

# Policymaking and Implementation in a Double Democracy



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Policymaking and Implementation  
in a Double Democracy

PhD Dissertation

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Anders Leth Nielsen  
Aarhus, March 2026

# Preface

This PhD dissertation, “Policymaking and Implementation in a Double Democracy,” consists of the four self-contained papers presented below together with this summary report. Intended to tie the individual papers together, the summary report provides an overarching introduction to the concept of Double Democracy, the overall research question, and the main contributions made. It presents and summarizes the main theoretical arguments, methods used, and findings across the four papers. On top of this, the summary report provides a concluding discussion of the potentials, limitations, and perspectives across and beyond the papers. Readers who may be familiar with some of my papers or who may intend to read them will benefit most from the cross-cutting introduction and the final conclusion and discussion. Reference is made in the summary report to the individual papers using their letters (A, B, C, and D) and/or the shorthand titles below.

**Table 1.1: Overview of Papers**

Shorthand	Full Title [Status]	Authorship
A. Democracy paper	Local Policy Customization in a Double Democracy <i>[Working paper]</i>	Sole-authored
B. Customization paper	Why Cities Customize National Policy during Implementation <i>[Revised &amp; resubmitted to Urban Affairs Review]</i>	Sole-authored
C. Influence paper	How the Butler Did It—Investigating Individual City Influence on National Policy <i>[Published in Regulation &amp; Governance as Nielsen (2025)]</i>	Sole-authored
D. Documents paper	Who Governs? The Case for Increased Use of Internal Policy Documents <i>[Working paper]</i>	Co-authored with Peter Bjerre Mortensen



# Chapter 1: Introduction

Many countries have more than one tier of government. In fact, according to the OECD (2019), all member countries have at least two levels of government and many have three or more. Local governments, municipalities, or cities<sup>1</sup> can be defined as the lowest governmental tier, created to deliver a range of specified services to a relatively small geographically delineated area (Boadway and Shah, 2009). They hold an important role in the shared governing of many countries, and a global wave of decentralization in recent decades has pushed more political responsibility to local levels of government (Ladner et al., 2018; Ladner et al., 2023; OECD, 2019; Treisman, 2007). While local governments are often argued to provide benefits such as allocative efficiency, local competition, and democratic legitimacy (Oates, 1999, 2011 [1972]; Treisman, 2007), political decentralization has also been argued to entail drawbacks, such as increased costs and coordination challenges within and between governmental levels (Treisman, 2007). These mixed expectations highlight how getting multiple levels of government working together is anything but straightforward, and they raise fundamental questions about authority-sharing, conflicting policy goals, and variation in implementation. The core contention of this dissertation is that tensions will likely arise when more than one level of government is involved in policymaking and implementation. The aim of this dissertation is to illuminate these tensions.

## 1.1. Introducing Double Democracy and the Research Question

This dissertation introduces the concept of *double democracy* to shed light on the tensions possibly arising between levels of government engaged in joint policymaking and implementation. Three features characterize a double democracy. First, by definition, a double democracy implies that two distinct levels of democratic government are in place: a superior democracy and subordinate democracies. Both levels adhere to the defining characteristics of modern democracy: “(a) limited majority rule; (b) elective procedures; and (c) the representational transmission of power” (Sartori, 1987, p. 30). Accordingly, both levels are governed by democratically elected representatives.

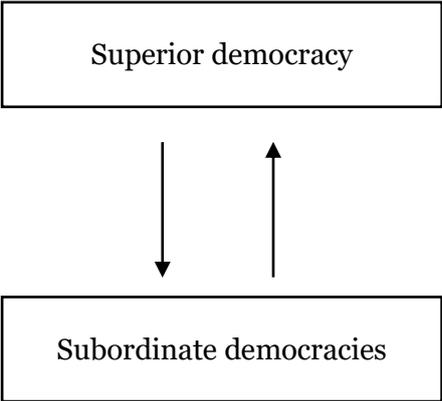
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<sup>1</sup> Different strands of literature use different terms. This is also the case for my papers. In this summary report, I use the three terms interchangeably to signify the lowest level of government in a country.

Second, both levels hold legitimate policymaking authority. Lower levels of government derive their policymaking authority through *political decentralization*; that is, they possess “exclusive authority to make decisions on at least one policy issue. In addition, to distinguish decision-making decentralization from mere administrative delegation, the subnational government’s right to decide on this issue must be entrenched in a way that is difficult for the central government to reverse” (Treisman, 2007, p. 24). In other words, subordinate governments exercise policymaking authority delegated by the superior political level.

Third, the two levels of government are hierarchically ordered rather than equal. The superior democracy—national government—can make demands regarding implementation on subordinate democracies (Blom-Hansen, 1999b; OECD, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2025). Thus, the national government may choose to use local governments as implementation agencies. A double democracy leaves varying but legitimate scope for the local customization of implemented policies (Thomann, 2015; Thomann & Zhelyazkova, 2017). Furthermore, while subordinate democracies often lack formal rights in superior-level policymaking, they are nevertheless likely to participate informally, given their interest in shaping policies they are frequently responsible for implementing. As a result, the two democratic levels are in constant interaction. These three features constitute the core of the double democracy, depicted schematically in Figure 1.1. Although introduced here as an ideal type with two tiers of government, the tensions associated with double democracy are equally salient in systems with more than two governmental levels.

**Figure 1.1. A Simple Illustration of Double Democracy**



The interplay between superior and subordinate democracies—or between central and local government—in policymaking and implementation thus comprises the central focus of this dissertation. The overall research question addresses this relationship by asking: *How do central and local governments interact in policymaking and implementation within a double democracy?*

Each of the three empirical papers (A, B, and C) sheds light on different aspects of double democracy by asking more specific sub-questions. Papers A and B focus primarily on the downward arrow in Figure 1, as well as on local political processes within subordinate democracies. Paper A (democracy paper) develops the theoretical concept of double democracy and provides new empirical insights into *how* local governments customize when assigned implementation tasks by the national government. Paper B (customization paper) seeks to explain *why* local governments choose different implementation strategies, and it develops an explanatory typology to account for this variation. Paper C (influence paper) focuses on the upward arrow in Figure 1, asking *how* and under *what* conditions individual cities seek and achieve policy influence at the national level. To this end, Paper C theorizes the process linking municipal intentions to national policy change and advances arguments about the exchange of specific city resources for policy influence. Finally, Paper D (documents paper) asks *how* policymaking processes and intergovernmental interactions of this kind can be studied using internal policy documents.

## 1.2. Main Claims and Contributions

Building on the double democracy concept, this dissertation advances two core theoretical claims. The first is that the relationship between national and local government is fundamentally characterized by tension. Local governments exist in part because they enable the tailoring of services and regulation to local needs. They hold democratic legitimacy because of their proximity to the citizenry (Oates, 1999, 2011 [1972]; Treisman, 2007). At the same time, local governments are tasked with implementing national policies on behalf of the national government. National policymakers often pursue specific policy goals and may also hold clear preferences regarding how policies should be implemented, organized, and/or financed (e.g., Blom-Hansen, 1999b). Moreover, national policymakers frequently favor equal treatment and relatively uniform service provision across the national territory (Oates, 1999, 2005). These objectives inherently generate tension when local policymakers seek to adapt policies to distinct local needs.

The second claim is that when local governments serve as implementation agencies for the national government, they should be understood as powerful political actors with autonomous local leadership. Two arguments support this claim. The first emphasizes local political leadership: Political decentralization differs fundamentally from administrative decentralization, in which the central government can appoint and overrule local officials (Treisman, 2007, p. 23). Under administrative decentralization, the national government acts as the principal, and local administrative units function as agents. Local

governments, by contrast, are governed by locally elected councils mandated by voters to make binding political decisions on their behalf (Pitkin, 1967; Trounstein, 2010). In this relationship, voters are the principals and local councils are the agents, expected to serve the local electorate through political decision-making. The second argument emphasizes that local governments can be quite powerful. They control resources on which national governments depend, including legal, organizational, political, and informational resources. These resources are exchanged through ongoing bargaining games in which local governments seek to maximize their influence (Rhodes, 1981; 1997, pp. 8–9). Accordingly, this dissertation contends that both the implementation of national policy by local governments (the downward arrow) and lobbying efforts directed at the national level (upward arrow) must be analyzed in light of the power and political agency exercised by local governments.

Building on these claims, the dissertation makes three types of contributions in answering the research question: theoretical, methodological, and empirical. The dissertation's theoretical contributions are twofold. First, the dissertation introduces the theoretical concept of double democracy, offering a new lens for understanding the interplay and tensions between two levels of government, with particular emphasis on intergovernmental tension and the role of local political agency. This concept is developed in the democracy paper (Paper A). Second, the dissertation advances new theory on specific dimensions of central–local interaction, developed in the customization paper (Paper B) and the influence paper (Paper C). The customization paper introduces a novel typology to explain local customization of national policy, arguing that implementation strategies are a function of city council interest (Anzia, 2021) and local implementation conditions (e.g., Goggin et al., 1990; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). The influence paper extends existing theory on municipal lobbying by arguing that local governments sometimes seek policy influence independently, beyond commonly studied collective strategies such as municipal interest organization (Blom-Hansen, 2002; Hula, 1999; Kjærgaard, 2016). It further contributes to our understanding of the conditions under which municipalities gain such influence, not only through the exchange of technical information and political support (e.g., Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Bouwen, 2004; Dür, 2019), but also by offering implementation capacity to national policymakers who depend on these resources (Blom-Hansen, 1999a; Rhodes, 1980, 1997). In Chapter 2, I situate the dissertation in relation to three distinct strands of the literature, demonstrating in greater detail where it builds on and where it extends the state of the art.

Methodologically, the dissertation relies on multiple types of case studies, based primarily on internal policy documents and elite interviews. Internal policy documents constitute a rich, expanding, yet still underutilized data

source. Papers A, B, and C demonstrate how internal policy documents from multiple levels of government can provide distinct empirical insights into both national policymaking processes and local implementation dynamics. Building on these studies and other recent research using internal policy documents, Paper D contributes by demonstrating how the study of governmental policymaking processes can benefit from increased use of this data source. In the digital age, internal policy documents represent a vast and growing body of material that enables scholars to revisit—and potentially offer new answers to—the classic question of *who governs?*

Finally, the dissertation offers novel empirical findings on the interplay between national and local governments. Paper A (democracy paper) shows how local policy customization unfolds in practice within a double democracy. It highlights how local politicians in city councils are central to policy customization processes that unfold between national policymaking and practical implementation. By combining cross-case and within-case analyses, the paper demonstrates that local councils exercise political discretion to shape policy through local political processes. Paper B (customization paper) examines the drivers of variation in local policy customization, explaining divergent implementation responses. It addresses why some local governments go beyond national requirements, while others seek to water down implementation efforts. Using cross-case comparisons and in-depth case studies, the paper shows that local governments' implementation strategies are shaped by city council interest and local implementation conditions. When these align with new national demands, local governments implement supportively; when they do not, they seek to limit change and minimize disruption. The paper thus demonstrates that both local political agency and contextual constraints are necessary to explain variation in local implementation. Finally, using process-tracing methods and systematic within-case comparisons, Paper C (influence paper) sheds new light on individual city lobbying. It documents how cities engage with national government to influence national policymaking and identifies the conditions under which influence is achieved.

### 1.3. Roadmap for the Summary Report

The remainder of the dissertation summary report is structured as follows. *Chapter 2 Theory* situates the concept of double democracy within the existing literature and provides a concise overview of the key theoretical arguments advanced in the individual papers. *Chapter 3 Methodology* outlines the research designs, empirical settings, and data sources across the papers. *Chapter 4 Findings* summarizes the main empirical results. Finally, *Chapter 5 Discussion and Conclusion* concludes by synthesizing the main findings and discussing limitations, implications, and avenues for future research.



# Chapter 2: Theory

In this chapter, I first position the dissertation within the existing literature, clarifying where it builds on and extends the state of the art. I then introduce the core theoretical arguments advanced in the individual papers and explain how they relate to the double democracy concept.

