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POLITICAL INFLUENCE IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: HOW CITIZENS PERCEIVE POLICY DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether local development policy should be driven by politics or civil engagement, focusing on the citizens' perspectives on this topic across European countries. It examines the factors influencing citizens' attitudes towards the role of politics and citizen engagement in local governance, with the goal of determining whether increased citizen involvement can lead to a more balanced approach between local politicians and the public. Analysis was performed on survey data collected from local government networks in 15 European countries. Results showed that higher decentralization is associated with more positive views on the influence of politics in local development. However, those who see local elections and political influence as crucial support limiting citizen involvement in policymaking. They believe economic policies should be decided by local councils and political representatives rather than public opinion. The novel research approach from the perspectives of citizens involved in local networks across Europe offers valuable insights into the political influence and citizen participation in decision-making related to regional development policies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, European countries have experienced decentralization at varying times and extents. Consequently, this topic has garnered increasing academic attention. States have transferred fiscal, administrative, or political responsibilities to the lower levels of government. In parallel with these movements, there has been a significant shift in population migration from rural to urban areas in European countries. Decentralization processes occurred at varying speeds and with differing transfers of competencies and responsibilities. In some countries, competencies were transferred to lower levels of government, which was not accompanied by a significant level of fiscal and political decentralization. This led local units to become heavily dependent on transfers from the central government. Local levels of government face the challenges of providing satisfactory public services to citizens, as well as the need for coordination and cooperation with other levels of government and various stakeholders.

This paper examines whether local development policy should be driven by politics or civil engagement, focusing on the citizens' perspectives on this topic across European countries. It examines the factors influencing citizens' attitudes towards the role of politics and citizen engagement in local governance, with the goal of determining whether increased citizen involvement can lead to a more balanced approach between local politicians and the public. This issue gains importance in the context of fiscal austerity and consolidation following the European debt crisis of 2010 (Haffert & Mehrrens, 2015) and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans adopted by European Union member states in response to the pandemic crisis ten years later

(Heyne & Ruiz-Rufino, 2025). Contrary to theoretical views suggesting that fiscal austerity and consolidations have a negative impact on public opinion and reduce public support for governments, empirical studies have found little to no such effect (Kalbhenn & Stracca, 2020; Jacques & Haffert, 2021). Although the government's main political reason for consolidation is electoral concerns (Hübscher & Sattler, 2017), studies have shown that the weak political impact of austerity measures on public opinion applies to both left- and right-wing governments (Jacques & Haffert, 2021). Furthermore, when policies are imposed externally by a supranational EU authority, in multilevel government systems, citizens hold national officials less accountable for unpopular measures (Talving, 2018). People are more concerned about the economic impact of consolidation programs than their political outcomes, which manifest in unemployment, poverty, exclusion, and other social deficiencies (Kalbhenn & Stracca, 2020; Lesche et al., 2015).

The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is a temporary central instrument of NextGenerationEU, designed to strengthen and enhance the EU's resilience in the face of the current crisis. The RRF ensures funding to the EU member states to support their economies and societies in achieving sustainable and resilient development, as well as preparing for the green and digital transitions. Although RRF promotes increased engagement between national authorities and stakeholders, the centralized, technocratic implementation of National Recovery and Resilience Plans reduces the ownership of social actors (Munta et al., 2024; Capati & Christiansen, 2025). Such findings somewhat conflict with the proclaimed priorities of EU Cohesion policy, which promotes a place-based approach (Bramanti & Rosso, 2024), as a community-driven, collaborative, and long-term strategy aimed at enhancing social, economic, and physical well-being within a specific geographic area. It focuses on tackling complex local challenges by leveraging existing community strengths. This approach empowers citizens to take the lead in identifying priorities and co-designing solutions, promoting local ownership and enabling interventions tailored to the unique context, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all model.

The study focuses on local government networks established in European countries, particularly those involving citizens participating in these networks. Local networks bring together representatives from various government levels and actors, and members of these networks present diverse interests (Salvati, 2021). Local participatory policymaking and citizen involvement increase public engagement and contribute to the legitimacy of decisions (Michels & De Graaf, 2010).

Many local governments are increasingly adopting democratic innovations to enhance and expand citizen participation in decision-making processes, because citizen involvement has multiple benefits to democracy and fosters the EU cohesion policy process (Michels, 2012; Moodie et al., 2022).

The paper examines how citizens within local government networks perceive the influence of politics in local decision-making. This research examines whether greater fiscal autonomy at the local level promotes increased citizen engagement in governance

or enhances citizen satisfaction with their influence over local development. The research examines the interplay between political decision-making and citizen influence in shaping local development policies by analyzing the perspectives of individuals actively participating in local government networks. Emphasizing the significance of citizen participation, the study suggests that strengthening citizen influence can enhance democratic practices at the local level (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Furthermore, this research contributes to the limited comparative literature on local government networks by providing insights into state-society relations and the functioning of these networks across Europe.

In our work, we focus on the attitudes of citizens, specifically those who are members of local networks established by local self-government units. The opinions and perceptions of this target group are important because its members participate in local development policies and might better assess the political impact. The comparative analysis of attitudes and perceptions of citizens and politicians allows for distinguishing the views of these two groups.

