P03 / The Politics of Rescaling: Democratic Backsliding, Local Governance and Public Policy

Topic : Policy Change/Continuity/Dynamics

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The general objective of this panel is to examine how processes of territorial rescaling reshape democratic governance, political power relations, and public policy across different political systems. Building on established scholarship on state rescaling, multilevel governance, and territorial politics (Brenner, 2004; Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Keating, 1997; King & Le Galès, 2017), the panel approaches territorial scales not as fixed institutional levels but as politically constructed and continuously reconfigured spaces. It starts from the premise that centralization and decentralization are not necessarily mutually exclusive processes: they may coexist, overlap, and be selectively combined through institutional reforms, administrative practices, fiscal arrangements, and political strategies.

While existing research has extensively examined the political construction of territorial scales and the changing distribution of authority across levels of government, this panel seeks to further investigate the democratic implications of these transformations. In particular, it places the relationship between territorial rescaling and democratic backsliding at the centre of its inquiry. It explores how central governments may use institutional, administrative, fiscal, and regulatory instruments to constrain local autonomy, reshape political competition, and strengthen executive control. Conversely, it also considers how local governments and subnational institutions may contribute to democratic resilience by defending political pluralism, accountability, and alternative forms of policy-making.

The panel addresses three interconnected research questions:

- Political and institutional mechanisms: Under what political and institutional conditions do processes of centralization, decentralization, and territorial rescaling reshape the distribution of power and authority between central and subnational governments?
- Democratic implications: How do these processes interact with democratic backsliding, executive aggrandizement, political competition, and the erosion or resilience of local democratic institutions across different political systems?
- Public policy consequences: How do territorial transformations affect local autonomy, democratic accountability, policy-making capacity, and policy implementation? Under what conditions can subnational governments preserve or strengthen their capacity to act in the face of increasing central control?

The scientific relevance of the panel lies in connecting established debates on territorial rescaling and multilevel governance with research on democratic backsliding and democratic resilience. Rather than assuming that decentralization necessarily promotes democratization or that centralization inevitably undermines democracy, the panel examines the political conditions and institutional mechanisms through which territorial reorganization produces different democratic outcomes. Research on decentralization has already demonstrated that the transfer of responsibilities and resources does not automatically translate into greater subnational autonomy, as outcomes depend on political actors, institutional arrangements, and the sequencing of reforms (Falleti, 2010). Similarly, recent scholarship has drawn attention to the changing forms of democratic backsliding, particularly executive aggrandizement and the strategic use of formally democratic institutions to weaken democratic constraints (Bermeo, 2016).
Recent contributions have also begun to examine the relationship between recentralization and democratic erosion, particularly in countries experiencing an illiberal turn and in contexts where national governments seek to constrain opposition-led local authorities (O'Dwyer and Stenberg, 2022; Heinelt and Lackowska, 2026; Tan and Özer, 2026). Building on these emerging debates, this panel seeks to broaden the comparative scope of the discussion by examining territorial transformations across established democracies, countries experiencing democratic backsliding, and authoritarian or hybrid political systems (Ohemeng et al.2026). It also seeks to connect these debates more explicitly to public policy by investigating how territorial reorganization affects policy autonomy, institutional accountability, and the capacity of subnational governments to formulate and implement public policies.

Recentralization may serve as a means of strengthening executive power and weakening opposition-led

local governments, but it may also be justified or implemented through institutional arrangements that do not necessarily entail democratic erosion. Similarly, decentralization may expand local policy capacities and political participation while simultaneously reproducing central control through fiscal dependence, administrative supervision, or regulatory constraints.

The panel therefore seeks to identify the mechanisms through which territorial rescaling affects the balance between central authority and local autonomy, as well as the conditions under which these transformations contribute to democratic erosion or resilience. By bringing together comparative and empirically grounded research from different political and institutional contexts, it aims to advance the study of territorial politics and public policy. Particular attention will be paid to how these transformations affect democratic representation, institutional accountability, and the capacity of subnational governments to formulate and implement public policies.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The relationship between territorial organization, political power, and democratic governance has long been a central concern in the study of public policy and territorial politics. Research on state rescaling, multilevel governance, and territorial politics has demonstrated that territorial scales are not fixed or neutral institutional arrangements but are politically constructed and continuously reconfigured through struggles over authority, resources, and institutional competences (Brenner, 2004; Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Keating, 1997). This scholarship has also shown that centralization and decentralization are not necessarily opposing or sequential processes. They may coexist within the same institutional and policy settings, producing complex configurations of territorial governance.