## 2.1. Existing Literature

The investigation of multi-level governance structures is by no means new. Various theoretical perspectives have addressed the fundamental question of how governmental levels work together. This dissertation builds on and contributes to three key strands of literature: (1) vertical policy-process integration, (2) decentralization and fiscal federalism, and (3) policy implementation. Before turning to these strands, I briefly discuss literature on so-called *multi-level governance* (MLG) to situate the double democracy concept within the broader MLG literature. The MLG literature, which emerged from studies of European integration, focuses on both horizontal and vertical dispersal of government power, often involving multiple, overlapping structures (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Peters & Pierre, 2001; Piattoni, 2010). Despite some scholarly disagreement on its conceptual core (Papadopoulos et al., 2024; Peters & Pierre, 2004; Piattoni, 2010; Tortola, 2017), there is general agreement that MLG involves more than two levels of government and includes non-governmental actors (Peters & Pierre, 2004; Piattoni, 2010). As outlined above, this dissertation builds on the layered nature of multi-level government structures and adopts a more focused approach. Unlike MLG, however, which emphasizes multiple levels (i.e., three at minimum) and the horizontal dispersion of authority beyond formal governments, this dissertation concentrates on the vertical dimension between two levels of formal government. In so doing, the double democracy can be viewed as a special form of multi-level governance, emphasizing tensions in policymaking and implementation between two democratic levels.

First, the recent literature on vertical policy-process integration (VPI) focuses specifically on how governmental levels coordinate vertically in policymaking and implementation (Adam et al., 2019a; Fernández-I-Marín et al., 2023; Knill et al., 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Knill et al., 2024). This literature has developed dimensions for assessing the degree of integration between administrative levels of governmental (Adam et al., 2019a; Knill et al., 2021a, 2021b). VPI research emphasizes the accumulation of national policies, which can increase the implementation burden (Adam et al., 2019b; Fernández-I-Marín et

al., 2023; Knill et al., 2021a, 2021b; Knill et al., 2024; Zink et al., 2024). Vertical policy-process integration is assessed via bottom-up channels, whereby implementers provide feedback to policymakers, and top-down channels, whereby policymakers engage in implementation costs. Top-down integration makes policymakers (co-)responsible for implementation costs, reducing incentives to continuously accumulate new policies and ensuring sufficient administrative capacity, while bottom-up integration enables implementers to provide feedback during policy design, improving the fit with administrative capacity (Fernández-I-Marín et al., 2023; Knill et al., 2021a). When vertical integration is high, the implementation burden is therefore dampened. While VPI provides valuable insights into institutional coordination between administrative levels of government, it leaves limited room for the agency of individual local governments. This dissertation shares the focus on vertical cooperation but emphasizes that local governments can act independently beyond formal institutional structures. Moreover, the VPI literature builds on a basic distinction between policymaking at the top and implementation at the bottom (Knill et al., 2021b, p. 761). The bottom is therefore treated as a matter for “implementers” with more or less “administrative capacity” working in “bureaucratic processes” (wording from Knill et al., 2021b). This means it pays much less attention to local government both in terms of their political influence and political leadership. By contrast, the double democracy concept forwarded in this dissertation takes its point of departure in the fact that local governments are not merely administrative implementation agencies, but rather democratic political entities unto themselves.

Second, the literature on decentralization examines the central–local government relationship, providing fundamental definitions and arguments regarding political decentralization, including local democratic legitimacy, responsiveness, and accountability (Musgrave, 1959; Oates, 1999, 2005, 2011 [1972]; Tiebout, 1956; Treisman, 2007). Research in this tradition explores power-sharing across government levels from different perspectives. Classic European studies focus on local political influence and autonomy, including cross-country comparisons (e.g., Boyne, 1996; Mouritzen, 1991; Page & Goldsmith, 1987). Fiscal federalism—a primarily American sub-strand—examines the economic and fiscal dimensions of intergovernmental relations (Oates, 1999, 2011 [1972]; OECD, 2018), including intergovernmental transfers (Boadway & Shah, 2006), taxation (Boadway & Cuff, 2022), and the assignment of government functions (Boadway & Shah, 2009). This dissertation builds on the conceptual foundations of decentralization and shared policymaking from this research tradition but extends the focus beyond purely economic considerations. Further, whereas the decentralization and fiscal federalism literature often emphasizes the optimal assignment of government

functions, this dissertation investigates the tensions arising when local governments exercise autonomy while national governments pursue their own policy goals (Blom-Hansen, 1999b). It challenges the underlying assumption of a clear division of labor between governmental levels, instead highlighting the political implications of shared decision-making in the grey zone where policymaking authority is not clearly assigned, and policy goals are potentially in conflict.

Third, the dissertation draws on and extends the policy implementation literature. Implementation broadly refers to “what is expected to follow once a particular goal has been formulated and decided upon, in order to realize that goal” (Hill & Hupe, 2022, p. 6). A central concern in this literature is how (national) policies are translated into reality (locally)—and often also why implementation sometimes fails (e.g., Hill & Hupe, 2022; Matland, 1995; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984 [1973]; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980; Winter, 2012a). Whereas early implementation scholars scrutinized the tensions between policy formulators and implementers, including governmental levels (Bardach, 1977; Nakamura & Smallwood, 1980; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984 [1973]), the contemporary implementation literature focuses largely on street-level bureaucrats (Hill & Hupe, 2022; Sager & Gofen, 2022) and macro-level EU implementation (Falkner et al., 2005; Thomann, 2015; Thomann & Sager, 2017b; Thomann & Zhelyazkova, 2017; Zhelyazkova & Thomann, 2022; Zhelyazkova et al., 2024). Consequently, the local political (meso-) level between national policies and street-level implementation receives limited attention (Ferraro & Failler, 2024; Gollata & Newig, 2017, p. 1309). Addressing this gap, this dissertation adds to the implementation literature in two ways. First, it foregrounds the local political level—the subordinate democracies—as an intermediate unit of analysis between national legislators and street-level implementers. Second, it incorporates local political factors to explain implementation outcomes, emphasizing how implementation is shaped not only administratively but also by local political leadership in the city councils. Drawing on the EU implementation literature, the dissertation develops new arguments about how and why national policies are implemented at the local level through *policy customization* (Thomann, 2015, 2019; Thomann & Sager, 2017a, 2017b; Thomann & Zhelyazkova, 2017).

To sum up, Table 2.1 outlines how the concept of double democracy builds on and adds to these three key strands of literature. Double democracy draws on established insights regarding vertical cooperation, decentralization, and implementation processes while adding a distinct focus on local political agency and the tensions in shared authority. Specifically, it emphasizes the room for local governments to act beyond institutional structures, highlights areas of shared policymaking and political tension between national and local

goals, and places local political agency at the forefront of implementation processes.

**Table 2.1: How Double Democracy Builds on and Adds to the Existing Literature**

Existing literature	Double democracy builds on	Double democracy adds
Vertical policy integration (VPI)	Vertical cooperation between levels of government on policymaking and implementation	Room for individual local agency beyond institutional structures; local political influence on implementation
Decentralization theory	Principles of decentralization and divided policymaking authority	Focus on shared authority; national–local tensions regarding policy goals
Implementation literature	Tensions between policy formulators and implementers; concept of policy customization	Focus on local governments as intermediate unit of analysis; local policy customization in city councils

While the dissertation’s double democracy concept contributes particularly to the three literatures outlined above, the individual papers also draw on and speak to other strands of literature. The following section provides an overview of the theoretical arguments in each of the papers and, where relevant, highlights other literatures to which the papers speak.

## 2.2. Overview of Theoretical Frameworks and Arguments in the Papers

Paper A (democracy) investigates how national policies are implemented locally within a double democracy. This paper further develops the double democracy concept, presented in the introductory chapter, to analyze the central–local government interplay. To this end, I draw on decentralization theory and implementation research to argue that double democracy dilemmas or tensions arise when national and local policy goals co-exist.

First, both national and local governments derive authority from separate electoral mandates (Treisman, 2007), enabling each level to claim legitimate authority over policy decisions. Second, whereas national governments often prioritize equal treatment across the national territory, a core rationale for local governments is the ability to emphasize local diversity, responsiveness, and locally specific needs (Oates, 1999, 2011 [1972]). These differing priorities can generate implementation tensions. Third, although local governments are formally subordinate to the national level, political decentralization grants them a degree of autonomy, creating a grey zone in which national governments can impose policy goals while local governments retain discretion in

implementation. I argue that these tensions become particularly salient when local governments act as implementation agents and must be compelled or persuaded to align with national goals (Blom-Hansen, 1999b).

To examine how the local implementation of national policies unfolds in a double democracy, Paper A builds on the concept of *customization* from the EU implementation literature. This concept captures how member states shape and adapt EU directives during national implementation (e.g., Thomann, 2015; Thomann & Zhelyazkova, 2017; Zgaga et al., 2023; Zhelyazkova & Thomann, 2022). I extend this concept to the subnational level, defining *local policy customization* as the political process through which local councils adapt national policy to local contexts. Whereas studies of member-state customization focus primarily on the legal transposition of EU regulation into national legislation, local governments typically do not legislate, necessitating the development of a distinct measure of local policy customization. To address this, I draw on May's (2003, p. 223) definition of policy as "a set of intentions or goals, a mix of instruments or means for accomplishing the intentions, a designation of governmental or nongovernmental entities charged with carrying out the intentions, and an allocation of resources for the requisite tasks". This means policy has four components: targets (what is to be achieved), instruments (how it is to be achieved), organization (who is responsible), and resources (how it is financed)<sup>2</sup>. I argue that each of these components can be modified through local policy customization. Based on this conceptualization, Paper A formulates analytical questions guiding the empirical analysis, focusing on local council involvement in implementation, interaction between local and national governments, and the types of customization decisions made by local councils.

Paper B (customization paper) advances the analysis of local policy customization by examining why local governments—referred to here as cities—facing similar national demands sometimes adopt different implementation strategies. I argue that much of the contemporary implementation literature focuses on national-level actors and street-level bureaucrats, leaving variation in city-level policy implementation under-theorized (Ferraro & Failler, 2024; Gollata & Newig, 2017; Hill & Hupe, 2022). To explain the drivers of local policy customization, I integrate insights from implementation research and urban politics into an explanatory framework for cities' implementation strategies. I argue that cities select implementation strategies based on the degree of local fit between national policies and local contexts. Local fit is con-

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<sup>2</sup> I use the terms goals/targets/intentions; instruments/tools/means; and resources/finances interchangeably.

ceptualized as a function of two context-sensitive factors: city council interest and local implementation conditions.

The first factor, *city council interest*, refers to the city council's local policy goals as expressed in prior policy decisions within the relevant policy area. The core argument is that city councils assess national policies in light of their existing local objectives, which are reflected in decisions adopted by the council majority. A national policy is aligned with city council interest when it supports goals the council has already chosen to pursue, whereas it is misaligned when it contradicts those goals. This conceptualization taps into a longstanding debate in the *urban politics* literature concerning the drivers of local political outcomes. Whereas Peterson (1981) emphasized economic development as the primary driver, more recent scholarship highlights the importance of local political partisanship and ideology, particularly where cities enjoy discretion in implementation (Choi et al., 2010; de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw, 2016; de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2024; Gerber, 2013; Gerber & Hopkins, 2011; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014). Paper B therefore argues for measuring city council interest through prior decision records. The second explanatory factor, *local implementation conditions*, draws on the policy implementation literature. I argue that both internal and external conditions shape implementation capacity. *Internal factors* refer to the city administration's organizational capacity, including administrative structures, personnel, and financial resources. *External factors* encompass broader socioeconomic and contextual factors that may constrain or enable implementation of the policy in question (e.g., Goggin et al., 1990; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975; Winter, 2012b).