Thus, the scientific contribution of this research stems from i) a country-comparative approach in researching local government networks, and ii) assessing political influence on local decision-making from the point of view of the citizens involved.

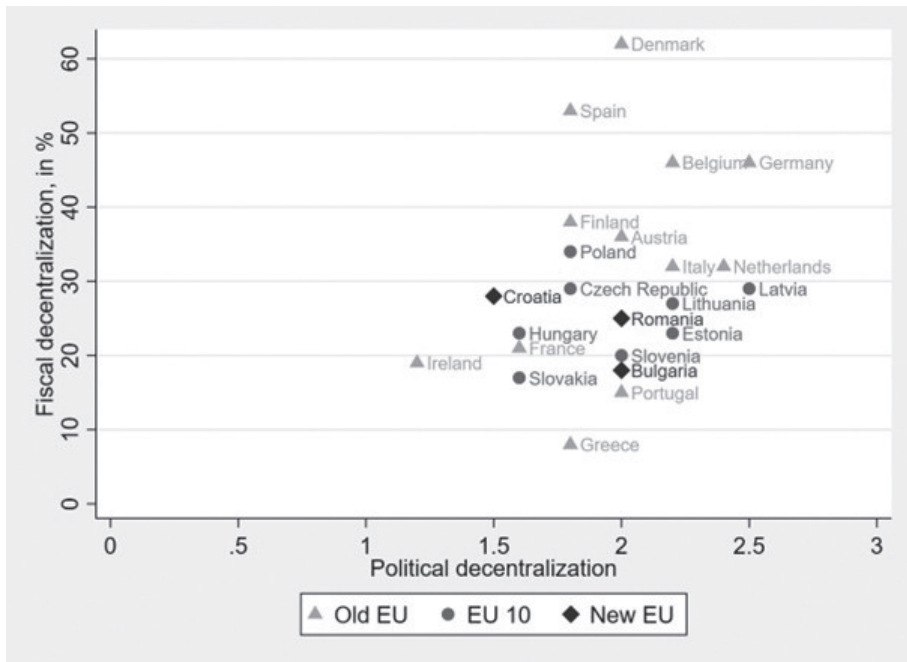
The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature and develops the research hypotheses accordingly. Chapter 3 explains the survey data and methodology used to analyze the empirical model. The results of the empirical analysis are presented in Chapter 4. This is the central section of the paper, examining and discussing the factors that influence citizens' attitudes toward political influence and their participation in local-level decision-making. Chapter 5 concludes with findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Decentralization varies significantly across European countries. While some countries have conducted a more extensive decentralization process, with a significant transfer of power and resources to lower levels of government, others remain more centralized. Figure 1 illustrates the levels of political and fiscal decentralization across EU member states. European Committee of the Regions (2025) measures the political decentralization index for European countries by 5 indicators: (1) the legal basis for the principle of self-government; (2) the representation of sub-national levels at the national level; (3) the ability of the sub-national levels to influence higher-level governments' legislation and policymaking; (4) the extent to which sub-national levels establish and sustain direct relations with EU institutions; and (5) the extent to which local and regional dimensions are taken into account during subsidiarity. It ranges from 0 to 3, with values of 1.2 in Ireland and 2.5 in Germany and Latvia. The values

of fiscal decentralization, measured by the share of local government expenditures in total general government expenditures, range between 8 percent in Greece and 62 percent in Denmark. As stated by Rodríguez-Pose and Vidal-Bover (2024), the extent of the mismatch between fiscal and political decentralization has a greater impact on economic growth than the actual levels of fiscal and political decentralization in each country.

Figure 1. Political and fiscal decentralization in EU countries.



Note: Fiscal and Political decentralization indices are unavailable for Iceland and Norway, members of the European Economic Area.

Source: Based on European Committee of Regions (2025) data: <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/Decentralization-Index.aspx>.

The literature suggests that political decentralization processes play an important role in encouraging greater citizen participation in decision-making at the local level (Krtalić & Gasparini, 2007). Citizen participation in decision-making processes is a crucial element in enhancing democracy (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). It contributes to community well-being by ensuring that public services are more relevant and local government operations are more efficient. Further, governments are frequently concerned about low political support from citizens, which extends from the national to the local level (Hübscher & Sattler, 2017). At the local level, where government policy has the most direct impact on citizens' lives, public support is crucial for effective community development and well-being. This can be achieved by increasing citizens'

involvement in governance processes. Recent findings underscore the importance of considering both the territorial conditions and institutional capacity in assessing the effectiveness of decentralization. Empirical evidence suggests that the benefits of political and fiscal decentralization largely depend on the quality of local government and the characteristics of the neighboring regions (Rodríguez-Pose & Muštra, 2022).