Building on these contributions, this panel seeks to examine the democratic implications of territorial rescaling, with particular attention to the relationship between recentralization, local autonomy, and democratic backsliding. Across different political systems, central governments have increasingly relied on institutional reforms, administrative supervision, fiscal arrangements, and regulatory instruments to reshape relations with subnational governments. These transformations may affect the autonomy of local authorities, particularly when opposition parties control local governments, and may alter the conditions of political competition, democratic representation, and institutional accountability.

The panel approaches democratic backsliding not exclusively as a process occurring in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, but also as a potential transformation within established democracies. The expansion of executive power, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, and the erosion of local democratic autonomy may take different forms depending on political and institutional contexts (Bermeo, 2016). Subnational politics can also become an important arena of democratic contestation, where opposition coordination, electoral competition, and local institutional arrangements may either constrain or facilitate the consolidation of dominant-party rule (O'Dwyer and Stenberg, 2022). Territorial rescaling therefore provides an important perspective for examining these transformations because changes in the distribution of authority between central and subnational governments can become instruments of political control, but may also generate institutional spaces for democratic resistance and resilience.

Recent research has begun to investigate how recentralization operates in countries experiencing an illiberal turn, including through administrative, judicial, fiscal, and discursive mechanisms targeting local autonomy (Heinelt and Lackowska, 2026). This panel builds on these contributions while seeking to extend the debate beyond a focus on illiberal contexts. It welcomes comparative analyses of different democratic and political settings in order to identify the conditions under which territorial reorganization contributes to democratic erosion, institutional resilience, or other forms of political and administrative transformation.

A central concern of the panel is therefore to understand the mechanisms through which territorial reorganization interacts with democratic change. Under what political and institutional conditions does recentralization contribute to the weakening of local democracy? How do electoral competition, partisan alignment, executive power, fiscal dependence, and administrative oversight shape relations between central and local governments? Can subnational institutions and opposition-led local authorities act as sites of democratic resilience? Conversely, under what conditions can decentralization reinforce democratic accountability and local policy-making capacity, and when does it reproduce or conceal forms of central control?

Beyond these political and institutional dynamics, the panel also examines the implications of territorial rescaling for public policy. The redistribution of responsibilities and resources across territorial levels can significantly affect the capacity of local governments to design, finance, and implement public policies. The transfer of responsibilities without adequate financial resources, the expansion of central administrative supervision, and the creation or reorganization of metropolitan, regional, and intermunicipal structures may produce hybrid forms of governance in which local responsibilities coexist with substantial central control. These arrangements raise broader questions about policy autonomy, state capacity, democratic accountability, and the effectiveness of public action.

The panel welcomes theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions based on comparative,

single-case, historical, or mixed-method approaches. Contributions may examine established democracies, countries experiencing democratic backsliding, authoritarian or hybrid regimes, as well as federal and unitary systems. Papers may focus on different policy sectors and territorial levels, including national, regional, metropolitan, and municipal governance.

Potential topics include, but are not limited to:

Recentralization, democratic backsliding, and executive aggrandizement.

Territorial rescaling and the transformation of state power.

Local autonomy, political competition, and opposition-led local governments.

Democratic resilience and subnational institutions.

Central-local government relations and institutional accountability.

Fiscal centralization, administrative supervision, and local policy capacity.

Decentralization, political participation, and democratic representation.

Metropolitan governance, territorial reforms, and multilevel governance.

Policy implementation and the redistribution of responsibilities across territorial levels.

Comparative perspectives on territorial politics and democratic change.

By bringing these debates together, the panel aims to contribute to public policy scholarship by examining territorial rescaling not merely as an institutional reorganization of government, but as a political process with significant consequences for democratic governance and public policy. It seeks to advance a comparative understanding of how different configurations of centralization and decentralization shape the relationship between political power, local autonomy, and democratic resilience across diverse political and institutional contexts.

SELECTED REFERENCES

Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. Journal of Democracy, 27(1), 5–19.

Brenner, N.(2004).NewStateSpaces:Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood. Oxford University Press.