Together, city council interest and local implementation conditions combine to form an explanatory typology—an implementation strategy matrix—with varying degrees of local fit, as outlined in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2: A Matrix for Local Implementation Strategies Based on Local Fit**

		Local implementation conditions	
		Facilitating +	Constraining ÷
City council interest	Prior city policy aligned with national policy +	A. High local fit <i>Supportive implementation</i>	B. Medium fit <i>Forced or dashed implementation</i>
	÷ Prior city policy misaligned with national policy	C. Medium fit <i>Ignored or tempted implementation</i>	D. Low local fit <i>Resistant implementation</i>

Note: Categories are dichotomous for overview. In practice, these variables are continuous.

Finally, I reverse the perspective in Paper C (influence paper), which focuses on how individual cities can seek influence over national policymaking and the conditions necessary for success. Influence is understood “as control over political outputs,” meaning “that an actor is viewed as influential, if behavior results in or prevents changes in political decisions or in the political agenda that are preferable/undesirable to the actor” (Pedersen, 2013, p. 30). To investigate city-level influence, I draw on foundational insights from the interest group literature, which advances an argument about *resource exchange* between interest groups and policymakers (e.g., Binderkrantz, 2005; Binderkrantz et al., 2024; Bouwen, 2004; Christiansen et al., 2004; Pedersen et al., 2014; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). According to this argument, interest groups can gain political influence when they are able to supply resources that policymakers value. Municipal interest organizations play an important role as a collective intermediaries between local governments and the national government (Blom-Hansen, 2002; Hula, 1999; Knill et al., 2021b). However, research also shows that local governments sometimes lobby on an individual basis (Goldstein & You, 2017; Kjærgaard, 2016; Loftis & Kettler, 2016; Payson, 2020, 2022). In Paper C, I suggest that the resource exchange logic also applies to cities seeking to influence policymakers independently. Accordingly, I argue that individual cities can gain influence if they are able to offer national policymakers valuable resources, such as *political support*—for example, positive media attention or the shaping of public opinion (e.g., Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Dür, 2019)—*technical knowledge*; that is, information about policy problems and potential solutions (e.g., Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Bouwen, 2004; Christiansen et al., 2004), or *implementation capacity*, understood as the organizational arrangements and resources required to carry out policy (see e.g., Blom-Hansen, 1999a, p. 45; Rhodes, 1981; Rhodes, 1997). Whereas the first two types of resources are derived from the interest group literature,

the argument concerning implementation capacity is rooted in multi-level governance settings (Boadway & Shah, 2009). The implementation literature shows that many policies are altered during implementation (e.g., Bardach, 1977; Barrett & Fudge, 1981; Nakamura & Smallwood, 1980). Because cities are often responsible for implementing national policies, I argue that they have a strong interest in how such policies are formulated, financed, and fit locally. At the same time, because the state often depends on cities for implementation, it is likely to grant influence to secure compliant and effective implementation. In sum, I argue in Paper C that when cities can supply one or more resources on which the state depends, they are likely to be granted policy influence.

Table 2.3 summarizes core theoretical arguments in the individual papers and how they relate to the overarching concept of double democracy.

**Table 2.3: Theoretical Arguments Used to Study Aspects of the Double Democracy**

Paper	Short Research Question	Main Theoretical Argument	Dimension of the Double Democracy
A	How do local governments customize?	Local councils adapt national policy to the local context in a local political customization process	Implementation
B	Why do local governments customize?	Local governments implement based on how well national policies fit locally (city council interest + local implementation conditions)	Implementation
C	How do local governments influence? When are they successful?	Local governments can gain influence by exchanging resources on which the national government depends	Policy-making influence

### 2.3. Chapter Summary

This chapter has situated the dissertation within three broad strands of literature: vertical policy-process integration, decentralization theory and fiscal federalism, and policy implementation theory. Together, these literatures examine multi-level governance—or, more specifically, vertical interactions between levels of government in policymaking and implementation—from different angles. I draw on a range of theoretical ideas and concepts from these bodies of work. However, I also argue that certain dimensions have received limited attention. In particular, I highlight that this dissertation addresses,

among other things, the political agency of local governments, the grey zone of authority and the policy tensions it produces, and the need to view policy implementation in a double democracy as a local political process rather than a purely administrative one. To address these gaps, the dissertation introduces the concept of double democracy. Finally, I have summarized the core theoretical arguments advanced in the papers. The democracy paper (Paper A) introduces the concept of double democracy and investigates how local governments customize national policy through local political processes. The customization paper (Paper B) explains variation in customization as a function of local fit, understood as the combination of city council interest and local implementation conditions. The influence paper (Paper C) theorizes how cities can gain policy influence by offering three types of resources—political support, technical knowledge, and implementation capacity—on which the national government depends.



# Chapter 3: Methodology

Across the three empirical papers, I employ a diverse methodological toolbox that combines multiple research designs and data sources. I conduct case studies involving varying numbers of cases or units of analysis and draw on both qualitative and quantitative data. The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the methodological approaches employed, justify the underlying design choices, and introduce the empirical research setting used in Papers A, B, and C. I also account for Paper D, which makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating how internal government policy documents can be used to study policymaking processes.

## 3.1. Empirical Research Setting

To study the overarching research question of *how* a double democracy operates between national and local governments, it is necessary to select a research setting in which the core components of double democracy are *likely* present (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, pp. 270–274). This requires a research setting that meets the following criteria:

1. *A politically decentralized country.* The study must examine a country with at least some degree of political decentralization from the national government to lower tiers of government. If no decision-making authority is delegated to local governments, there is, by definition, no double democracy to study.
2. *A policy area with scope for customization and potential for influence.* Beyond a decentralized national context, the study must focus on a policy area in which the national government formulates policy and local governments are responsible for implementation. Importantly, the policy must allow local governments some discretion in implementation if distinct policy goals across levels of government are to co-exist. Moreover, to study local influence on national policymaking, the policy area must provide opportunities for local governments to attempt to shape national decisions.
3. *Within-case variation.* Because some of the papers move beyond studies of how processes in the double democracy take place but have also explanatory ambitions (Papers B and C), the research setting must include multiple cases or units of analysis to generate variation. Such variation is necessary to observe differences in both dependent and independent variables.

To meet these criteria, I study the formulation and implementation of social housing policy in Denmark. First, Denmark is a country with a high degree of political decentralization (Boadway & Shah, 2009; Ladner et al., 2018; Ladner et al., 2023). It is a unitary state with 98 municipalities governed by locally elected councils, elected every four years. Danish municipalities are responsible for a broad range of welfare-state services and account for a substantial share of total public expenditure. They also enjoy general competence to undertake new tasks not explicitly mandated by law and possess tax-raising authority, albeit within national constraints (Blom-Hansen, 1999a; Boadway & Shah, 2009; Page & Goldsmith, 1987; Pedersen et al., 2025). While Danish local governments do not formally participate in national policymaking, they are comparatively powerful in an international perspective. Taken together, Danish local governments possess the autonomy and responsibilities required to study the operation of a double democracy.

Second, I focus on the policy area of social housing. In Denmark, social housing policy is characterized by broad national regulation setting out the responsibilities of housing organizations and local governments, organizational models, housing types, financial schemes, and more. Within this framework, local governments decide where social housing is to be planned and built, by whom, and in what quantities. As a result, key decisions regarding concrete social housing construction are made through local political processes in local councils. This broad division of labor changed significantly with the introduction of new national regulation on so-called “ghettos” in 2018.<sup>3</sup> This legislation required ten Danish local governments to physically transform 15 designated areas in cooperation with housing organizations<sup>4</sup>. Prior to the reform, these areas consisted of more than 90% social housing units. The legislation mandated that this share be reduced to a maximum of 40% by 2030. While this target was fixed, local councils and housing organizations retained discretion in selecting the combination of physical tools used to achieve it, including demolition, sale of units, construction of private housing, or conversion of social housing into elderly or youth housing. Two features of this legislation are particularly important. First, local councils retained room for customization, enabling them to adapt implementation strategies to local conditions and preferences. Second, the new policy demands represented a substantial national intervention in a policy area previously left to local decision-making, thereby increasing local political salience and creating incentives for

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<sup>3</sup> This terminology was contested, but since it was the official legislative term, I use this notion.

<sup>4</sup> I focus on physical transformation of social housing areas set out in Laws 38 and 39 (2018).

municipalities to seek influence over national policymaking. Importantly, local governments held divergent preferences regarding the content and consequences of the reform, making individual attempts to influence national policy both possible and likely. Further details on the legislation and specific policy processes examined are provided in the individual papers.

Third, the explanatory ambitions of Papers B and C require empirical variation. I therefore exploit the fact that the subordinate level of democracy consists of multiple local governments that did not respond uniformly during either the national policy formulation phase or the policy implementation phase. In Paper B, I investigate why local governments adopted markedly different implementation strategies—sometimes even across areas within the same city. In Paper C, I analyze variation in local government attempts to influence upcoming national policy. This within-case variation enables me to explain differences in implementation strategies as well as successful and unsuccessful efforts to exert policy influence.

Taken together, this research setting—the formulation and implementation of social housing legislation in Denmark—meets the requirements for studying the tensions and interactions of a double democracy. Danish local governments generally enjoy considerable autonomy, which is challenged when the national government introduces new policy objectives for the transformation of designated vulnerable social housing areas. More specifically, the legislation combines a mandatory national target with discretion for local governments to customize, among other things, the mix of physical tools used to achieve it. At the same time, the reform represented a sufficiently substantial departure from prior practice that local governments were likely to try to seek influence over the national policymaking process. The regulation of the transformation of social housing areas therefore constitutes a particularly fruitful research setting for studying the tensions between different levels of government within a double democracy. Furthermore, because local governments held divergent views regarding the feasibility and desirability of the new policy, they responded very differently, both in terms of early lobbying efforts and in their subsequent implementation strategies. This within-case variation provides the empirical leverage needed to address the dissertation’s explanatory research questions.

### 3.2. Research Designs

My empirical studies are all designed as case studies (Gerring, 2004, 2017). I follow Gerring’s (2004, p. 341) definition of a case study as an in-depth study of a single, relatively bounded phenomenon conducted with the ambition of saying something about a larger class of similar phenomenon. Case studies thus typically involve a relatively small number of cases (small/medium-N),

but they examine them in greater depth than large-N approaches (Gerring, 2017). In this sense, case studies favor depth over breadth. Relatedly, case studies place particular emphasis on context. By delving “into” cases, researchers can account for the rich real-world contexts in which they are embedded (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 1994). More generally, case studies are well suited for investigating research questions that focus on *how* processes and interactions unfold over time (Gerring, 2017; Yin, 1994).

However, this does not imply that case study research must be limited to a single case, nor does it preclude explanatory ambitions. Indeed, in all the empirical papers, I leverage the fact that each case holds multiple *units of analysis* (Gerring, 2004). As outlined below, I use this within-case variation in different ways across the studies. In some of the papers, I employ classic comparative case study methods to address explanatory questions. Although there are different ways of combining cross-case and within-case analyses, scholars generally agree that the key advantage of such designs is that they link broader regularities across cases with in-depth insights into causal complexity and sequences of mechanisms within cases (Beach & Rohlfing, 2018; Goertz & Haggard, 2023; Goertz & Mahoney, 2013; Lieberman, 2005).

Table 3.1 provides an overview of research designs, empirical settings, and main data sources. In the following paragraphs, I summarize the research designs employed; for full details, please see the individual papers. In Paper A, which has as an exploratory and descriptive aim, I employ a diverse case selection strategy (Gerring, 2017, pp. 58–62) and select three heterogeneous units to maximize the potential for analytic generalization beyond the units studied. The objective is to select housing areas and local governments that capture key dimensions of variation among Danish local governments in the best way possible. In this paper, the case is the implementation of new social housing policy in Denmark, while the units (sub-cases) are the local political customization processes in three local governments.