The approach promoting public participation and citizen engagement as an integral part of local (citizen-centered) governance, where citizens actively participate in economic development, is not new (e.g., Graham & Phillips, 1998; De Blasio & Nuzzo, 2010). In his elaboration on the cases of local communities in Poland, Sobol (2015) did not provide the exact answers “to what extent should the politicians be the decision-makers and to what the representatives of the society”, and “to what extent should the citizens be involved in public affairs to contribute to local sustainable development” (Sobol, 2015, p.67), leaving room for further research on the nuanced effect of citizen participation to developmental outcomes (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). As Spina (2014) notes, decentralization can encourage political participation or citizens’ involvement in activities to influence public policies. Several factors influence the impact of decentralization on citizen participation, including trust and transparency (Arkorful et al., 2021; Holum, 2022). Citizen participation often takes a protest-oriented form, while a negative correlation exists between actual citizens’ involvement in decision-making processes and trust in local government. Local government initiatives have shown only a limited impact on building trust and no measurable effect on actual citizen participation. The strong negative correlation between participation and trust indicates that engagement is primarily driven by protest, rather than by successful efforts from local authorities to involve citizens in decision-making processes (Holum, 2022). Based on data from 2006, Spina (2014) finds that decentralization generally promotes political participation in European countries, but a higher level of decentralization is not necessarily associated with greater citizen participation. More studies have claimed that the effects of decentralization on public participation depend on specific circumstances (Arkorful et al., 2021; Richardson, Durose, & Dean, 2019). Consequently, studies exploring the nexus between decentralization and civic engagement have recently focused on communities and settings in specific regions or countries worldwide. Here, it is often considered that less developed local units face additional challenges in implementing effective development policies. Additionally, less developed EU regions tend to trust the EU more than richer regions (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2024). A study on German regions affected by deindustrialization, or remote rural areas, revealed the persistence of so-called left-behind NUTS3 regions, despite the federal structure and strong regional policies that may have little effect in peripheries (Royer & Leibert, 2024). Rodríguez Pose, Dijkstra, & Poelman (2024) address the issue of persistent European regional divides through the concept of the “regional development trap,” referring to regions that exhibit growth decline, lower productivity, and employment compared to neighboring regions. Their analysis shows that the longer a region remains in such a trap, the higher the likelihood of supporting

anti-system and Eurosceptic parties. Additionally, industrial decline has a similar effect (Dijkstra, Rodríguez-Pose, & Poelman, 2020), and the persistent European regional divides, along with the ongoing process of deindustrialization, may possibly limit the impact of decentralization and citizen engagement initiatives. Given that institutional factors influence economic development (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013), it is also important to consider different legacies and the national constitutional framework (Florczak-Wątor, 2024). For example, decentralization in two former socialist countries, Croatia and Poland, occurred on different paths but resulted in similar problems of weak and dependent local governments. Croatia is paradoxically a highly centralized country, due to the large number of small local government units that lack the capacity to manage local development (Slijepcevic et al., 2024). In contrast, local government in Poland has gained political accountability but no tax autonomy (Laszek & Trzeciakowski, 2018). Thus, there is a need for the EU to adequately address local development and sub-national entities, as defined by the national institutional framework, and improve the functionality of its multi-level structure (Fromage, 2021). This may have long-term positive consequences for narrowing the regional development gap, whereas today the economically advanced regions disproportionately benefit from their highly complex economic structure and innovative capacity (Pinheiro et al., 2025), as well as re-industrialization (Di Bernardino et al., 2021; Capello & Cerisola, 2023).

Given the decentralization processes in European countries in recent decades, this paper examines citizens' views on citizen participation in decision-making, considering the achieved level of fiscal decentralization in the observed countries. The paper examines the relationship between fiscal decentralization and citizens' perceptions of political influence versus participation, focusing on the optimal level of citizen participation in decision-making regarding local development policies.

A higher level of fiscal decentralization grants local units greater autonomy over financial resource allocation, which is expected to result in diverse attitudes among different groups of citizens about the researched topic. Decentralized systems allow local authorities to be closer to citizens and better informed about their needs, thereby contributing more effectively to community well-being. Consequently, it can be assumed that there will be a positive correlation between decentralization and citizens' attitudes toward increased political influence on local development. So, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H1: A higher level of fiscal decentralization is positively related to more positive attitudes towards the importance of political influence on local development policy.

Egner et al. (2022) examined patterns of local governance in relation to societal actors at the municipal level, focusing on state-society relations and the functioning of local networks across European countries. Previous research suggests that the success of such networks is influenced by the degree of governmental autonomy. For example, Cristofoli et al. (2020) found that the effectiveness of home care

assistance networks in Switzerland was contingent on the government's ability to operate independently. Klijn and Koppenjan (2014) conceptualize local networks as autonomous yet interdependent entities composed of individuals, groups, and organizations that maintain long-term collaborations to address public issues and policy challenges. Similarly, Silva et al. (2023) analyzed local networks in Portugal, highlighting the central government's dual role in facilitating network formation and restricting stakeholder diversity and network scope. If local governments function as key initiators of local networks, then understanding the extent of political influence on network operations and local development policies requires a research focus on network members within state-initiated local networks.

