-up-government” approach introduced by the UK Labour Party under Tony Blair. Although it is presented as an initiative to improve intergovernmental coordination and overcome fragmented planning across all levels of government, the DDM also represents an attempt to strengthen oversight and control over underperforming municipalities. Its objectives thus include the need to “build government capacity to support municipalities; strengthen monitoring and evaluation at district and local levels; and exercise oversight over budgets and projects in an accountable and transparent manner” (COGTA, 2022, para,4).

Despite initial favourable commentary on the DDM’s potential to overcome silos in the delivery of municipal services and to forge a more integrated approach across municipalities, more recent concerns have been raised about its capacity to overcome more deep-rooted problems in the system of local government. Thus, a case study commissioned by the province of the Eastern Cape in 2023 found that the model “overlooks the significant task of stabilizing the governance and financial management environment in the local and district authorities” (Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council, 2023, p. 9). Further constraints identified were a lack of local capacity to implement the model and inadequate legislation to ensure effective intra- and intergovernmental coordination.

The Fifth Wave of Reform

In a further initiative to strengthen accountability over the activities of dysfunctional municipalities, the government developed the Intergovernmental Monitoring, Support and

Interventions Bill, which was tabled in April 2025 to give greater effect to the intervention measures outlined in the Constitution. It has yet to be adopted by Parliament (COGTA, 2025). These include earlier intervention to restore administrative functionality (rather than as a last resort), the dissolution of non-functional municipal councils, the suspension, or dismissal of local councillors or officials, and the appointment of provincial or national officials to assume their duties. The Bill also makes provision for the imposition of fines and imprisonment of those found guilty of offences. The Bill has been followed by a comprehensive review of the 1998 White Paper on Local Government, which presents a critical assessment of the factors undermining the constitutionally defined objectives of local government. These include the systematic hollowing out of local capacity, the failure of regulatory and oversight mechanisms, financial mismanagement and corruption, and political interference in administrative activities (Hlabisa, 2025a).

This review identified nine priorities, including the need for fiscal reform, ethical conduct, depoliticisation of administrative systems, restored community relationships, stronger accountability mechanisms, intergovernmental coordination, and more effective citizen participation (COGTA, 2025; Hlabisa, 2025b). The review is significant because it no longer frames municipal failure solely as a capacity deficit and recognises political behaviour, institutional design, and structural inequality as mutually reinforcing factors. The extent to which the latest policy succeeds in its mission to reform local government has yet to be seen. However, although the diagnosis is considerably more exacting than previous analyses, the proposed reform measures still focus on improving oversight, accountability and organisational efficiency, with little reference to how the informal political economy might be eliminated.

The five waves of reform discussed above reflect the government's growing concerns about the effectiveness of the system of local government, but only in the most recent reform has the diagnosis of municipal dysfunction become more explicit, moving from concerns about institutional consolidation and administrative capacity towards recognition of political interference, corruption and weak accountability. Notwithstanding this progression, the instruments deployed remained predominantly administrative, organisational and coordinative. Although successive reforms focused on strengthened monitoring and oversight arrangements, they were less successful in altering the political incentives governing appointments, procurement and the enforcement of sanctions. The resulting gap between formal institutional reform and the informal political economy of municipal governance, consequently, helps explain the persistence of dysfunction despite repeated policy interventions. This conclusion

is strongest for the earlier reforms, where evidence of implementation is available, but more recent initiatives can presently be assessed primarily in terms of their design and prospective capacity to address the identified problems. The factors which have collectively enabled malpractice and mismanagement at the local level are discussed in the sections which follow.

A Lack of Administrative Capacity and Weak Financial Management

The responsibilities assigned to newly established local authorities, as noted, were not introduced progressively, and most lacked staff with the necessary expertise and experience to fulfil their new obligations immediately. Since then, more remote municipalities have struggled to recruit and retain staff in key positions. These problems are particularly serious in municipal finance departments where, in 2024, the average vacancy rate was 20% and where there was an average vacancy rate of 19% for chief financial officers; in municipalities with disclaimed audit opinions this figure rose to 28% (Auditor-General South Africa [AGSA], 2025, p. 46). Without effective financial leadership, municipal accounting departments perform poorly. In the 2024/25 financial year, 39 municipalities (approximately 15%) received clean audits, while 117 received unqualified audit opinions with findings and 99 received modified opinions, including qualified, adverse and disclaimed opinions (AGSA, 2026, p. 14). These categories do not account for every municipality in the audit population and should not be presented as an exhaustive distribution. The report further found that 88% of the municipalities appointed consultants to assist them in preparing their financial statements, but, costs aside, this professional assistance was unable to address poor record keeping and asset management. Almost all the municipalities used consultants to provide skills that their own finance departments lacked.