In the customization paper (Paper B), which has an explanatory aim, I employ a nested comparative case study design combining cross-case and within-case analyses (Lieberman, 2005). This design allows for both the identification of broader cross-case patterns and the investigation of mechanisms within cases. The initial cross-case comparison follows the logic of a most-similar systems design comparing local governments that differ on both independent and dependent variables but share many structural features that cannot plausibly explain divergent outcomes (e.g., Collier, 1993; Lijphart, 1971). In the subsequent within-case analysis of mechanisms, I select diverse cases to maximize variation on key independent variables (Gerring, 2017, pp. 89–92; Lieberman, 2005, p. 444). This “double” or “nested” design yields more robust explanations than either a purely cross-case comparison or a set of

isolated in-depth case studies. In this paper, the case is again the implementation of new social housing policy in Denmark, while the units of analysis are the implementation plans for 15 housing areas.

**Table 3.1: Overview of Research Questions (RQ), Research Designs, Empirical Setting, and Data Sources in the Three Empirical Papers**

Paper	Short RQ	Research Design	Empirical Setting	Main Data Sources*
A	How do local governments customize?	Exploratory case study 3 units of analysis	Implementation of new social housing regulations in Denmark	43,000+ pages of internal documents 21 interviews
B	Why do local governments customize?	Explanatory case study (nested comparative design) 15 + 6 units of analysis	Implementation of new social housing regulations in Denmark	Local government and development plan indicators 13,000+ pages of internal documents 11 elite interviews
C	How do local governments influence (and when are they successful?)	Descriptive and explanatory case study (process-tracing) 35 units of analysis	Formulation of new social housing regulations in Denmark	30,000+ pages of internal documents 17 elite interviews

Note: The number of unique interviews is 24 and approximately 43,000 pages of unique internal policy documents.

Finally, in the influence paper (Paper C), which both describes patterns of individual city lobbying and develops explanations for success, I apply process-tracing methods to analyze 35 units of analysis (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). These units cover seven substantive elements of the new law across five political stages, ranging from policy preparation to implementation. For each unit, I systematically assess a set of predefined observable implications that should be present if a city successfully gains policy influence. I elaborate on this operationalization below. I then compare successful and unsuccessful units to identify the conditions under which cities succeed in influencing national policy. This design allows me to establish cross-unit patterns in cities' attempts to seek influence while also deriving explanations for when cities are successful in gaining influence. In this paper, the case is the formulation of new social housing legislation, and the units are distinct elements of the law at different points in time.

In case study research, questions of external validity, or generalizability, largely hinge on case selection and the specification of scope conditions (Gerring, 2017). Scholars should therefore be explicit about the broader

universe to which the case belongs, clearly delineating whether the findings apply to, for example, all countries or only certain political systems? Or all policy areas or only specific types of policies? Such transparency helps the reader to assess how far the findings can travel beyond the case studied. I return to this issue and discuss generalizability in greater detail in Chapter 5.

### 3.3. Key Data Sources

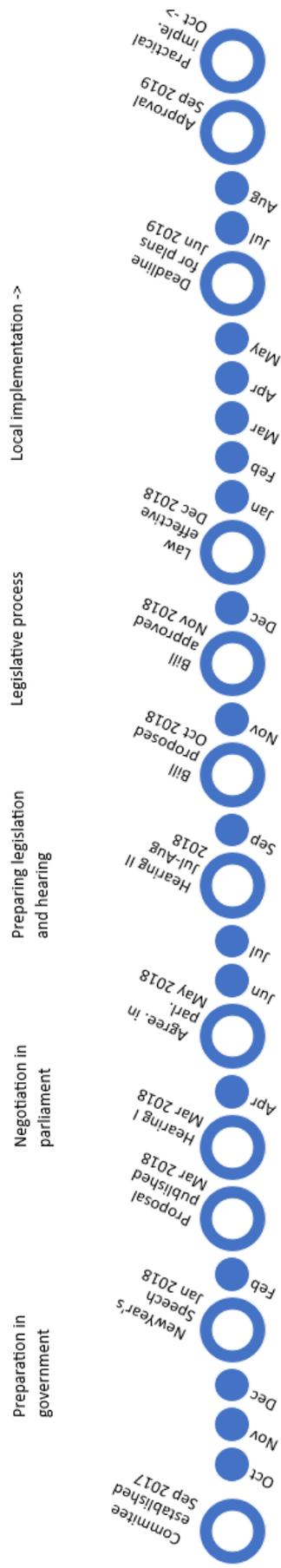
For all the case studies, I rely on a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data sources. All my data sources are observational in the sense that they are not intentionally manipulated by the researcher (Gerring, 2017, p. 29). Across all papers, the most important data sources are *internal policy documents*, which I triangulate with *elite interviews*. In addition, I draw on publicly available documents, most importantly city council and committee decisions, finalized development plans, and media coverage. In Paper B (customization paper), I also employ a set of more quantitative indicators relating to cities and housing areas. These key indicators include measures of the specific tools used in each development plan, as well as measures of prior city council policy positions, the physical condition of housing areas, administrative capacity, political majority, and city-level economic and population growth indicators. I elaborate on the operationalization of a selection of key variables below. Using multiple data sources to establish triangulation is a key methodological strategy in social science research in general and in case study research in particular, as it enhances construct validity (Rapp & Andersen, 2025; Yin, 1994, p. 34). Reliance on multiple data sources is a major strength, as it ensures that evidence from different sources can be cross-checked, thereby providing a more robust empirical foundation for the analytical conclusions.

The following sections provide an overview of my collection of internal policy documents and elite interviews, and I describe how I combine these two qualitative data sources in the analyses. Further details regarding data collection and analytic procedures are provided in the individual papers and their appendices. A key step in using internal policy documents for empirical research is gaining access to them. For Papers A, B, and C, I entered into four formal cooperation agreements to obtain access to documents—one with a national ministry and three with different local governments. These agreements granted access to internal documents and correspondence, subject to agreed terms regarding confidentiality and the non-disclosure of personal information. I was subsequently granted access to the case files and documents stored within the relevant government units that pertained to the cases under investigation (i.e., the formulation and/or implementation of the “ghetto law”). As the figures in Table 3.1 show, this process resulted in a very large (and initially overwhelming) volume of data. In total, I obtained more than 30,000 pages of

documents from the former Ministry for Transport, Building and Housing, and more than 13,000 pages from the municipalities of Aarhus, Slagelse, and Kolding.

The cooperation agreements also granted me permission to interview individuals directly involved in the policy processes at both the national and local levels. These included key politicians and civil servants from both levels of government. In addition, I interviewed central actors from interest organizations, specifically the municipal interest organization KL (Local Government Denmark) and the social housing interest organization BL (The Danish Federation of Non-Profit Housing Providers). All 24 interviewees participated under conditions of pseudonymity, and the collection of interviews was ethically approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University. I conducted all the interviews after reviewing the relevant documents, which proved advantageous, as it contributed to targeted follow-up questions based on prior document analysis. More specifically, interviews were used to clarify how events unfolded and to probe the motivations underlying key decisions and actions behind what took place. Interviews were therefore particularly valuable for understanding why certain developments occurred and how different actors perceived them, aspects that are typically not explicitly documented in internal documents. This illustrates triangulation in practice: Internal documents provided the empirical backbone, while interviews were used to fill gaps, clarify ambiguities, and add detail. The interviews were all conducted as semi-structured informant interviews (Johnson, 2004). This format enabled the collection of rich, detailed accounts while ensuring that all core topics were systematically covered, and it allowed flexibility to pursue emerging themes through follow-up and open-ended questions. The interviews all followed a similar chronological structure, supported by the use of a visual timeline of key events placed on the table during the interview (see Figure 3.1).

**Figure 3-1: Overall Timeline of New Policy on Transformation of “Ghetto Areas” Used for Interviews**



### 3.4. Operationalization

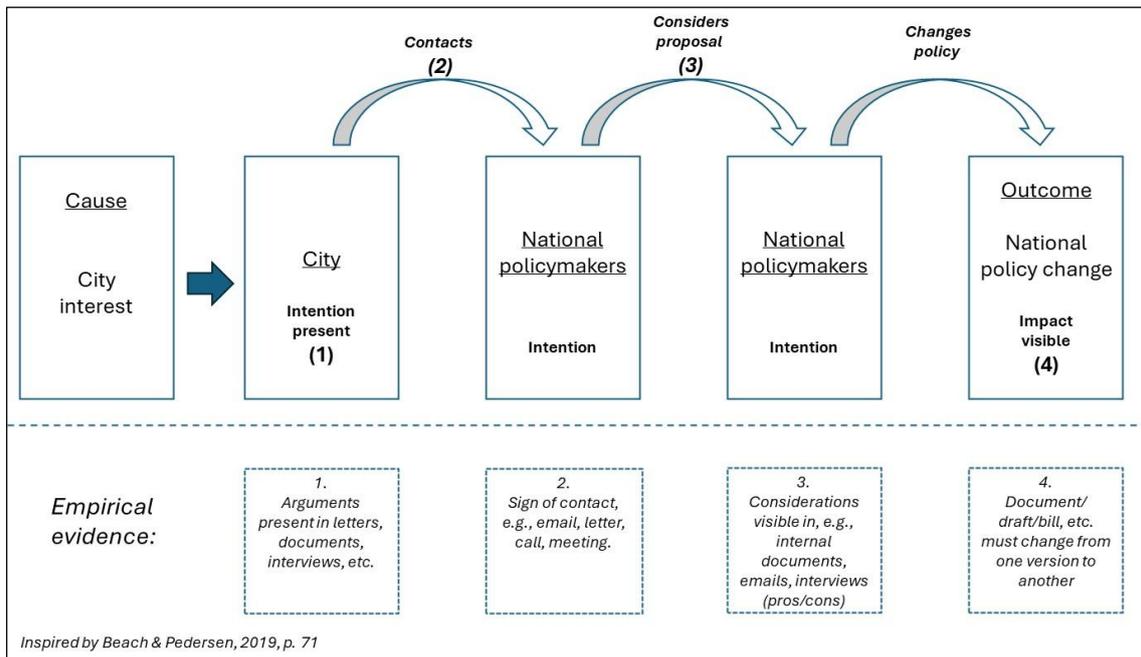
This section summarizes some of the key operationalizations in the customization paper (Paper B) and influence paper (Paper C). Together, they illustrate how I combine quantitative and qualitative data sources in the empirical analyses. The customization paper investigates explanations for variation in local implementation strategies, where the dependent variable is the degree of physical transformation of a housing area, while the key explanatory (independent) variables are the combination of city council interest and local implementation conditions (see the typology in Table 2.2). The full list of variables and their operationalization is presented in Paper B. To measure the dependent variable, I calculate a transformation percentage by weighting the four physical tools specified in the legislation (demolitions, sales, densification, relabeling) for each housing area. I rank the tools according to the extent of physical change they produce from a citizen's perspective. Demolitions are treated as the most transformative tool, while relabeling is the least transformative. Accordingly, I assign higher weights to demolitions and sales (1 and 0.75, respectively) than to densification and relabeling (0.5 and 0.25, respectively). Greater reliance on more transformative tools therefore results in a higher transformation score, and vice versa.

The two key independent variables are operationalized follows: To account for city council interest, I investigate whether cities had previously developed or adopted physical development plans or related policies for the housing area prior to the 2018 national reform. The existence of such plans indicates that the city council had already endorsed physical transformation as a policy solution, implying alignment between local preferences and the national policy. Conversely, where no such plans existed, I treat the national requirement for physical transformation as misaligned with prior local policy and thus misaligned to city council interest. Based on this assessment, prior city policy is categorized as either "pro-transformation" or "no transformation." To account for the local implementation conditions, I focus on two dimensions that are particularly salient for this policy: 1) implementation capacity and 2) the physical state of the housing area. Implementation capacity is measured by the number of relevant administrative staff in the city administration (e.g., architects, engineers, planners, and professionals with a social sciences background), who are needed to design and oversee physical transformation plans. This information is found in the municipal staff and salary database (sirka—krl.dk). The physical state of the housing area is measured by whether housing organizations have undertaken major renovation investments within the past 10 years. Where such investments have occurred, city councils are expected to be more reluctant to pursue extensive physical transformation due to sunk

costs. Based on these indicators, local implementation conditions are categorized as *constraining* (recent renovation and low administrative capacity), *facilitating* (no recent renovation and high administrative capacity), or *mixed* (high administrative capacity but renovated area or low administrative capacity but area not recently renovated). In addition, I include indicators of economic growth, population growth, and the ideological orientation of the city council majority to assess potential rival explanations.