Local authorities, particularly in underdeveloped areas, frequently struggle with a lack of qualified and skilled human resources. This challenge is partly due to central governments often offering higher salaries and better career advancement opportunities than local units in less developed areas. As a result, the shortage of human capacity often prevents local units from fully capitalizing on the advantages of decentralization and increased fiscal autonomy (Rodríguez-Pose & Ezcurra, 2011). Understanding citizens' attitudes toward political influence and civil participation in local development through local networks established by local governments contributes to a deeper comprehension of democratic processes and how they perceive their role in shaping local development policy. Local and regional economic development should be supported by facilitation rather than centralized policies. One recommended form of facilitation is local community forums, which gather a wide array of stakeholders, including citizens (Ersoy & Taylor, 2012).

The impact of political parties on local governance is evident in Eastern and Central Europe, as highlighted by Bäck et al. (2006) and Egner et al. (2013). Political parties continue to dominate local decision-making processes, while the role of citizens, who engage through various networks, remains relatively minor. Research by Chiru and Enyedi (2022) suggests that low political effectiveness, authoritarian values, and perceptions of corruption influence citizens' attitudes toward local politicians and their support for replacing them with non-political experts. This suggests a persistent trend in settings where political parties significantly shape local politics, overshadowing the potential for grassroots influence. The dynamics of local governance reflect broader political structures, where party affiliations often influence policy preferences and decision-making frameworks. In this context, the relationship between citizens and political entities influences local democracy in Eastern and Western Europe.

Considering the research mentioned above, it is expected that citizens who believe local elections should largely influence local government policies also believe that citizens themselves should not have a significant influence on local government policy. In our analysis, the distinction between local political representation and local public opinion follows Heinelt's (2013, 2016) understanding of councillors' roles in local democracy, which notes that councillors tend to either adopt the model of representative democracy or the idea of participatory governance. Local political

representation refers to how elected councillors fulfil their representative mandate within institutional and party-political frameworks. By contrast, local public opinion captures the views, preferences, and concerns of citizens regarding local issues. As Heinelt (2013) argues, individuals' right to participate in the election is insufficient for democratic self-determination. Whether local development policy should be entrusted to elected politicians or preferably to citizens will be assessed by testing the following hypotheses:

H2.1: Citizens who believe they should have more opportunities to influence local government policies beyond voting are less likely to view local elections as the primary determinant of local government policies.

H2.2: Citizens who consider that council decisions should align with the majority opinion of residents are more likely to view local elections as the primary determinant of local government policies.

H2.3: Citizens who believe that decisions should be made by majority voting are more likely to consider local elections the most important factor in determining local government policies.

H2.4: Citizens who consider that political representatives should make decisions based on their judgment of what is right, regardless of the current views of residents, are more likely to think that local elections should be the primary factor in shaping local government policies.

These assumptions will be verified using data on the opinions of citizens' representatives in local network membership across European countries. The empirical model will be explained in the next chapter.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data

The statistical analysis in this paper is based on data regarding the level of fiscal decentralization, citizens' views on political influence, and citizens' participation in local development policies. This research utilizes part of the data collected through a large-scale survey that examines the relationships between societal actors and local governments in 15 countries. The survey was conducted in Austria, Flanders (Belgium), Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, and Sweden by the group of

scientists, according to the methodology which is described in detail in Björn et al. (2022) and Teles et al. (2021). The survey questionnaire was emailed to up to four local government networks established by the local government, requesting that it be forwarded to all their members. A total of 3,121 answers from 15 European countries were collected regarding the analyzed topics. The characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

Variable	N	Mean / %	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Age	3,043	52.90	18.62	12	98
Politicians					
Not politicians	3,111	67 %	0.47	0	1
Politicians	3,111	33 %	0.47	0	1
Gender					
Female	3,142	47 %	0.5	0	1
Male	3,142	53 %	0.5	0	1
Education					
Primary or less	3,113	9 %	0.29	0	1
Secondary	3,113	28 %	0.45	0	1
Tertiary	3,113	63 %	0.48	0	1
Occupation					
Executives	2,750	21 %	0.41	0	1
Professionals	2,750	59 %	0.49	0	1
Workers	2,750	20 %	0.40	0	1
Labor market status					
Employed	2,991	68 %	0.47	0	1
Retired	2,991	22 %	0.42	0	1
Student	2,991	7 %	0.26	0	1
Unemployed	2,991	3 %	0.16	0	1

Note: The number of observations varies for each variable due to missing values.

Source: Authors' work.

3.2. Methodology

Our empirical model is the following:

$$ELEC_{ic} = \alpha + \beta_1 CITIZ_INF_{ic} + \beta_2 DEC_LOC_{ic} + \beta_3 DEC_CON_{ic} + \beta_4 RP_IND_{ic} + \gamma_1 DECENTRAL_c + \gamma_2 EU_c + \gamma_3 COUNTRY_c + \delta \mathbf{X}_i + \varepsilon_{ic} \quad (1)$$

The dependent variable in our model is the respondents' *i* opinion that the results of local elections should be the most important factor in determining local government policies (*ELEC*) in the country *c*. We will test the impact of citizens' opportunity to influence local government policies (*CITIZ_INF*), the statement that council decisions should reflect a majority opinion among the residents (*DEC_LOC*), the statement that decisions should be made by reasoning and discussion aimed at reaching consensus rather than by majority voting (*DEC_CON*), statement that political representatives should make what they think are the right decisions, independent of the current views of local people (*RP_IND*), and degree of decentralization within a given country (*DECENTRAL*). Since all variables were measured on a Likert scale without a unit of measurement, they were entered into the model in their standardized form, i.e., in units of standard deviations.