The retention of senior staff is problematic, partly because municipal managers are appointed on five-year contracts and may be removed by their political principals for any number of reasons, including a refusal to implement illegal or unethical instructions. In this context, where loyalty or factional affiliation overrides competence, senior managers often seek more secure employment or jobs in more favourable locations.

Weak financial management and fiscal accountability have been aggravated by inconsistent political and administrative commitment to regulatory oversight and consequence management. Successive reports from the Auditor-General have documented repeated non-compliance with legislation and reporting standards and have identified weak accountability

and consequences as recurring institutional causes of poor audit outcomes. These findings establish persistent failures of oversight and enforcement, although audit evidence alone cannot establish the political motives underlying every failure to act. In its findings for the 2022/23 financial year, the Auditor-General stated: “A lack of accountability and consequences remains one of the key root causes for poor audit outcomes at 60% of municipalities” (AGSA, 2024, p. 99).

> We reached out to key role players in the accountability ecosystem (municipal mayors and speakers as well as provincial premiers and members of the executive councils for finance and local government) to intervene in the non-submission of financial statements. We also informed the provincial legislatures, Parliament and the National Treasury. Our audit leadership further repeatedly engaged with the municipal managers and chief financial officers of these municipalities to encourage submission. When all of this failed, we notified the affected municipal managers and the board of a municipal entity that the non-submission of the financial statements constitutes a material irregularity, as the delays in the accountability processes are causing substantial harm to these municipalities. The lack of transparency for the use of funds and the financial position of these municipalities should not be tolerated by councils, provincial and national leadership or oversight. (AGSA, 2022, p. 9)

The operational capacity of some municipalities, as indicated, has been further weakened by the government’s adoption of NPM modalities in the late 1990s which, in an endeavour to run the public sector according to private-sector principles, has led to the outsourcing of all but the most basic service delivery (Cameron, 2009). Under this model, basic operational activities such as the repair of potholes, the maintenance of infrastructure, and other operational functions which had hitherto been undertaken by municipal officials are now put out to tender, and these procurement processes and supply chains frequently provide opportunities for financial malfeasance of the types documented in reports by the Auditor-General’s office.

At national and provincial levels, inconsistent intervention may be partly related to the constitutional requirement that every sphere exercise its powers without encroaching on the geographical, functional or institutional integrity of another sphere (Republic of South Africa, 1996, sec. 41(1)[g]). Existing research also suggests that party factionalism, patronage relationships and concern about alienating local political constituencies may constrain enforcement. The persistence of non-compliance despite repeated findings is consistent with insufficient political commitment or political constraints on enforcement, but it is acknowledged

that the documentary and audit evidence presented here does not independently establish the motives of every national or provincial decision maker.

Cadre Deployment and the Weak Separation of Powers

A lack of accountability has been aggravated by the ANC's policy of "cadre deployment" and the patronage and nepotism that stem from this. Cadre deployment was initially conceived as a measure to ensure that party loyalists would be deployed to key state positions to ensure that the correct ideological line was being followed and that the transformation of society was being carried out as planned. Over time, however, the objectives of the policy have been widely abused and those deployed are frequently friends or family of the politically influential.

Concerns have frequently been raised that those deployed often lack the necessary skills and intervene in the affairs of a municipality irrespective of their position in the administrative hierarchy. Once appointed, furthermore, it is seldom possible to remove them for poor performance. The net effect of this policy is the demoralisation of committed staff and growing cynicism on the part of the public (Adanlawo & Chaka, 2024; De Visser et al., 2009). Notwithstanding widespread public condemnation of cadre deployment, the ANC government has persisted with this policy, promising only to appoint more qualified people to key positions in a municipality (Mlambo & Maserumule, 2024). However, it is noteworthy that the 2025 review of the Local Government White Paper calls for clearer political and administrative roles, professionalisation of municipal administration, stronger accountability and oversight, depoliticised decision-making, and limitations on political appointments, suggesting that cadre deployment could also be subject to review (COGTA, 2025, p. 32).

Poor Service Delivery

Limited staff capacity, financial mismanagement, leadership turnover, weak oversight and corruption are associated with persistent and, in many municipalities, deteriorating service delivery, particularly in poor communities. The scale of the problem was acknowledged by the South African president in his 2025 State of the Nation Address: "In many cities and towns across the country, roads are not maintained, water and electricity supply is often disrupted, refuse is not collected and sewage runs in the streets" (Ramaphosa, 2025, p.4). However, the president's statement recognises the existence of serious service failures but does not, in itself, identify their causes. Causal interpretation requires the service evidence to be read alongside audit findings, financial data and research on municipal administration. Poor service

delivery has also been aggravated by failures to spend grants intended for public housing, infrastructure maintenance and development.