In the influence paper (Paper C), I employ process-tracing methods to study how individual cities seek to influence national policymaking. I specify four theoretically derived observable implications, all of which must be empirically identifiable in order to conclude that a city has successfully gained policy influence. First, a city must demonstrate an intention to impact national-level policy. Second, there must be empirical evidence of direct interaction between the city and national policymakers on a specific policy element at a given stage of the process. Third, it must be observable that the national policymakers not only received but actively considered the city's input. Fourth and finally, there must be documented changes in written policy outputs (e.g., drafts, proposals, legislative texts) that align with the city's stated intentions. When all four observable implications are present, I conclude that a city has successfully exercised policy influence. This causal logic is summarized in Figure 3.2, which graphically links the cause (city intention) to the effect (changes in national policy) through the four steps and specifies the type of empirical evidence required at each stage. I then apply this framework to systematically trace the connection between city interest and policy change across multiple policy elements and political stages, drawing on evidence found in internal documents and elite interviews.

**Figure 3.2. Process-tracing mechanisms linking city interest with national policy change**



Note: Published as Figure 1 in Nielsen (2025).

### 3.5. Advocating Increased Use of Internal Policy Documents (Paper D)

Paper D (documents) is a methods paper that assesses the use of internal policy documents, a core empirical data source across all of the empirical papers. More specifically, Paper D argues for the increased use of internal policy documents in studies of governmental policymaking processes. In this paper, my co-author and I define internal policy documents as nonpublic materials produced or stored within government to support the formulation or implementation of policy decisions. They comprise a broad range of documents, including decision proposals, memos, minutes, drafts, and emails, all sharing the feature that they were not produced to communicate with the public but to underpin internal processes across levels of government. Put simply, internal policy documents are close-to-decision materials used in real-world decision-making and implementation processes within government.

Because we live in a digital age, these documents also share the key feature of being digitally born (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022). This has important implications for both the depth and volume of data they contain. We argue that digitalization has dramatically increased the quantity and richness of documents produced. More documents are created than ever before, and digitalization entails that multiple iterations, as well as process and communication documents (e.g., emails, workflows) are now stored digitally. As a result,

internal policy documents constitute a rich but still underutilized data source allowing researchers to trace decision-making processes with unprecedented detail, capturing not only final outcomes but also the intermediate steps, drafts, and exchanges that shaped them.

In Paper D, we compare internal policy documents with two other major qualitative approaches: elite interviews and participant observation. We argue that interviews provide valuable insights into government processes, but they are inherently retrospective and filtered through respondents' memories. Consequently, information may be biased due to forgetting or strategic distortion (Beamer, 2002; Dexter, 1970; Hochschild, 2009). Ethnographic observation, while offering very close, real-time insights, is constrained by the problem that researchers can only know in hindsight which processes are consequential. Internal policy documents overcome these limitations: they are contemporary records of governing processes and are produced without anticipation of external scrutiny. We therefore argue that they offer an authentic window into real-world decision-making. We demonstrate the significance of these differences by providing examples of the qualities of internal policy documents compared to other sources. One such example draws on Nielsen (2025)—Paper C—which shows how cities were able to influence national legislators despite a very closed process at the government core. Had the study relied solely on interviews, it would have suggested that cities played only a marginal role, reflecting central policymakers' retrospective accounts. Internal documents, however, revealed a substantially different pattern of influence.

Finally, Paper D shares our experiences with managing large volumes of documents. We summarize these strategies—which are also central to this dissertation—as *skimming* and *sorting*. To gain an overview of the data, we follow Bowen's (2009, p. 32) advice to 1) skim, 2) read, and 3) interpret. Skimming is particularly useful for developing a preliminary understanding of the material. Keyword searches across digital document collections are highly useful at this stage. Subsequently, sorting documents is essential for filtering documents from a "gross population" to a "net population" of analytically relevant materials organized into categories. For process-oriented studies, we strongly recommend constructing timelines that organize key events in temporal sequence, providing a clear overview of what happened and when. Figure 3.1 illustrates this approach by presenting an overall timeline of the legislative process concerning the transformation of so-called "ghetto areas," from early ministerial preparation to the onset of local implementation. Taken together, Paper D advocates for increased use of internal policy documents. Their proximity to actual decision-making, combined with the richness

generated by digitalization, makes them indispensable for studying policy-making and implementation processes in contemporary democracies.

### 3.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological approaches applied throughout the dissertation. I combine multiple research designs and data sources to examine how a double democracy operates in practice. The empirical setting is Denmark, and the policy area is social housing. This setting is chosen because Denmark is a politically decentralized country in which local governments enjoy significant autonomy and responsibility, and because social housing allows for local customization within a national framework, thereby generating within-case variation. These characteristics make it likely that the dynamics of double democracy are observable, rendering the setting suitable for both descriptive and explanatory analysis. The empirical studies are all designed as case studies, enabling in-depth analysis of processes and interactions over time. I combine cross-case and within-case research designs, along with process-tracing methods, to provide robust answers to research questions that are both descriptive and explanatory. I rely on multiple data sources. Most importantly, I have collected and analyzed more than 43,000 pages of internal policy documents, which I have triangulated with 24 elite interviews conducted with representatives from different levels of government and interest organizations. In some studies, this data is further supplemented with public documents and quantitative indicators. I illustrated selected operationalizations in Papers B and C. Together, the combination of cross-case and within-case designs and robust data triangulation provides a solid foundation for addressing the dissertation's overarching research question. Finally, I summarized the main contribution of Paper D, a methodological paper on internal policy documents, which argues that they constitute a rich yet underutilized data source in the digital age.



# Chapter 4: Main Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the main empirical findings from Papers A, B, and C. I focus on general patterns and conclusions within and across the papers and refer readers to the individual papers for detailed, in-depth analyses.

## 4.1. Paper A: How Local Customization Takes Place

Paper A (democracy paper) explores how local customization processes unfold in a double democracy. Building on the concept of double democracy and the associated dilemmas introduced in the theoretical section, the paper derives three guiding analytical questions (Q1–Q3) to structure the empirical analysis. These questions address (Q1) the involvement of political leadership within the councils, (Q2), interactions between central and local government, and (Q3) the customization decisions made by local councils during implementation. The empirical section of Paper A provides a detailed account of the policy processes in three local governments: Aarhus, Slagelse, and Kolding. Among the group of local governments subject to the new “ghetto legislation,” these cases differ significantly on the development plans adopted (both targets and instruments) as well as on key background characteristics, including political leadership, prior experience, and size. Following this in-depth case analysis, I conduct a systematic cross-case comparison using theoretically derived parameters.

Despite the deliberate selection of diverse cases, the analysis reveals pronounced commonalities in the local customization processes. With respect to customization decisions (Q3), all three local councils adapted both the targets and instruments of national policy to local conditions. One council (Aarhus) customized the policy beyond national requirements; two councils (Aarhus and Slagelse) aligned new demands with pre-existing local plans; and one city council (Kolding) customized in ways that limited the impact of new requirements. Local councils also adjusted the geographical boundaries of designated areas (Kolding and Slagelse) to better reflect local preferences, whereas Aarhus deliberately refrained from boundary changes to preserve a high level of transformation. Across all three cases, the councils were deeply involved in organizational matters. Political representatives from the council participated directly in cooperation with housing organizations and engaged in decisions regarding future administrative arrangements. The new national policy was integrated with both existing local initiatives and new, supplementary efforts at own expense, that is, initiatives not legally mandated by the state. While the

level of ambition varied, all three councils committed to additional initiatives financed at their own discretion and expense.

Regarding council involvement (Q1), the analysis shows variation in timing, with some councils initiating implementation considerations earlier than others. Nevertheless, the local councils were all deeply engaged, despite differences in policy approaches, prior experience, and administrative capacity. The council members participated through a range of political fora, from formal political agreements and coalition negotiations (Aarhus) to specialized council committees (Kolding and Slagelse). Finally, the analysis demonstrates variation in central–local interactions (Q2). All three local governments participated in a national–local administrative dialogue—a so-called “implementation forum” coordinated by the ministry. In addition, two councils (Kolding and Aarhus) engaged in direct political dialogue aimed at influencing national policymakers on both the overarching goals and the instruments of the policy. Table 4.1 provides an overview of customization processes across the three cases.

**Table 4.1: Local Policy Customization Processes**

Analytical dimension		Aarhus	Slagelse	Kolding
Customization decisions (Q3)	<i>Strategy</i>	Customization to fulfill existing high local ambitions	Customization to fit national requirements to local conditions and preferences	Customization to minimize national interference
	<i>Topics</i>	Target Instruments Lobbying Boundaries (not changed) Supplementary efforts Organization	Target Instruments Boundaries (Changed) Supplementary efforts Organization	Target Instruments Lobbying Boundaries (changed) Supplementary efforts Organization
Council involvement (Q1)	<i>Fora</i>	Magistrate Coalition meeting Council	Standing committees Special advisory committee Council	Special advisory committee Standing committees Council
	<i>Timing</i>	Very early	Late	Late (except debate meeting)
	<i>Degree</i>	Very deep	Deep	Deep
Local-national interaction (Q2)		Political inputs (early) Hearing Administrative dialogue with central government	Administrative dialogue with central government	Political inputs (later) Hearing Administrative dialogue with central government

## 4.2. Paper B: Why Cities Customize

Whereas Paper A focuses on customization processes, Paper B investigates the determinants of customization outcomes—in other words, why cities adopt different implementation strategies. Using a nested analytical design, Paper B first presents cross-case findings across all 15 housing areas. The dependent variable is the degree of physical transformation of a housing area. The independent variables are city council interest and local implementation conditions, which are combined to form an explanatory typology (see Table 2.2). The core argument is that cities that have adopted prior physical development plans—as an expression of city council interest—and that have faced facilitating conditions (high administrative capacity and an area not previously renovated) are more likely to pursue highly transformative plans. Conversely, cities lacking prior transformation policies and facing constraining conditions (low administrative capacity and prior investment in renovation) are more likely to adopt less transformative (i.e., conservative) plans.

Table 4.2 provides an overview of the cross-case findings in Paper B. Specifically, it reports the average percentage of physical transformation across groups defined by the key independent variables. As shown, plans are more transformative where local fit is high (62% transformation on average), moderately transformative where fit is medium (45%), and least transformative (i.e., conservative) where local fit is low (33%). The same pattern emerges when examining city council interest and local implementation conditions separately. Plans are, on average, more transformative where prior council policy toward the area is “pro-transformation” (59%) and less transformative where prior policy is not (30%). Similarly, plans are more transformative under facilitating conditions, where housing has not been renovated and administrative capacity is high (62%); moderately transformative under mixed conditions (52%); and least transformative under constraining conditions, where areas have been renovated and administrative capacity is low (33%). Taken together, these findings support the theoretical expectation that local implementation strategies reflect local fit when looking across the development plans adopted for the 15 housing areas.

**Table 4-2: Average Transformation Percentage of Area Plans across Groups on Key Variables**

	Local fit	City council interest (area)	Local implementation conditions (area)	Party/ideology	Economic result	Population growth	Residents as share of total population
	High	Prior pro-transformation policy	Facilitating	Right	Positive (high)	High	High
	Medium	No prior transformation policy	Mixed	Left	Positive (small)	Medium	Medium
	Low		Constraining		Negative	Small	Small
Average transformation percentage of plans	31	30	33	53	54	40	49
Pattern as expected?							