In the context of control variables, *EU* is a proxy for the European Union (EU) membership effect, differentiating between older and newer EU member states. *COUNTRY* accounts for country-specific fixed effects. Additionally, *X* denotes a matrix comprising respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, which serve as controls for conventional individual-level effects. These characteristics encompass commonly analyzed demographic factors such as age, gender, education level, occupation, and labor market status. A key distinguishing factor in this analysis is whether the respondent holds a political position. The model's error term, ε_{ic} , is assumed that the variable is normally distributed with a mean of zero and constant variance.

A description of all variables used in this model is presented in Table A1 in the Appendix. Although our dependent variable is measured on a five-point Likert scale, we employ ordinary least squares (OLS) as the primary estimation method because it yields straightforward and comparable coefficients. Prior research shows that OLS performs well with ordinal variables when the scale has several categories. In addition, OLS enables the inclusion of country fixed effects and a wide set of controls in a transparent way, which is particularly useful in our cross-country setting.

As a robustness check, we also estimate an ordered probit model that accounts for the ordinal nature of the dependent variable. The results are consistent with the OLS findings, confirming that our main conclusions are not sensitive to the choice of model. The model is estimated using the OLS method in Stata 18 software.

4. RESULTS

The results show that citizens across European countries strongly believe that local election outcomes should be the primary factor in shaping local government policies (Table 2). The next prevalent opinion of citizens is that decisions made by local councils should align with the prevailing views of the local population. Moreover, there is widespread consent among citizens that they should have opportunities to influence local policies beyond just voting. Citizens' opinions in favor of political representatives' independence are observed as well. In contrast to allowing political representatives to make decisions independently of public opinion, citizens, on average, express the lowest support for the decision-making process that concludes with consensus.

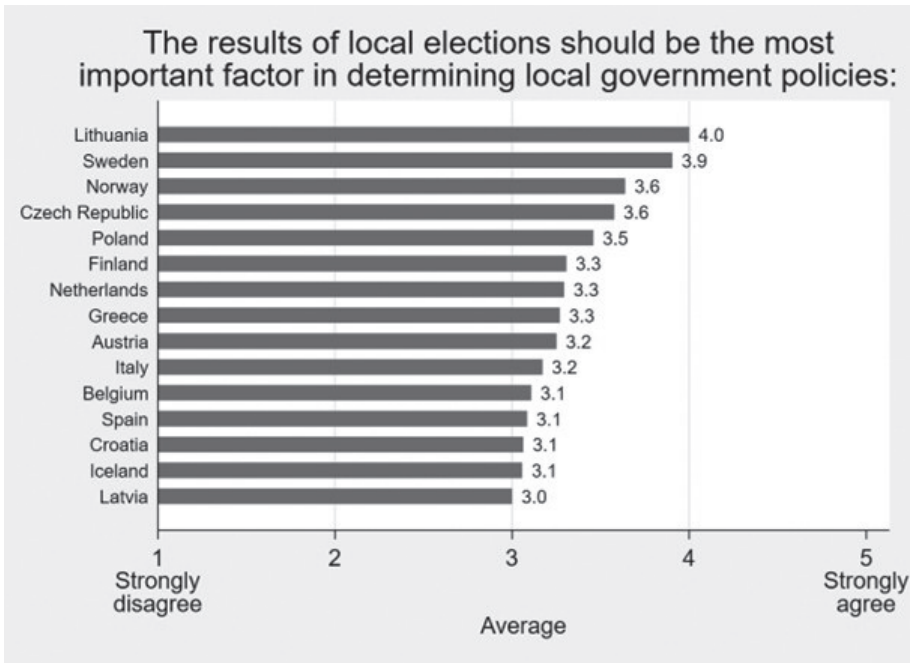
Table 2. Descriptive statistics of main variables in the empirical model.

Variable	N	Mean	S.d.	Min	Max
Political influence through local elections (ELEC)	3,121	4.02	1.07	1	5
Citizens influence local govt. policies (CITIZ_INF)	3,120	3.75	0.95	1	5
Local council decision (DEC_LOC)	3,121	3.78	0.95	1	5
Consensus decision-making process (DEC_CON)	3,116	2.91	1.15	1	5
Political representatives' independence (PR_IND)	3,105	3.31	1.07	1	5

Notes: The number of observations varies for each variable due to missing values. "S.d." stands for standard deviation.

Source: Authors' work.

While Table 2 provides an aggregate overview, Figure 2 illustrates the cross-country variation in citizens' attitudes toward the importance of local elections. The figure displays the average level of agreement with the statement that local election results should be the most important factor in determining local government policies. On a scale from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree"), responses vary significantly. Citizens in Lithuania show the highest level of agreement, with an average score of 4.0, closely followed by those in Sweden (3.9). In contrast, respondents in Latvia express the weakest agreement (3.0), with several other countries, including Iceland, Croatia, Spain, and Belgium, also clustering at the lower end of the scale (3.1). This variation suggests that national context and institutional arrangements likely play a role in shaping how citizens perceive the mandate of elected officials in local policymaking. This variation suggests that in Nordic countries, electoral mechanisms are viewed as the primary channel of accountability, while in Central and Eastern European countries, traditions of consensus-based governance reduce the relative emphasis placed on elections, with Western European countries occupying an intermediate position between these two patterns.