Ineffective Citizen Participation

According to the Constitution, one of the principal objectives of local government is "to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities" (Republic of South Africa, 1996, sec. 152(1)(a)). Various measures have been prescribed in legislation and policy to promote public participation in policy formulation processes and decision making on issues which affect the daily lives of citizens. Under this mandate, all municipalities are expected to establish structures, systems, and practices to advance citizen participation. These include eliciting public input into the formulation of five yearly Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), the election of ward councillors to represent local communities, participation in ward committees (which are supposed to channel local concerns to the councillor), and public hearings, among other mechanisms.

Formally, these systems hold out the promise that ordinary people will be able to influence decisions affecting their daily lives. Research conducted in a range of municipalities has nevertheless found that participatory mechanisms frequently fail to engage citizens meaningfully (Piper & Deacon, 2008; Tapscott & Thompson, 2013). Whilst these studies do not contend that all municipalities perform in the same way, they do indicate recurring problems associated with mismatched community expectations and municipal capacity, limited responsiveness and, in some cases, elite capture of participatory structures. Competition for councillor positions appears to intensify these problems. In the context of widespread unemployment and poverty, the remuneration received by councillors creates a strong incentive both to be elected and to remain in office. The average annual ward councillor salary in 2025 was R420,000 (roughly US$26,000), while an estimated 50% of the employed population earned less than R80,000 (US$5,000) annually (National Treasury, 2026). For some, holding office as a councillor also opens up opportunities to distribute patronage by providing access to public housing, employment or other scarce municipal resources.

A further concern relates to the extent to which local councillors can be held accountable for their activities by the electorate. South Africa is a developing democracy overcoming a long history of racist and authoritarian rule, and in elections most citizens have tended to vote for a specific party rather than for an individual candidate. This has been reinforced by the fact that large segments of the electorate have maintained a strong allegiance to the ruling party,

built intergenerationally during the protracted struggle against apartheid. Whilst increasing numbers of the electorate have become disillusioned with the ANC, many have chosen not to vote rather than to support another party. Although this practice is changing, councillors who previously failed to represent their constituents were unlikely to be voted out if they were re-nominated on a party list and, in the process, a key element of democratic accountability was forfeited. Conversely, due to intra-party wrangling, councillors' diligence in performing their duties is no guarantee that they will retain their positions on party electoral lists.

Coalition Governments

This scenario has changed in the past five years or so as increasing numbers of younger voters, angry with the ruling party's poor service delivery record and corruption, have switched their allegiance to a range of new and existing opposition parties. Despite a few notable exceptions, however, these opposition parties have been unable to garner sufficient votes to govern municipalities on their own and have been compelled to enter coalitions with other parties, including the ANC. Thus, the local government elections held in November 2021 resulted in 66 hung councils, involving 25% of all municipalities in the country. Whilst this shift in the distribution of power could be considered a positive progression in the deepening of local democracy in South Africa, the drafters of the Constitution and of subsequent legislation made no provision for the governance of coalition governments (Rulashe et al., 2025). Agreements entered into by coalition partners, consequently, are not legally binding and their continuation is often subject to the whims of their political leadership (Mofokeng et al., 2024; Sithole, 2023).

In this context, coalitions are often highly unstable politically and many collapse. The metropolitan City of Johannesburg, the economic power hub of the country, for example, had eight mayors over a two-year period from 2021 to 2023 as political parties struggled to gain control over the levers of power (Mwareya, 2023). As a result of political instability in municipalities, there is little strategic planning, policy formulation stagnates, and there is little or no consequence management as each succeeding government blames its predecessor for any governance failures. Thus, greater electoral competition has not automatically translated into deeper local democracy. Instead, in some municipalities, party fragmentation has combined with existing patronage politics to produce a new form of institutional instability.

Low Levels of Trust

Unsurprisingly, as a result of ongoing service delivery failures and the unfulfilled campaign promises of political parties, trust in local government in the country is extremely low. According to the Auditor-General's report for the financial year 2022/23:

> Public frustration at poor service delivery continues to grow, as reported by various civil society organisations and as can be seen from frequent service delivery protests. Businesses are closing because of persistent challenges with water, electricity and road infrastructure, further hampering economic development. (AGSA, 2024, p. 8)

This perspective is consistent with a national Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2022, in which 70.7% of respondents stated that they trusted their local government council just a little (25.8%) or not at all (44.9%) (Afrobarometer, 2024). In addition, 63.5% disapproved or strongly disapproved of their councillors' performance; 76.7% believed that councillors never or seldom listened to citizens; and 60.4% believed that most or all councillors were involved in corruption. These results demonstrate an association between low trust, perceived unresponsiveness and perceptions of corruption. Although indicative, they do not measure the actual prevalence of corruption or establish the causal ordering among these attitudes.