Table 4.2 also reports the average scores for several alternative independent variables included to assess rival explanations. First, I examine whether economic pressure or lack of population growth leads cities to adopt more transformative plans in order to attract higher-income residents (Peterson, 1981). This expectation is not supported. I also test whether political partisanship matters (Anzia, 2021)—specifically, whether cities governed by left-leaning majorities adopt less transformative (i.e., more conservative) plans in an effort to protect social housing and tenants’ rights and to resist the right-wing government’s physical policy measures. This is likewise not supported. In fact, the relationship runs in the opposite direction: the four most transformative plans are adopted by cities with left-leaning mayors. Finally, I assess whether plans are influenced by the relative size of the housing area. On the one hand, larger areas might incentivize policymakers to pursue greater transformation to limit the proportion of low-income residents in the housing stock. On the other hand, because these residents also represent a substantial share of the electorate, policymakers might avoid measures that could generate electoral backlash. As Table 4.2 shows, the evidence is inconclusive: medium-sized areas exhibit the least transformative plans (42%) compared with small areas (49%) and larger areas (58%).

Ruling out these rival explanations strengthens Paper B’s central argument; namely, that development plans are primarily shaped by the combination of city council interest and local implementation conditions. The paper includes robustness checks demonstrating that the findings hold when alternative operationalizations of the dependent and independent variables are used. At the same time, the relationship is not linear, and the paper discusses outliers that deviate from the overall pattern. Notably, no city failed to comply by either refraining from submitting a plan or proposing insufficient transformation that would trigger state rejection. This compliance is likely explained by the severity of potential sanctions, including the threat of state takeover of housing areas, which would entail even more extensive transformation and a loss of local planning authority.

In the second part of the analysis in Paper B, the customization paper, I follow up on the cross-case findings with in-depth studies of six housing areas across three cities. The aim is to examine mechanisms in greater detail and to assess whether the explanations identified in the cross-case analysis hold when moving closer to local decision-making processes. For this purpose, I select six housing areas in three cities—Kolding, Slagelse, and Aarhus—that vary on the key independent variables (Lieberman, 2005, p. 444). Table 4.3 maps all of the housing areas in an explanatory matrix. As shown, both areas in Aarhus (1) fall into the “high fit” category, both areas in Kolding (7) are “low fit,” while the Slagelse areas (5) occupy mixed categories.

**Table 4.3: Mapping Areas by Local Implementation Conditions and City Council Interest**

		Local implementation conditions (area)		
		Facilitating	Mixed	Constraining
City council interest (area)	+	(A) High fit Gellerup+ <sup>1</sup> (85%) Vollsmose <sup>2</sup> (70%) Bispehaven <sup>1</sup> (66%) Gadehavegaard <sup>3</sup> (46%) Mjølnerparken <sup>4</sup> (41%)	Tingbjerg+ <sup>4</sup> (74%) Taastrupgaard <sup>3</sup> (58%) Ringparken <sup>5</sup> (53%)	(B) Medium fit Motalavej <sup>5</sup> (40%)
	No prior transformation policy		Sundparken <sup>6</sup> (23%)	Skovvejen+ <sup>7</sup> (44%) Stengaardsvej <sup>8</sup> (43%) Munkebo <sup>7</sup> (24%) Finlandsparken <sup>9</sup> (22%) Agervang <sup>10</sup> (22%)
	÷	(C) Medium fit		(D) Low fit

Notes: Cities: 1) Aarhus, 2) Odense, 3) Høje-Taastrup, 4) Copenhagen 5) Slagelse, 6) Horsens, 7) Kolding, 8) Esbjerg, 9) Vejle, and 10) Holbæk.

“Mixed” refers to only one of the two enhancing conditions being in place.

“Area” in parentheses indicates area-level variations on both dimensions (city council interest and local implementation conditions).

The case studies reinforce the overall argument in two important ways. First, they show that city councils’ local policy goals are crucial to understanding how and why national legislation is customized. When prior city policy aligns with new national policy, that is, when transformation plans are already in place, implementation is oriented toward leveraging national legislation to advance existing local objectives. This pattern is evident in Aarhus, where an interviewee exclaims: “We welcomed it [the legislation] with open arms” (Interview 11, Aarhus City). A similar dynamic is observed in Slagelse, albeit with greater ambivalence toward the most contested tool: “I was happy about the agreement [to make new legislation]. [...] I was surprised that we had to demolish that much in Motalavej. [...] But apart from that, I’m happy about the process. (Interview 17, Slagelse City).” By contrast, when prior city policy does not include transformation plans, legislation is customized to minimize change. In these cases, national requirements are attenuated in favor of divergent local goals and perceptions of the housing area. This dynamic characterizes Kolding’s resistant approach, where one interviewee remarked: “So it seemed ridiculous; that was the common perception” (Interview 22 on the area of Munkebo, Kolding City). Second, the case studies demonstrate that local implementation conditions matter: When a housing area has already

undergone renovation, the city seeks to avoid demolition where possible. This was the case in Kolding and, to a lesser extent, Slagelse but not in the largest area in Aarhus. Administrative capacity further influences implementation: Aarhus possesses substantially greater capacity than Slagelse and Kolding, affecting how readily cities can assume and manage the demands imposed by national policy. Consistent with the cross-case analysis, the rival explanations receive little support in the in-depth studies. Local deliberations reveal no evidence of ideological motivations, nor do considerations related to the city's economic conditions or growth strategies appear to drive implementation decisions. Table 4.4 summarizes the main findings across these within-case analyses.

**Table 4.4: In-Depth Comparison of Local Fit in Three Cities**

	Aarhus	Slagelse	Kolding
City council interest	Prior pro-transformation policy	Prior pro-transformation policy	No prior transformation policy
	Many prior efforts in Gellerup+. Decision to make plan for Bispehaven.	Some reductions made in Motalavej. Plan made for Ringparken.	No plans for physical transformation. National target and tools are not right.
	Areas have problems, and physical transformation is a sound target. Demolitions are a useful tool.	Areas have problems, and physical transformation is sound. Desire to avoid demolitions.	Munkebo is not viewed as problematic. Skovvejen+ has issues, but they can be handled.
Local implementation conditions	Facilitating	Mixed/Constraining	Constraining
	Few renovations in Gellerup (experiments part of plan). Bispehaven renovated in 2005.	Both areas (partly) renovated. Ringparken's renovation is older (1999).	Both areas recently renovated: Skovvejen in 2009 and ongoing. Munkebo in 2012.
	High administrative capacity.	Low administrative capacity.	Low administrative capacity.
	Differences between areas.	Differences between areas.	Differences between areas.

### 4.3. Paper C: City Influence

This section summarizes the main findings of the influence paper (Paper C), in which I systematically trace city influence across seven aspects of the legislation in five political stages. I do so using four observable implications specified in the operationalization section, and Table 4.5 provides a summary of the empirical findings.

**Table 4-5: Mapping city influence on policy formulation across elements and stages**

Policy content	Sub-element	Stages															Elaboration														
		1. Policy preparation					2. Negotiation					3. Hearing and law preparation						4. Legislation					5. Implementation								
		Unit no.	Intention	Contact	Consideration	Impact	Unit no.	Intention	Contact	Consideration	Impact	Unit no.	Intention	Contact	Consideration	Impact		Unit no.	Intention	Contact	Consideration	Impact	Unit no.	Intention	Contact	Consideration	Impact				
A. Ghetto definition	(1) Criteria	U1	N	N	N	N	U2	Y	Y	N	N	U3	Y	Y	N	N	U4	N	N	N	N	U5	Y	Y	N	N	U6	Y	Y	Y	No city influence: A city suggests altering the definition during negotiation, and it is critical during the hearings, but it is not considered.
	(2) Geographical area	U4	N	N	N	N	U5	N	N	N	N	U6	Y	Y	Y	Y	U7	N	N	N	N	U8	Y	Y	N	N	U9	Y	Y	Y	City influence: Following requests by several cities during the hearings, criteria for dividing and enlarging areas are changed.
	(3) Target and tools	U7	N	Y	Y	Y	U8	N	N	N	N	U9	Y	Y	N	N	U10	N	N	N	N	U11	N	N	N	N	U12	N	N	N	No city influence: The core model came from one city, but no intention can be documented. During the hearings other cities try to change the law's target percentage without success. No attempts to change tools.
C. Decision-making processes	(4) Housing organization	U10	N	Y	Y	Y	U11	N	N	N	N	U12	N	N	N	N	U13	Y	Y	Y	Y	U14	N	N	N	N	U15	Y	Y	Y	No city influence: Decision-making procedures likely changed following visit to cities, but no intention can be documented.
	(5) City	U13	Y	Y	Y	Y	U14	N	N	N	N	U15	Y	Y	Y	Y	U16	Y	Y	Y	Y	U17	Y	Y	Y	Y	U18	Y	Y	Y	City influence: A city argues in favor of giving cities greater authority. This was changed both in preparation and following the hearings.
D. Finances	(6) Earmarked sum	U16	Y	Y	Y	N	U17	Y	Y	N	N	U18	Y	Y	N	N	U19	Y	Y	Y	Y	U20	N	N	N	N	U21	N	N	N	No city influence: Several attempts are made across stages to secure more and more flexible funding but unsuccessfully.
	(7) Pricing rules	U19	Y	Y	Y	Y	U20	N	N	N	N	U21	N	N	N	N	U22	Y	Y	Y	Y	U23	N	N	N	N	U24	N	N	N	City influence: By request from one city, new pricing rules are made during preparation.

Note: (1) Y: Yes, N: No (2). Only instances with a complete row of Y-Y-Y documented on the parameters Intention-Contact-Consideration-Impact count as city influence. Instances with N-Y-Y-Y could be termed *unintended influence* or *undocumented intention*. No cities make direct contact to try to push for policy change during the stages of (4) legislation and (5) implementation (equivalent to filling these cells with NNNN).

Note: Published as Table 4 in Nielsen (2025).

The table shows that city influence can be documented for four units of analysis. These units (6, 13, 15, and 19) are marked by a full row of “YYYY,” where Y = Yes and N = No for Intention, Contact, Consideration, and Impact. Table 4.5 also shows two instances where contact, consideration, and impact are present, but where a city intention cannot be documented (NYYY—Units 7 and 10). Here, a city likely provided inspiration, but it cannot be documented that a city pushed for changes on these matters. Finally, it is not possible to document successful city influence on the remaining units (units marked with YYNN or YYYN or NNNN). The basis for these findings is a more than 60-page long empirical analysis covering all units of analysis in full detail which is available as online supportive information for the published Paper C. Paper C contains examples from four of these units—one negative where influence did not succeed and all the instances that did succeed—in the main manuscript. I replicate one of them in condensed form in the following to demonstrate how the conclusions shown in Table 4.5 are reached. For the full details, please see the full paper (Nielsen, 2025).

#### 4.3.1. An Example: How a City Changed the Pricing Rules

Final adjustments are underway when the mayor of a large city sends a letter to the Prime Minister. The letter includes a technical request to exempt transactions from the “additional purchase price” which applies when land is sold for a use other than originally intended. When additional purchase price must be paid, it reduces incentives for housing organizations to sell land to private developers, thereby challenging the city’s densification plans. Time is critical, and the ministry begins developing potential solutions. The preferred option requires approval from three other ministries and is forwarded with the following remark:

We have been asked by the PS [Permanent Secretary] – after inquiry from [city] to the Prime Minister regarding parallel society (attached) – to take into account the wish from [city] to be able to abstain from additional purchase price in our proposal for a bill on parallel society.

The ministry also drafts a proposal to retain land revenue within the housing area, another point raised in the mayor’s letter. Emails and internal documents show that this suggestion prompted serious consideration within the ministry. A meeting follows on February 9, 2018, between the city director and the permanent secretary, and the issue is also raised publicly by the city. Within weeks, the proposal to refrain from charging the additional fee becomes part of the government’s public proposal.

Observable implications are evaluated as follows: A large city sought to change legislation to stimulate private development in a social housing area

(intention = yes). Documentary evidence shows a letter and a meeting (contact = yes). Proposed solutions were drafted and discussed between ministries (consideration = yes). Finally, the proposal was incorporated into the government’s public proposal just three weeks later (change = yes). This configuration is summarized as YYYY in Table 4.6 and corresponds to Unit 19 in Table 4.5.