Figure 2. Citizens' attitudes toward the importance of local elections.

Source: Authors' work.

As previously presented in Figure 1, the values of decentralization indices vary across the countries here examined. The political decentralization index ranges from 1.5 in Croatia to 2.5 in Latvia, and the values of fiscal decentralization range between 8 percent in Greece and 53 percent in Spain. The regression analysis results (Table 3) suggest that in countries with higher levels of decentralization, there is a stronger tendency to view local elections as the primary determinant of local policy decisions, thus confirming H1. This means that in contexts where local governments have more significant financial autonomy, there is a prevailing belief that political considerations should play a central role in guiding local development, with less emphasis on consensus-building and citizen participation in decision-making. These results suggest a perceived negative relationship between the degree of decentralization and citizen involvement in local decision-making, aligning with Spina's (2014) findings. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of citizen participation in local governance to better align public services with community needs, fiscal decentralization appears to be primarily associated with strengthening the role of local politicians. By granting local governments greater autonomy over financial resources and public policy implementation, fiscal decentralization enhances local political authority. Nevertheless, citizen participation remains contingent on several factors, including trust in local government and individual preferences for engagement. However, it

remains questionable whether fiscal decentralization, without citizen participation, also reduces inequality at the local level and increases local development.

Furthermore, the regression analysis results suggest that citizens who advocate for broader opportunities to influence local government policies beyond voting exhibit a negative association with the belief that local election outcomes should be the primary determinant of policy decisions. The negative coefficient estimate indicates that a one-standard-deviation increase in the belief that citizens should have influence beyond only voting corresponds to a 0.067 standard deviation decrease in the belief that election results should be the dominant factor in policy determination. This implies that individuals favoring expanded civic engagement are less likely to prioritize election outcomes as the key driver of local policy decisions, confirming H2.1.

Furthermore, citizens who believe that council decisions should align with the majority opinion of residents are more likely to consider election results as the most important determinant of local government policies (estimated coefficient 0.171), confirming hypothesis H2.2. Namely, they view local elections as the primary means of creating policies, as they believe that the party winning the elections will make decisions supported by the majority of the electorate. This opinion about the relationship between decision-making in local councils and the impact of local elections on the conduct of local development policy in local councils is anticipated because, in European countries, there is a high share of politicians in local councils (Razin, 2013).

Table 3. Model estimation results.

Regressors	Estimated coef. (S. e.)
Citizens influence local govt. policies (CITIZ_INF)	-0.067*** (0.020)
Majority local council decision (DEC_LOC)	0.171*** (0.019)
Consensus decision-making process (DEC_CON)	-0.075*** (0.020)
Political representatives' independence (PR_IND)	0.211*** (0.020)
Decentralization	0.205*** (0.015)
<i>Country controls</i>	
EU membership: benchmark Old EU members	
New EU members	-0.378* (0.214)
Non-EU members	-0.278*** (0.106)
Country-specific effects	Included ^a
<i>Individual controls</i>	
Age	0.002 (0.002)
Politician status: benchmark not politician	
Politician	-0.024 (0.043)
Gender: benchmark male	

Female	0.012 (0.039)
Education: benchmark primary	
Secondary	-0.156 (0.104)
Tertiary	-0.183* (0.105)
Occupation: benchmark executives	
Professionals	0.001 (0.049)
Workers	0.026 (0.062)
Status: benchmark employed	
Retired	0.024 (0.055)
Student	0.003 (0.115)
Unemployed	-0.163 (0.142)
N	2,568
Adjusted R-squared	0.113

Notes: * $p < 0.1$, *** $p < 0.01$. "S.e." stands for standard errors. a Country-fixed effects are not shown for presentation purposes.

Source: Authors' work.

Conversely, those who support decision-making through deliberation and consensus rather than majority voting are less inclined to prioritize election results in shaping policies (estimated coefficient -0.075). Lastly, individuals who believe that political representatives should act based on their judgment, independently of prevailing public opinion, exhibit a stronger preference for election results as the decisive factor in local policy-making (estimated coefficient 0.211), confirming H2.4. These results highlight distinct patterns in public attitudes toward democratic decision-making and the role of elections in local governance.

Results also indicate that EU status, or more precisely, the length of EU membership, matters. Citizens in new EU countries or outside the EU, compared to citizens of the older EU countries, show a lower tendency to view local elections as the primary determinant of local policy decisions, with this result being more statistically significant for the non-EU member countries in our sample, Iceland and Norway.

The observed cross-country differences are consistent with theoretical expectations on the role of institutional legacies in shaping citizen attitudes toward political influence. Stronger support for the primacy of local elections in Nordic countries may reflect the long-standing processes of democratization and decentralization, where electoral mechanisms are viewed as central to ensuring accountability. By contrast, the weaker emphasis on elections in Central and Eastern European countries aligns with traditions of consensus-based governance and participatory channels that extend beyond voting. These patterns highlight how different institutional contexts condition citizens' views on the relative importance of electoral versus other forms of influence in local policymaking.