Protest Action

Citizens dissatisfied with poor service delivery and the perceived ineffectiveness of formal participation have increasingly used protest to communicate their grievances. In 2025, one monitoring source recorded an average of 19 such events each month (Jacobs, 2026). Some protests directed at local government have involved the destruction of public and private property and loss of life (Tapscott, 2017). The designation "service-delivery protest" encompasses events with multiple and context-specific causes, including housing, water, sanitation, employment, corruption and political contestation. Protest counts should therefore be interpreted as indicators of dissatisfaction and contentious engagement rather than as direct measures of municipal performance or proof of a single causal mechanism.

A recurring problem faced by municipalities is an inability to collect taxes and levies. By December 2025, aggregate municipal consumer debt had reached R467.2 billion, compared with R261.5 billion in December 2021, an increase of approximately 79% (National Treasury, 2022, 2026). Households accounted for R335.3 billion, or approximately 71.8% of the outstanding debt. These arrears reflect the interaction of household poverty and

unemployment, weaknesses in municipal revenue collection and, in some communities, resistance to payment. Persistent arrears place pressure on municipal cash flows, restrict expenditure on infrastructure and services, and contribute to delayed payments to suppliers. Because of reduced income and poor collection of outstanding revenue, municipalities prioritise the payment of staff salaries and councillor remuneration, and the remainder is paid to suppliers (electricity, water, and other basic services). Ensuing cash flow challenges lead to the delayed payment of suppliers and contractors, some of whom stop delivering to municipalities, resulting in incomplete project implementation and other performance objectives not being achieved (AGSA, 2022, p. 22).

Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations. Because it employs an interpretive critical-review methodology, it is unable to estimate the independent causal effects of patronage, corruption or political interference on municipal performance. Its conclusions should therefore be understood as identifying recurring associations and plausible institutional mechanisms rather than establishing definitive causal relationships. The analysis triangulates policy documents, audit and financial evidence, public-opinion data and relevant scholarship, but the selection and interpretation of these materials necessarily involve analytical judgement. The evidence also captures different and not necessarily interchangeable dimensions of municipal performance. Audit outcomes measure financial reporting, compliance and internal control rather than service-delivery quality; public-opinion surveys record perceptions rather than verified corruption; and protest statistics indicate dissatisfaction but do not establish its causes.

Whilst two government inquiries—the Zondo Commission (Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector Including Organs of State, 2022) and the ongoing Madlanga Commission (Republic of South Africa, 2025) have exposed widespread corruption at the national level, their focus has not been on local government. Consequently, informal patronage networks and political intervention at the local level have seldom been fully documented, making their prevalence and independent effects difficult to quantify. The study also does not systematically compare successful and unsuccessful municipalities, while the most recent reforms are too new for their outcomes to be assessed. These limitations require the central argument to be stated cautiously: political incentives and informal networks offer an important but not exclusive explanation of municipal dysfunction, operating alongside structural inequality, fiscal constraints, institutional design and shortages of administrative capacity.

Conclusion

South Africa's experience presents an important challenge to conventional accounts of decentralisation. Since 1994, local government has been constitutionally recognised as a distinctive sphere, assigned extensive developmental and service-delivery responsibilities, supported by intergovernmental fiscal transfers and provided with elected councils and formal mechanisms for citizen participation. Nevertheless, a large proportion of municipalities remain unable to fulfil their constitutional mandates consistently. The central question addressed in this article has therefore been why an extensive programme of institutional reform has produced such limited systemic improvement.

The analysis suggests that municipal dysfunction cannot be attributed to a single cause. The spatial and fiscal inequalities inherited from apartheid continue to leave municipalities with profoundly unequal revenue bases, administrative resources and service-delivery obligations. Shortages of professional skills, institutional complexity and weaknesses in intergovernmental coordination further constrain municipal performance. These structural and administrative conditions are indispensable to understanding the crisis, but they do not provide a sufficient explanation. They operate within a political environment in which patronage, partisan intervention, rent-seeking, unstable coalitions and weak consequence management frequently shape the implementation of formal rules.

The significance of this political environment lies in the mechanisms through which it affects institutional behaviour. Patronage and partisan considerations can influence appointments and contribute to the displacement, marginalisation or departure of experienced officials. Political intervention in procurement can redirect public resources and weaken the relationship between expenditure and service-delivery priorities. Instability in municipal leadership can disrupt planning and shorten the time horizons of political and administrative office-holders. Where councils, provincial authorities and other oversight institutions fail to investigate transgressions or impose credible consequences, the expected costs of non-compliance remain low. In this way, political incentives can reproduce administrative weakness rather than merely coexist with it.