**Table 4.6: How pricing rules were changed during policy preparation (U19)**

Policy content	Sub-element	Unit no.	Stage			
			1. Policy preparation			
			Intention	Contact	Consideration	Impact
D. Finances	(7) Pricing rules	U19	Y	Y	Y	Y
Conclusion on empirical observations			Yes—city intentions to change pricing rules	Yes—letter and meeting	Yes—solutions drafted and discussed with other ministries	Yes—new proposal to change pricing rules part of policy

Note: Published as Table 7 in Nielsen (2025).

### 4.3.2. What It Takes to Gain Individual Influence

In the final part of the analysis in the influence paper, I compare successful and unsuccessful instances of city influencing to identify the conditions for success. I show that the cases in which the state granted influence are characterized by exchanges of both knowledge (H2) and implementation capacity (H3). Cities achieve influence when they provide information about problems and viable solutions, and when the state depends on their capacity to effectively manage the largest and most visible areas. In this sense, the empirical material suggests that the state granted influence to some cities to ensure that the broader objective of physical transformation would subsequently be implemented. While the exchange of political support (H1) was less prominent, it was observed in one case. I also examine two potential rival explanations: city size and the political affiliation of city councils. The evidence indicates that although successful influence is dominated by large cities, large cities also fail in some instances, and small cities occasionally succeed. This suggests that size matters but does not guarantee success. With respect to political affiliation, neither an under-representation argument from the American literature (Payson, 2022) nor the claim that same-party affiliation facilitates influence (Page & Goldsmith, 1987) is supported. The most influential large cities are governed by Social Democratic mayors, while some of the smaller cities led by right-wing mayors oppose their government party colleagues at the national level.

## 4.4. Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the main empirical findings. Paper A asked how local customization processes take place in a double democracy. The analysis showed that local councils are deeply involved in implementation across all cases, despite differences in approach, prior experience, and capacity. Councils participate in various political fora, and they engage in adapting targets and instruments of national policy to local contexts. Interaction with national government varies: all cities join administrative dialogues, while some local governments also enter political negotiations to seek influence. Overall, this paper shows that local customization of national policy is a political process firmly rooted in the local council. Paper B asked why cities customize differently. The findings support the argument that local implementation strategies reflect local fit—the combination of city council interest and local implementation conditions. Plans are most transformative when cities have already made pro-transformation policies and have facilitating implementation conditions, and least transformative when no such policies have been adopted and conditions constrain. In-depth case studies confirm this overall conclusion. Paper C asked how individual cities influence national policy and when they can succeed. The analysis documented four instances of successful influence and showed that success depends on the exchange of certain types of resources. Cities gained influence when they provided technical knowledge and implementation capacity, while political support played a lesser role. Overall, these findings underline that individual cities can shape national policy if they can offer resources on which the state depends.



# Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This final chapter of the dissertation summary has three aims. First, it provides an answer to the research question by summarizing the main findings. Second, it discusses the potentials, limitations, and avenues for future research. Third and finally, it discusses the policy implications for practice.

## 5.1. Main Findings—Summary

This dissertation has set out to answer the research question: *How do central and local governments interact in policymaking and implementation within a double democracy?* The concept of double democracy was introduced to capture the distinctive interplay between two democratically legitimate levels of government—national and local—each with policymaking authority, yet where the national democracy is superior to local democracies. By conceptualizing this setting as a double democracy, the dissertation highlights the inherent tensions between national policy ambitions and local governments' different aspirations for local responsiveness and diversity. It adds to the existing literature by placing local political agency at the center of analysis and by theorizing the grey zone of authority where policymaking and implementation intersect.

The overall answer to the research question is that central and local governments interact through a continuous process of negotiation and customization. The national government enacts national policy with varying room for local adaptation, while local governments respond by using this room to customize policy implementation downstream, sometimes also lobbying to shape policy upstream. These interactions take place at the intersection between policy formulation and practical implementation, and they are neither purely hierarchical nor fully collaborative. The dissertation has shown that the division between central and local government authority, as well as between policymaking and implementation, is fluid and contested. It is better characterized as a zone of interdependence, negotiation, and active policy customization. Through empirical case studies of social housing legislation in Denmark, the dissertation has demonstrated how and why local governments use their local political agency. The democracy paper (Paper A) showed how city councils engage in local political processes to customize national demands to local contexts, and the customization paper (Paper B) showed that cities' choice of implementation strategy reflects how well new national implementation fits city councils' local goals and local implementation conditions. The influence paper (Paper C) showed how cities can pursue individual strategies to seek influence

upstream. When cities provide technical knowledge and implementation capacity to national legislators, they can gain policy influence. Finally, the documents paper (Paper D) argued for increased use of internal policy documents, which are the key empirical source for the Papers A, B, and C in this dissertation. It argued that they comprise a rich and underutilized data source, especially in digitalized governments, which allow scholars to trace real-world policymaking processes in great detail.

Taken together, this underscores that the double democracy is characterized by continuous interaction and negotiation between levels of government because national and local policy goals co-exist. Local governments customize national policy through political processes, and they pursue individual influence during policy formulation. The dissertation advances our understanding of central–local relations, making a case for local political agency exercised across political stages and between governmental levels.

## 5.2. Discussion of Potentials and Suggestions for Future Research

In this section, I first discuss the generalizability of my studies. Related to this, I proceed to discuss the role of municipal interest organizations in the analysis, and I also discuss the interplay between (un)successful influence and later implementation strategies. On this basis, I set out avenues for future research.

Case selection is central to the question of generalizability, especially in case studies, which rely on analytical generalization (Gerring, 2017; Seawright & Gerring, 2008; Yin, 1994). The dissertation identifies and demonstrates the workings and implications of double democracy in social housing in Denmark. This empirical setting was chosen deliberately because it offers a clear opportunity to observe and describe the workings of a double democracy. Denmark is a highly decentralized, unitary state, and the policy area of social housing provides both room for local customization and variation across cases. Double democracy and its inherent tensions are likely to be present in other countries and policy areas with the following scope conditions: First, I argue that the conclusions should travel to other countries with some degree of local autonomy. This could include Nordic countries and other European countries with strong municipal systems (Ladner et al., 2018; Ladner et al., 2023). I argue that my findings are likely to also apply to federal systems, such as the German *Länder* and U.S. *states*, where subnational governments hold formal constitutional prerogatives giving them authority over certain policy areas. Second, the findings are relevant for policy areas where national and local goals can diverge and where local governments retain room for customization in implementation. It can be difficult to give a detailed list of policy areas, as this may

differ between countries, but it is useful to think of policy areas that are core local government tasks with substantial autonomy, yet where national governments occasionally intervene. Examples of this could be core local regulation, such as planning, zoning, and housing (de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2024; Larsen & Kettel, 2025; Peterson, 1981) and climate policy (Gerber, 2013), as well as core local government service areas, such as daycare (Blom-Hansen, 1999b), but likely also other types of social and welfare services (Christensen et al., 2014; Fimreite & Lægroid, 2009). These policy areas are commonly left to local governments to decide in order to provide local variation, but they are often also under national government control. Thus, from time-to-time, national governments issue regulations, service standards, or organizational directives that interfere with the local room for discretion. In contrast, for policy fields characterized by consistent strict national standards and minimal local discretion, we should expect less room for the subordinate democracy to operate. In sum, double democracy is likely to be present in other countries and policy areas where local governments hold some degree of autonomy under national oversight.

Taking these scope conditions into account in future research is important, and I suggest that more comparative work is needed to push investigations of double democracy beyond Denmark and social housing. Future studies should try to vary systematically along three key dimensions: the degree of local discretion, local conditions, and local interest. This can be achieved through comparative studies across countries and policy areas. Scholars have identified an accumulation of national policy and suggested an increasing implementation burden (Adam et al., 2019b; Fernández-I-Marín et al., 2023; Knill et al., 2021a, 2021b; Knill et al., 2024). However, we know less about how national obligations toward local governments specifically have evolved, which underlines the need to study the room for local discretion in greater detail. Scholars have shown that word counts do not capture the substance of the national policy burden (Hurka et al., 2023), and it is therefore important to scrutinize the specific wording of regulation. For example, there is a large difference between requirements that local governments “must” or “shall” fulfill compared to provisions they “can” choose to decide on. The findings of this dissertation suggest that local governments, at least to some extent, can mitigate implementation burdens through customization and pre-legislative lobbying, and it is important to follow up on this in relation to more detailed mappings of implementation demands.

Another opportunity is to establish comparative designs where implementation by units within the state (administrative decentralization) is systematically compared to implementation by local governments (political decentralization) (Treisman, 2007). A core challenge is to find implementation tasks

that are truly comparable in the sense that they involve the same task and differ only in terms of governmental and organizational structures. Previous studies have investigated Danish welfare and employment policy provided in a dual system where both state agencies and local governments participated. These studies showed that caseworkers in the central government hierarchy were more likely to adhere to national goals compared to caseworkers in more autonomous local governments, who were in charge of more or less similar services and instead complied more with local goals (Winter et al., 2008a; Winter et al., 2008b). Although the differences were small, this finding supports the general argument forwarded in this dissertation that local political agency—the city council—is an important intermediate variable between policymaking and practical implementation. Further comparative studies of this kind would be highly beneficial.

A second—and related—point of discussion concerns the role of municipal interest organizations. The existing literature emphasizes these organizations as key intermediaries between levels of government (Blom-Hansen, 2002; Hula, 1999; Knill et al., 2021b). However, in the cases studied in this dissertation, the role of the municipal interest organization, KL, was less pronounced. Interviews and documents from my studies suggest that the municipal interest organization acted more as a microphone for certain larger cities than as an independent actor representing all cities. In one of my papers (Paper C), I quote a politician from a smaller city who explains how big cities are listened to more than smaller cities:

[I] am not sure there are many people around the country who understand how much power the four biggest cities have to change something. So, if they had gone in and said: ‘now we need to look a little deeper into this. Now we need to ...’ Then it would have been changed.

In this paper, I also show how a hearing letter from the municipal interest organization on selected issues closely mirrors specific arguments advanced by a large city. Moreover, my interviews with representatives from KL generally suggest that, in the specific field of social housing, KL possessed few resources and largely relied on city inputs (Interviews 16, 19). This dynamic was magnified by the fact that cities did not agree among themselves on the best way forward. As shown in the democracy paper and the customization paper (Papers A and B), local political attitudes were very different, some cities in favor of the law while others opposed it. This situation favors individual strategies over collective ones, because internal disagreement makes it difficult to adopt a unified position (Blom-Hansen, 2002; Kjærgaard, 2016; Vesa et al., 2025). Accordingly, we should expect that in policy areas where local governments are more aligned, collective strategies and communication through

municipal interest organizations are more pronounced, and future research should address the limitations of individual versus collective influence strategies in greater detail.

Third, another potential avenue for further investigation concerns the relationship between influence in policymaking and implementation within the same local government. In the EU literature, it has been argued that the successful uploading of preferences in the policymaking stage leads to more ambitious downloading of rules through national implementation (Börzel, 2002; Thomann & Sager, 2017b; Zgaga et al., 2023). Across my three empirical papers, the same pattern seems to emerge between successful uploading of local preferences—that is, issues successfully lobbied by local governments (Paper C)—and how the new regulation is later downloaded through local implementation plans (Papers A and B). Some of the larger cities that were successful in lobbying during policymaking also developed the most transformative implementation plans. Conversely, some of the smaller cities that failed in lobbying were also the ones that adopted the most resistant approaches in later implementation plans. This points to a possible spillover effect between the uploading (lobbying for influence) and downloading (customization of implementation) processes in a double democracy. This hypothesis should be investigated more systematically in future studies—ideally through comparative and longitudinal designs that make it possible to trace and compare the same units across multiple policy stages.