Interestingly, among all individual socio-demographic attributes of respondents, the only significant characteristic affecting personal opinion is whether the respondent has a higher education level. This finding aligns with previous studies, which have elaborated that individuals with a tertiary education level tend to be more critical of political decisions and are more actively involved in decision-making processes (Agerberg, 2019; Kam & Palmer, 2008; Sunshine & Hillygus, 2005). Our results support the notion that individuals with higher levels of education are less inclined toward political decision-making and more in favor of citizen participation in local development policies. However, the survey data do not clarify the underlying reasons for these differing attitudes based on educational attainment. It is possible that citizens with lower educational backgrounds feel less capable of effectively participating in decision-making regarding local development policies, leading them to favor a more decisive political influence in these matters. Conversely, it is noteworthy that the political status of respondents does not appear to affect their attitudes, indicating that political status does not correlate with stronger opinions on the importance of political decision-making in local development policies. This suggests that educational background plays a more significant role in shaping perspectives on political engagement than political affiliation or status. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for enhancing citizen participation and ensuring all citizens feel empowered to contribute to local governance. By fostering an environment where diverse opinions are expressed, local communities can work towards more inclusive decision-making processes that can reflect the needs of citizens from different angles.

As a robustness check, we additionally estimated an ordered probit model, presented in Appendix Table A2. The findings are broadly consistent with the OLS results discussed above. Citizens who favor broader opportunities to influence local government policies beyond voting are significantly less likely to prioritize local elections as the main determinant of local policy outcomes, while those who believe council decisions should reflect the majority opinion are significantly more likely to do so. Similarly, respondents who prefer consensus-based decision-making show a negative association with prioritizing election results, whereas those who support political representatives acting independently of public opinion display a strong positive association with viewing election outcomes as decisive.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The citizens' participation in decision-making is considered essential for traditional local democracy, contributing to transparency and the level of trust in the government, which is vital for local development. Understanding the interplay between political influence and citizen participation is essential for comprehending how local development policies are shaped. Citizens actively promoting local development through various local networks have an insight into the actual implementation of

these policies and the real-world impact of political decisions on their communities. This study also contributes to our understanding of the trends in European countries regarding the implementation of decentralization processes. The novel approach of this study is to assess the connection between politics and local development from the perspective of citizens, who are network members and important stakeholders, and to encourage local development through their work and projects.

The research findings provide valuable insights from citizens involved in local networks across Europe on the influence of politics and citizen participation in decision-making related to local development policies. The results reveal a prevailing consensus among citizens that citizen participation is essential and that local development policies should be shaped by considering the views and opinions of the local population regarding developmental direction, quality-of-life improvements, and community well-being. Specifically, this paper examines the factors that influence individuals who prioritize political influence over citizen participation in decision-making processes.

Results indicate that citizens who believe that the outcomes of local elections and political influence are the most important factors for determining local development policies also support limiting citizen influence on these policies. These individuals argue that decisions should be made at the local council level and based on the assessments of political representatives, regardless of the current opinions of local citizens. The findings suggest that this prevailing viewpoint is more common among those with lower levels of education. These results suggest that, despite increased citizen participation in decision-making, citizens have a high level of trust in local politicians, as well as confidence in their ability to steer local development policies toward long-term goals, even if these policies do not align with the immediate or medium-term desires of citizens. Additionally, individuals who value majority opinions in council decisions are more likely to view local election results as crucial in determining policies. Interestingly, such attitudes are not related to the respondents' political status. However, previous research has yielded conflicting findings regarding the impact of decentralization on citizens' access to public services and the effect of fiscal decentralization on economic growth. Such attitudes raise questions about how citizens perceive local democracy and their role in local governance.

Insight into citizens' attitudes regarding political influence on local development policy through local networks offers important perspectives on democratic processes in European countries. It reveals how individuals view their roles in shaping local governance policy and decision-making. This understanding encourages increased citizen participation, fosters inclusivity, and ensures that local development aligns with the community's needs and priorities.

Overall, our findings show that support for the primacy of local elections is strongest in the Nordic countries, weakest in the Central and Eastern European countries, and more moderate in Western Europe. These regional differences suggest that local governance reforms should be sensitive to institutional legacies. In contexts

where elections are viewed as the cornerstone of accountability, strengthening electoral mechanisms may be the most effective approach. Conversely, in systems with traditions of consensus-based governance, enhancing participatory and deliberative channels beyond elections may better align with citizen expectations.

Policy recommendations emphasize the importance of strengthening citizen participation in local decision-making to enhance transparency, trust in government, and sustainable local development. Given the study's findings that political influence often outweighs citizen engagement in shaping local policies, strategies should focus on institutional mechanisms that encourage participatory governance. Local governments should establish structured forums, conduct public consultations, and utilize digital engagement platforms to incorporate citizen voices into policy development. Additionally, educational initiatives should target citizens with lower levels of formal education to raise awareness about the benefits of democratic participation and empower them to engage in local governance processes. Furthermore, the decentralization process should prioritize balanced governance models that involve political representatives and citizen networks in policy decisions, ensuring that long-term development strategies align with community needs and aspirations.