This interpretation helps explain why successive reforms have yielded limited results. The Local Government Turnaround Strategy, Back to Basics and the District Development Model have sought to improve coordination, monitoring, administrative capability, financial management and service delivery. These remain necessary objectives. However, their

effectiveness has been constrained where the institutions responsible for implementation are embedded in political relationships that reward conduct inconsistent with the formal purposes of reform. Introducing additional procedures, plans, and oversight structures is unlikely to transform municipal performance if appointments remain politicised, procurement is vulnerable to manipulation and adverse findings carry few enforceable consequences.

This does not mean that all municipalities are dysfunctional or that all municipal politicians and officials participate in corrupt practices. Municipal performance varies substantially, and a number of municipalities demonstrate that accountable and effective local government is possible within the existing constitutional framework. This variation suggests that national institutional arrangements do not determine local outcomes uniformly and that leadership, administrative professionalism, fiscal circumstances, political competition and the effectiveness of local accountability institutions mediate the operation of the broader system. More systematic comparison of better- and worse-performing municipalities would help establish the relative importance of these factors.

The argument should also not be understood as a case for the recentralisation of municipal government. The democratic and informational reasons for locating appropriate decisions close to affected communities remain compelling. The South African experience demonstrates, rather, that devolution of authority and resources is a necessary but insufficient condition for effective local democracy. Decentralisation must be accompanied by capable administration, viable local finances, transparent decision-making and institutions able to hold political and administrative office-holders accountable.

Future reform should therefore be judged not primarily by the number of new structures or plans it creates, but by whether it changes the incentives governing municipal behaviour. This requires merit-based and transparent appointments, clearer boundaries between political and administrative authority, greater protection for professional officials acting lawfully, more effective scrutiny of procurement, independent and properly resourced oversight institutions, and consistent enforcement of personal and institutional accountability. It also requires sustained attention to the structural inequalities that leave many municipalities without an adequate economic and fiscal base. Political accountability and technical capability should not be treated as competing reform priorities: each is necessary to sustain the other.

The broader implication extends beyond South Africa. Formal decentralisation cannot be evaluated solely by examining the constitutional allocation of functions, the existence

of elected councils or the scale of fiscal transfers. Analysis must also consider the informal institutions and political incentives that determine how formal authority is exercised. Where those incentives reward patronage, resource extraction and the avoidance of sanction, increasingly elaborate reforms may coexist with declining institutional capability. The central challenge is therefore not simply to design better municipal institutions, but to create the political and accountability conditions under which those institutions can function as intended. Without that change, further rounds of reform risk reproducing the central pattern of the past three decades: formal institutional innovation without a corresponding transformation in the practices that shape local governance.

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How to cite this article:
Tapscott, C. (2026). The Limits of Local Government Reform and the Subversion of Local Democracy in South Africa. *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 280-308.
https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a974

REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA
IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION
RED universidades universidades
96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a980



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Reseña del libro:

Gobiernos locales en Iberoamérica: Retos y oportunidades

José Manuel Ruano de la Fuente y Camilo Vial Cossani (Eds.). Tirant lo Blanch. Valencia, 2026, 486 páginas.

Este libro es un compendio de información sobre el sistema municipal en Iberoamérica. Consta de una breve introducción y de capítulos sobre once países latinoamericanos (Argentina, Bolivia, Brasil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, México, Paraguay, Perú, Uruguay y Venezuela), más los casos de España y Portugal. No incluye los países iberoamericanos de América Central y el Caribe, tales como El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panamá y República Dominicana. En esencia, es la actualización de un libro sobre el mismo tema publicado hace una década por los mismos editores y que cubrió los mismos países: *Manual de gobiernos locales en Iberoamérica* (Santiago de Chile: CLAD, 2016, 448 páginas).

Es una obra colectiva cuyos colaboradores son destacados estudiosos del municipalismo en cada país. Cada capítulo sigue una plantilla general que abarca cuatro secciones: una introducción, una descripción general de los gobiernos locales, las principales políticas urbanas y desafíos municipales, y conclusiones, además de las referencias bibliográficas.

El gran mérito del libro es su riqueza de información descriptiva sobre el gobierno local de los países iberoamericanos —sus estructuras territoriales, sus sistemas electorales, sus competencias, sus finanzas locales, etc.—, que constituirá una

fuente imprescindible de consulta tanto para investigadores de la gestión pública urbana como para estudiosos de la participación ciudadana en los diferentes países de la región.