### 5.3. Policy Implications for Practice

Finally, I draw out some real-world implications for practice. The findings of my dissertation carry real-world implications for the design, implementation, and democratic oversight of public policy in a double democracy. In the following, I highlight two broader points related to the balance between governmental levels and democratic considerations.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the dissertation points to an inherent trade-off in a double democracy between national control and uniformity vis-à-vis room for local discretion and customization. This balance between the two democracies is delicate. My interviews suggest that national-level policymakers were fully aware of the potential clash between national and local ambitions on the new legislation. They anticipated a need to convince or force local governments to comply, and they built sanction mechanisms into the law to ensure this (Interviews 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10). Although Danish local governments made highly different transformation plans, they were all legally compliant. However, this is not always the case, and it is not difficult to find news media reporting on local governments that do not live up to national legislation. Within the last months of writing up this dissertation, for instance, media in

Denmark have reported on local governments not living up to new national minimal staffing levels in daycare institutions<sup>5</sup> and not complying with requirements to protect drinking water wells against pesticides.<sup>6</sup>

National policymakers must consider this balance between their own national goals and ambitions and the room for local governments to have their own policy goals. My studies clearly show that local politicians shape implementation according to local political priorities and local conditions. This must be considered upfront when designing national policies. If the national ambition is to ensure uniform citizen outcomes regardless of where people live, national policymakers should design policies that restrict the room for discretion using different types of incentives, restrictions, and sanctions. If, on the other hand, the national ambition is to ensure room for local variation and responsiveness, national policymakers should design policies that leave room for customization, where local policymakers can take over and tailor implementation (Pülzl & Treib, 2007). When national policymakers engage local governments early, allow for input, and leave discretionary room, they are likely to reduce conflict and foster supportive implementation. Policymakers must strike a careful balance between these concerns every time new legislation is made. Going back to the new law on the physical transformation of social housing areas, a national policymaker explained to me in an interview: “So this wasn’t about making a law... The product wasn’t a law. The product was [change] out there in the real world” (Interview 10). It was therefore essential to focus on implementation and the mobilization of local governments from an early stage. In other words: policymaking does not end with legislation; it only marks the beginning of local customization—a political process in its own right.

Second, the dissertation raises democratic considerations. On the one hand, double democracy has been argued to hold several democratic benefits: It fosters democratic legitimacy, responsiveness, and accountability, and multiple governmental layers provide checks and balances, as famously argued by Madison and Tocqueville (Burgess & Burgess, 2006; Oates, 1999, 2011 [1972]; Treisman, 2007). On the other hand, shared authority also comes with a democratic cost: When more than one actor is involved, as in a double democracy, accountability can easily become blurred (Fimreite & Læg Reid, 2009; Treisman, 2007). When policies succeed or fail, citizens may struggle to assign responsibility to the appropriate democratic body. Should credit or blame rest

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/en-raekke-kommuner-lever-ikke-op-til-minimumsnormeringerne-se-hvordan-det-ser-ud-i-din-kommune>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/seneste/miljoeminister-melder-25-kommuner-lovbrud>

with national policymakers who designed the policy? Or should it rest with local politicians who were in charge of implementation? (See also Lyons et al., 1992 for a discussion about democratic accountability in urban politics). This dilemma has also been discussed in relation to the Danish “ghetto law.” On the one hand, some opponents of the new legislation argued that it was not democratic because some of the residents were against transformation. It was perceived that changes were forced upon residents by the state and local governments. On the other hand, proponents argued that new legislation and the development plans were democratically decided in both the national parliament, the city council, and in democratic bodies within the housing organizations. But the question of accountability remains: Who can be held responsible for policy outcomes in a double democracy? A real-world example of the confusion about accountability is that when residents in one area in Aarhus initiated legal trials against the legislation, they sued both the state, the local government, and the housing organization.<sup>7</sup> Such uncertainty challenges the fundamental logic of democratic accountability, by which citizens can punish or reward politicians through elections. It opens a—perhaps naïve but nonetheless important—call for greater transparency: Policymakers should be clearer about the specific division of responsibility between levels of government and the exact scope for local customization. This could make it clearer for citizens to hold the appropriate actors accountable.

A final democratic consideration concerns the question of who is given influence. This dissertation demonstrates that large cities are more successful in gaining influence compared to smaller ones. This raises concerns about equity in democratic representation. If influence is concentrated among a few large and powerful local governments, smaller local governments risk being marginalized in national policymaking dialogues (cf. bottom-up integration as conceptualised by Knill et al., 2021b). Addressing this potential imbalance may require institutional mechanisms or cooperation among local governments with shared concerns to ensure that diverse voices are heard. Local governments sometimes coordinate with other local governments that share the same interests to form new alliances for influence (Kjærgaard, 2016; Payson, 2022). In recent discussions about reforming the Danish system of intergovernmental transfers to create greater equality between rich and poor local governments, several new alliances between local governments emerged—and arguably, a coalition of smaller local governments from more rural parts of Denmark was able to gain influence on the 2020 reform of the equalization

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<sup>7</sup> <https://voresbrabrand.dk/beboere-anlaegger-sag-mod-boligforening-kommunen-og-den-danske-stat/>

scheme.<sup>8</sup> This supports that it is overly simplified to conclude that only large cities can have their say in national policymaking processes.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.altinget.dk/kommunal/artikel/den-jyske-udligningslobby-tog-reformens-stoerste-stik>

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# English Summary

Many countries have more than one governmental tier. In recent decades, a global wave of political decentralization has given local authorities greater responsibility for local service provision and regulation. The core contention of this dissertation is that when more than one governmental tier is involved, tensions may emerge between them concerning shared decision-making authority, conflicts over policy goals, and variation in implementation.

The dissertation introduces the concept of *double democracy* as a theoretical framework to understand the tensions possibly arising between levels of government that work together on policymaking and implementation. A double democracy is characterized by two levels of government—central and local government—both of which have democratically elected representatives holding legitimate political decision-making authority, but where central government is superior and can make demands on subordinate local governments. At the same time, local governments have varying (but legitimate) room to customize policies locally, and they can also try to seek influence on national policymaking. This creates an interplay where the boundaries between policy development and implementation become blurred, and where interaction is marked by political negotiation and mutual dependence. The overarching research question of the dissertation is: *How do central and local governments interact in policymaking and implementation within a double democracy?* This is examined through case studies of new legislation on the transformation of socially vulnerable housing areas in Denmark. The legislation sets fixed national objectives while allowing room for local customization. The dissertation draws on the extensive collection and analysis of internal political documents combined with elite interviews, which provides unique insight into the political processes at both the national and local levels—and the interaction between them.

The dissertation makes three key contributions to the existing literature. Theoretically, it introduces the double democracy concept, which emphasizes tensions between governmental tiers and underlines the importance of accounting for local political agency. Methodologically, it demonstrates the potential of internal policy documents as a strong yet underutilized data source for studying political processes in great detail. Empirically, three main findings are highlighted. First, local governments customize national policies through local political processes in city councils. Customization is not merely an administrative task but an active political process in which councils adapt goals, instruments, resources, and organization to the local setting. Second, city councils' choice of implementation strategies can be explained by a combination of city council

interest and local implementation conditions. When new national demands fit with existing local policy goals and implementation conditions, policies are implemented supportively; when they do not fit, councils seek to limit change and minimize disruption. Third, the dissertation examines the opportunities for individual local governments to influence national policy. It shows that if local governments can offer resources on which the state depends—particularly technical knowledge and implementation capacity—they have greater opportunity to gain influence.

Overall, the dissertation shows that the relationship between central and local government is characterized by negotiation, interdependence, and active political customization rather than clear hierarchies and a clear division of labor. The conclusions have implications for how we design policies and governance systems in practice. In a double democracy, national policymakers should be aware of how local governments are not merely administrative implementation machines but politically governed entities with their own legitimate policy goals. If national policymakers engage local governments early, allow room for input, and leave room for discretion, they are likely to reduce conflict and foster supportive implementation. For citizens and society, this raises important questions about blurred political accountability: Who is accountable in a double democracy—the national policymakers who enacted the legislation or the local councils responsible for implementation?

# Dansk resumé

Mange lande har mere end et politisk niveau. I de seneste årtier har en bølge af politisk decentralisering verden over givet lokale myndigheder større ansvar for lokal service og regulering. Udgangspunktet for denne afhandling er, at når der er mere end et politisk niveau til stede, kan der opstå spændinger i samspillet, som handler om deling af beslutningskompetence, konflikter om politiske målsætninger og forskelle i implementeringen.

Afhandlingen introducerer begrebet *dobbelt demokrati* som teoretisk ramme for at forstå det spændingsfyldte samspil når politiske niveauer skal samarbejde om politikudvikling og implementering. Et dobbelt demokrati er kendetegnet ved to politiske niveauer – staten og kommunerne – som begge har demokratisk valgte repræsentanter med legitim politisk beslutningskompetence, men hvor staten er overordnet og kan pålægge kommunerne opgaver. Kommunerne har dog samtidig et varierende, men legitimt rum til at tilpasse politikken lokalt, og de kan også forsøge at påvirke statens formulering af ny politik. Dette skaber et samspil, hvor grænserne mellem udvikling og implementering af politik bliver flydende, og hvor interaktionen er præget af politisk forhandling og gensidig afhængighed. Det overordnede forskningsspørgsmål for afhandlingen er: *Hvordan interagerer stat og kommuner om politikudvikling og implementering i et dobbelt demokrati?* Dette undersøges gennem case-studier af ny lovgivning om omdannelse af socialt udsatte boligområder i Danmark. Denne lovgivning fastsatte bindende nationale målsætninger, men gav samtidig et vist rum for lokal tilpasning. Afhandlingen bygger på omfattende indsamling og analyser af interne politiske dokumenter kombineret med eliteinterviews, som til sammen giver et unikt indblik i de politiske processer på både nationalt niveau, lokalt niveau og interaktionen imellem dem.

Afhandlingen leverer tre kernebidrag til den eksisterende litteratur. Teoretisk introduceres begrebet dobbelt demokrati, som sætter fokus på spændinger mellem de politiske niveauer, og som understreger betydningen af lokale folkevalgte politikere. Metodisk demonstreres potentialet ved interne politiske dokumenter som en stærk, men noget overset, datakilde til studier af politiske processer med høj detaljeringsgrad. Empirisk kan tre hovedbidrag fremhæves. For det første viser afhandlingen, at kommunerne tilpasser nationale politikker gennem lokale politiske processer i byrådene. Tilpasningen er ikke blot en administrativ proces, men en aktiv lokalpolitisk proces, hvor byrådene tilpasser mål, instrumenter, ressourcer og organisering til de lokale forhold. For det andet kan kommunernes valg af forskellige implementeringsstrategier forklares med en kombination af byrådets politiske interesser og lokale implementerings-

betingelser. Når nye nationale krav passer til eksisterende politiske mål og betingelser på lokalt niveau, implementeres politikken understøttende. Når de ikke passer sammen, forsøger byrådene i stedet at udvande og begrænse omfanget af lokale ændringer. For det tredje undersøger afhandlingen hvilke muligheder kommuner har for individuelt at påvirke den nationale politik. Her viser afhandlingen, at hvis kommuner kan tilbyde ressourcer, som staten har brug for – især teknisk viden og implementeringskapacitet – så er der mulighed for at få indflydelse.

Samlet viser afhandlingen, at relationen mellem staten og kommunerne er præget af forhandling, gensidig afhængighed og aktiv politisk tilpasning fremfor klare hierarkier og klar arbejdsdeling. Afhandlingens konklusioner har betydning for, hvordan vi designer politik og styringssystemer i praksis. I et dobbelt demokrati skal nationale politikere være opmærksomme på, at kommuner ikke blot er administrative implementeringsmaskiner, men politisk styrede enheder med egne legitime mål. Hvis nationale beslutningstagere involverer det lokale niveau tidligt, giver rum for indflydelse og mulighed for tilpasning, så kan det være en vej til at reducere konflikter og understøtte implementeringen. For borgere og samfund er det samtidig et opmærksomhedspunkt, at det politiske ansvar kan blive uklart: Hvem har ansvaret i et dobbelt demokrati – de nationale politikere, som har vedtaget lovgivningen, eller de lokale byråd, som har haft ansvaret for implementeringen?