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between political influence, citizen participation, and local development policies, it has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. One limitation is the potential variability in the political and administrative structures across European countries, which may influence the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study primarily relies on perspectives from citizens involved in local networks. These respondents are more directly engaged in local development processes than the general population, which may bias the findings toward more informed or participatory views. However, this may not fully represent the views of disengaged or marginalized groups who are less active in decision-making processes. Thirdly, while we collected responses from 15 European countries, the response rate varied across countries, which may affect the balance of representation and should be considered when interpreting cross-country comparisons. Additionally, the role of socioeconomic factors beyond education, such as income level and employment status, has not been extensively examined; yet, these may significantly shape attitudes toward political influence and citizen participation. Future research, once data becomes available, should include more countries in the analysis and adopt a comparative cross-country approach to assess how different governance models and decentralization strategies impact citizen engagement in decision-making. Longitudinal studies could also provide deeper insights into how trust in local politicians and institutional changes affect participation over time. Furthermore, exploring the role of digital tools in fostering citizen engagement could offer new perspectives on enhancing participatory governance in the digital age.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Description of variables in the model

Variable	Description / Questionnaire item	Values
<i>Dependent variable</i>		
Political influence through local elections (ELEC)	The results of local elections should be the most important factor in determining local government policies.	Likert scale 1-5
<i>Independent variables</i>		
Citizens influence local govt. policies (CITIZ_INF)	Apart from voting, citizens should be given the opportunity to influence local government policies.	Likert scale 1-5
Majority local council decision (DEC_LOC)	Council decisions should reflect the majority opinion of the residents.	Likert scale 1-5
Consensus decision-making process (DEC_CON)	Decisions should be made by reasoning and discussion to reach a consensus rather than by majority voting.	Likert scale 1-5
Political representatives' independence (PR_IND)	Political representatives should make decisions based on what they believe are the right choices, regardless of the current views of local people.	Likert scale 1-5
Decentralization level (DECENTRAL)	Average share of local government expenses in GDP, 2020-2022	0-low level of fiscal decentralization, 1-high level of fiscal decentralization
<i>Control variables</i>		
EU membership (EU) ^a	Dummy variable denoting EU status	1-Old EU, 2-New EU, 3-Non EU
Age	Age of the respondent	27 - 94
Politician	The political status of the respondent	0-Not politician, 1-Politician
Gender	Gender of the respondent	0-Female, 1-Male
Education	The highest obtained education level of the respondent	1-Primary, 2-Secondary, 3-Tertiary
Profession	Profession of the respondent	1-Executives, 2-Professionals, 3-Workers
Labor market status	The labor market status of the respondent	1-Employed, 2-Retired, 3-Student, 4-Unemployed

Notes: ^a Old EU countries include Austria, Belgium, Finland, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden. New EU member states include Croatia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Non-EU members include Iceland and Norway.

Source: Authors' work.

Table A2. Ordered probit model estimation results

	Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3	Outcome 4	Outcome 5
Citizens influence local gov. policies (CITIZ_INF)	0.007 ^{***}	0.016 ^{***}	0.007 ^{***}	-0.017 ^{***}	-0.013 ^{***}
Majority local council decision (DEC_LOC)	-0.020 ^{***}	-0.043 ^{***}	-0.019 ^{***}	0.046 ^{***}	0.036 ^{***}
Consensus decision-making process (DEC_CON)	0.008 ^{***}	0.017 ^{***}	0.007 ^{***}	-0.018 ^{***}	-0.014 ^{***}
Political representatives' independence (PR_IND)	-0.024 ^{***}	-0.052 ^{***}	-0.023 ^{***}	0.056 ^{***}	0.043 ^{***}
Decentralization	-0.055	-0.117	-0.052	0.126	0.098
<i>Country and EU controls</i>					
EU-specific effects	Included ^a	Included ^a	Included ^a	Included ^a	Included ^a
Country-specific effects	Included ^a	Included ^a	Included ^a	Included ^a	Included ^a
<i>Individual controls</i>					
Age	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	0.000	0.000
Politician status: benchmark not politician					
Politician	0.002	0.004	0.002	-0.005	-0.004
Gender: benchmark male					
Female	-0.003	-0.006	-0.003	0.006	0.005
Education: benchmark primary					
Secondary	0.015	0.035	0.020	-0.035	-0.035
Tertiary	0.018 ^{**}	0.042 [*]	0.023	-0.042 ^{**}	-0.041
Occupation: benchmark executives					
Professionals	-0.001	-0.002	-0.001	0.002	0.002
Workers	-0.003	-0.006	-0.003	0.007	0.005
Status: benchmark employed					
Retired	-0.003	-0.007	-0.003	0.007	0.006
Student	0.001	0.001	0.001	-0.002	-0.001
Unemployed	0.022	0.040	0.013 [*]	-0.046	-0.029
<i>N</i>	2568	2568	2568	2568	2568

Notes: * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. Standard errors are not shown for presentation purposes. ^a

Country-fixed effects and EU-fixed effects are not shown for presentation purposes.

Source: Authors' work.