Sin embargo, el libro presenta algunas debilidades. Según los editores, tiene el objetivo de «ofrecer una mirada comparada sobre el papel, las capacidades y los desafíos de los gobiernos locales en la región». Desafortunadamente, a pesar de que cada capítulo se presenta con un formato común y con una sección final de conclusiones, los editores no aprovecharon la oportunidad de ofrecer «una mirada comparada». No hay capítulos transversales y comparativos sobre temas de gran importancia. Por el contrario, el libro termina de forma abrupta sin contar con un capítulo final de síntesis y reflexión sobre los hallazgos.

Esta falta de análisis comparativo refleja una debilidad más profunda de varios capítulos del libro, es decir, un enfoque del estudio del municipalismo que sigue amarrado al fetichismo del formalismo tradicional del derecho administrativo; en otras palabras, centrado en lo que «debe ser» la municipalidad según la legislación y las normas vigentes en lugar de lo que «es» en la práctica cotidiana de su forma de gestión. Con frecuencia, este enfoque hace que el tratamiento de diferentes temas se reduzca a una presentación meramente descriptiva de la legislación respectiva.

En los últimos años, el estudio del gobierno local en América Latina ha recibido la influencia positiva del enfoque de «economía política» (political economy), que busca entender por qué las políticas públicas de los gobiernos locales en América Latina funcionan de una forma que dista mucho de lo normativo según la legislación vigente; por ejemplo, en su nivel de autonomía, sus relaciones fiscales con el gobierno central, el control de la corrupción, la participación ciudadana, la ordenación urbana, etc. Aquí cabe mencionar los trabajos pioneros de Willis et al. (1999), Eaton (2004) y Faguet (2012). Este enfoque contribuye a superar la tradicional atribución simplista y errónea de la distancia entre lo que «debe ser» y lo que «es» la gestión municipal a la falta de «voluntad política».

En tercer lugar, los editores no aprovecharon suficientemente lo destacado en el propio subtítulo del libro —«Retos y oportunidades»— en relación con los gobiernos locales. El libro no reflexiona sobre dos enormes cambios en la gestión municipal de toda la región sin excepción durante la década transcurrida desde la publicación de la edición anterior, en 2016, hasta la actualidad: la paulatina pero creciente injerencia de la narcopolítica y el proceso de recentralización administrativa llevado a cabo por los gobiernos centrales de la región.* Hoy en día, estos dos procesos tienen un fuerte impacto negativo sobre la realidad municipal, pero su estudio está en gran medida ausente en el libro.

Se espera que una próxima edición del libro incorpore tanto una perspectiva más comparativa como un enfoque basado en la «economía política», no solo para describir, sino también para entender el comportamiento del gobierno local en América Latina.

** La palabra «narcopolítica» no aparece en el texto y «recentralización» aparece solo dos veces.*

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Acerca del autor

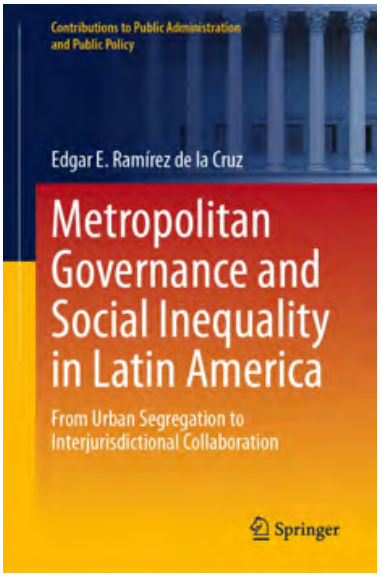
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Cómo citar esta reseña:
Nickson, A. (2026). Reseña del libro "Gobiernos locales en Iberoamérica: Retos y oportunidades", de Ruano, J. M., y Vial, C. (Eds.). *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 309-311. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a980

REVISTA DEL CLAD REFORMA Y DEMOCRACIA | IPSA AISP INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION | RED universidades universidades | 96

Septiembre - diciembre 2026 | e-ISSN 2443-4620 https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a981



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Book review:

Metropolitan Governance and Social Inequality in Latin America: From Urban Segregation to Interjurisdictional Collaboration

Edgar E. Ramírez de la Cruz · Springer, 2026 · 139 pages.

Metropolitan Governance and Social Inequality in Latin America offers a timely and conceptually ambitious contribution to the study of metropolitan governance, interjurisdictional collaboration, and urban inequality in Latin America. The book begins by identifying a fundamental paradox of contemporary metropolitan areas: while cities increasingly function as integrated economic, social, and territorial units, their political and administrative structures remain fragmented among multiple jurisdictions. This separation between the functional reality of the metropolis and the formal boundaries of governments constitutes what the author calls the "metropolitan problem." Its consequences include coordination problems, inefficiencies in service delivery, difficulties in realizing economies of scale, and, of particular importance to the book's argument, territorial inequalities in access to public goods and services.

The book positions social inequality within the traditional debate on metropolitan governance and development. On the one hand, a long tradition has advocated local government consolidation or the creation of metropolitan authorities to address problems arising from fragmentation. On the other hand, the

public choice tradition has emphasized the potential advantages of fragmented and polycentric systems, including competition among governments and the ability to tailor public services to the preferences of different communities. Rather than accepting this dichotomy, the book focuses on social inequality, metropolitan governance, and interjurisdictional collaboration. Metropolitan governance is not conceived as a single, stable structure but as a dynamic set of formal and informal institutions, organizational structures, administrative processes, managerial practices, and networks through which governmental and nongovernmental actors attempt to address issues extending beyond the boundaries of any single jurisdiction.

This definition represents one of the book's conceptual strengths. It allows the analysis to move beyond the search for an ideal institutional model of metropolitan government and instead concentrate on the conditions under which actors decide to collaborate. The relevant question is no longer simply which structure should govern a metropolitan area, but rather how, why, and under what conditions actors with different resources, competencies, interests, and jurisdictions construct mechanisms for collective action.

To address this question, the book uses the institutional collective action (ICA) framework as its theoretical starting point. ICA interprets many metropolitan problems as collective action dilemmas that emerge when the boundaries of public problems do not coincide with the boundaries of the jurisdictions responsible for addressing them. Governments may benefit from cooperation, but they must bear decision, negotiation, monitoring, and autonomy costs. The selection of an integration mechanism consequently depends on transaction costs and the risks associated with collaboration.

The book, however, does not simply apply ICA to Latin American cases. Its most interesting contribution is its critical reconsideration of the framework's assumptions in light of Latin American political and institutional conditions. The argument is that some implicit assumptions underlying ICA reflect the institutional conditions of the United States and Western Europe and therefore require reconsideration. These include the existence of a relatively strong rule of law, the primacy of formal rules, sufficient local administrative capacity, governments' ability to interact directly with external stakeholders, and the expectation that governments primarily seek efficiency and autonomy.

The Latin American cases reveal a considerably more complex reality. Informal institutions, clientelistic relationships, fiscal inequalities, differences in administrative capacity, party structures, economic informality, and historical trajectories of centralization affect both incentives and

actual opportunities for collaboration. The book does not reject ICA but seeks to expand its explanatory capacity by incorporating dimensions insufficiently addressed in its traditional applications.

The concept of collaboration risk is particularly important in Latin American countries. Interjurisdictional cooperation involves uncertainty: participants may fail to honor agreements, free-ride on the efforts of others, disagree over the distribution of costs and benefits, or appropriate the results of collaboration for political purposes. The book broadens this notion by demonstrating that these risks are not merely organizational or economic. They are also political. Mayors, governors, public officials, and other actors consider how collaboration might alter their careers, reputations, resources, and ability to claim credit for policy outcomes. The decision to collaborate thus becomes both a technical and a political calculation. In other words, metropolitan governance is shaped by distributive conflict as much as by efficiency concerns.

The comparative analysis of Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Santiago, and São Paulo provides the empirical foundation for developing this argument. The case selection is particularly useful because these large urban areas share problems of territorial fragmentation, sociospatial inequality, informal settlements, mobility, infrastructure, and unequal service provision, while operating under different constitutional structures, administrative traditions, and political trajectories. The purpose of the comparison is not to identify a single successful model but to demonstrate how different combinations of institutions, actors, and problems generate different forms of metropolitan governance.

The cases also demonstrate the importance of history. Much of Latin America's metropolitan development occurred under conditions of strong political centralization and, in some cases, authoritarian rule. Under those circumstances, national or state governments could informally perform metropolitan coordination functions. Democratization and decentralization increased autonomy and political pluralism, but, paradoxically, also made coordination problems more visible. Electoral competition, divided governments, and partisan rivalry increased the political risks associated with cooperation. Democratization therefore did not eliminate the metropolitan problem; rather, it fundamentally changed the conditions under which it must be addressed.

One particularly provocative contribution is the book's questioning of the assumption that actors always seek to maximize autonomy. In contexts where new responsibilities are not accompanied by sufficient resources or administrative capacity, acquiring jurisdiction over a complex problem may represent a political liability rather than a source of power. A government may prefer not to assume responsibility for housing, poverty, or other difficult problems if it will subsequently

be held accountable for outcomes it cannot control. In contrast, functions such as transportation or infrastructure may be politically attractive because they are associated with greater resources and visibility. Jurisdiction should not be understood solely as formal authority but as a resource whose value depends on the benefits, costs, and risks associated with a particular public issue.

Social and territorial inequality occupies a central place in this explanation. This is perhaps one of the elements that most clearly distinguishes the book from much of the traditional literature on metropolitan governance. Fragmentation does not merely produce efficiency problems; it also enables wealthier jurisdictions and social groups to distance themselves from the costs associated with regional problems. Fiscal and socioeconomic differences increase the political risks of collaboration when residents of wealthier municipalities perceive cooperation as subsidizing less affluent jurisdictions. Inequality, in this sense, is not merely an outcome of deficient governance; it is also an obstacle to constructing the collaboration required to address it.

This observation allows the book to connect two bodies of literature that frequently develop separately: scholarship on collective action and institutional efficiency and scholarship concerned with urban equity. Effective metropolitan governance requires reducing transaction costs and constructing a shared understanding of urban difficulties. When inequality of opportunity is defined as a metropolitan problem, it becomes possible to argue that addressing it is a collective responsibility rather than a problem exclusive to poorer jurisdictions.

This leads to another important contribution: attention to the framing of public problems. Before actors decide how to collaborate, they must recognize that a problem requires interjurisdictional action. The book proposes a three-stage process: collectively identifying a problem as metropolitan; assessing the risks and benefits of collaboration; and evaluating the transaction costs associated with potential institutional mechanisms. This sequence introduces a political dimension that complements more institutionalist explanations of cooperation.

Policy entrepreneurs, professional organizations, civil society, and epistemic communities consequently become especially important. These actors can produce and codify knowledge, construct metropolitan narratives, and demonstrate that apparently local problems—such as transportation, pollution, housing, or inequality—have regional causes and consequences. Metropolitan governance, therefore, depends not only on institutional design but also on the ability to construct a collective understanding of the metropolis as a shared space.

The book also identifies significant limitations in the cases examined. The absence of a con-

solidated metropolitan identity, inequalities among jurisdictions, differences in administrative capacity, partisan rivalries, and the persistence of informal institutions all complicate cooperation. At the same time, crises may create opportunities to temporarily overcome these barriers. Problems such as pollution, congestion, natural disasters, or public health emergencies reveal interdependence among jurisdictions and can generate sector-specific mechanisms of cooperation that may subsequently provide foundations for broader metropolitan arrangements.

The book calls for research on how metropolitan identities can be developed and how participatory mechanisms can better incorporate groups that have traditionally been excluded from regional decision-making processes.

Future research should prioritize examining the interrelated questions of legitimacy, accountability, and representativeness of metropolitan authorities. There is also a need to better understand the interaction between formal and informal institutions, analyze the effects of partisan competition and electoral cycles, examine the role of policy entrepreneurs, and explore fiscal mechanisms capable of reconciling efficiency and equity.

From a critical perspective, one of the book's principal strengths is that it avoids treating the Latin American experience as a deviation from institutional models developed in the Global North. Instead, it uses Latin American cases to reexamine and extend existing theories. Informality, inequality, power asymmetries, historical centralization, and institutional weakness cease to appear merely as "contextual variables" and instead become integral components of the theoretical explanation of metropolitan collective action.

At the same time, this effort raises questions that could be developed further. If metropolitan governance is understood as the dynamic aggregation of multiple collaborations, future research will need instruments capable of assessing not only when these collaborations emerge but also when they produce better outcomes and for whom. A collaboration may be institutionally stable and efficient without necessarily reducing metropolitan inequalities. Likewise, incorporating private actors and civil society organizations raises important questions concerning representation, legitimacy, and accountability that deserve further attention.

Overall, Metropolitan Governance and Social Inequality in Latin America makes a valuable contribution to public administration, urban governance, intergovernmental relations, and metropolitan policy studies. Its principal merit lies in shifting the discussion away from the search for an ideal metropolitan government structure and toward the political and institutional processes

through which fragmented actors construct—or fail to construct—collective responses. By placing inequality, informal institutions, and the political risks of collaboration at the center of the analysis, the book provides a particularly relevant perspective for understanding Latin America's large metropolitan areas. More broadly, it advances an argument whose implications extend beyond the region: understanding metropolitan governance requires examining not only the institutions available for collaboration but also who has incentives to use them, who bears their costs, who receives their benefits, and how societies come to recognize particular problems as shared metropolitan responsibilities.

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How to cite this review:
Andrew, S. A. (2026). Book review: "Metropolitan Governance and Social Inequality in Latin America: From Urban Segregation to Interjurisdictional Collaboration", by Ramírez, E. E. *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia,* (96), 312-317. https://doi.org/10.69733/clad.ryd.n96.a981