

ELITES WITHOUT A MANDATE? VOTER TURNOUT AND THE LEGITIMACY OF MUNICIPAL REPRESENTATIVES

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With 5 figures and 2 tables

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Summary: The article links theories of political legitimacy with empirical data on municipal electoral participation, describes spatial inequalities in the conferral of mandates to elected representatives, and provides an empirical basis for reflections on various aspects of local democracy. The main objective is to determine whether municipal representatives elected under conditions of low voter turnout can be regarded as elites with a sufficient majority mandate. The study examines the relationship between voter turnout and the legitimacy of municipal representatives in Czechia. It is based on data from the Czech Statistical Office on municipal elections in 2014, 2018, and 2022. The key indicators are voter turnout and the share of votes cast for elected representatives, which makes it possible to assess what proportion of the population effectively contributed to the mandate of local political elites. The spatial analysis reveals long-term stable patterns. Higher levels of electoral support are found in small and peripheral municipalities and lower levels in large cities and metropolitan regions. In many urbanized municipalities, political representation is thus supported by only a minority of the eligible population.

Keywords: Local political elites, voter turnout, legitimacy, mandates, elections, Czechia

1 Introduction

Political legitimacy and electoral participation are among the main topics of a range of academic disciplines as mentioned by FUKUYAMA (2014). In political science, they are associated with the justification of power and the consent of the governed (HABERMAS 2000). Sociology understands legitimacy both as an important source of power (ETZIONI-HALEVY 1999, PATEL et al. 2005) and as an important element (POWELL & DiMAGGIO 2012) of organizational functioning (SUCHMAN 1995). In geography, the topic appears mainly in relation to local governance (SWIANIEWICZ 2021, DOBOS 2021), spatial justice, and citizens' participation in decision-making about the places where they live (PAASI 2002, HARVEY 2010).

At the same time, electoral participation is one of the most frequently used empirical indicators of citizens' relationship to politics. Political scientists have long examined why people do or do not vote (LIJPHART 1997, LINEK 2013, SKORUPSKA 2022, BAUHR & CHARRON 2025), how socioeconomic inequalities shape participation (NORRIS 2011), and how voter turnout relates to the quality of democracy (ÇAKIR 2025). Sociology focuses on participation as a manifestation of social integration and trust in public institutions. Geography, in turn, adds an important spatial dimension. Voter turnout is not evenly distributed but varies substantially between regions

and cities, reflecting local conditions or identity as pointed out by CHROMÝ (2003), and the accessibility of political processes.

The municipal level, although closest to citizens' everyday lives, remains relatively marginal in debates on legitimacy and voter turnout (see GRAY & CAUL 2000, PRENER et al. 2025). Yet it is precisely here that a paradox emerges. Municipal representatives make decisions on key issues affecting quality of life, yet they are often elected by only a minority of eligible voters. In many municipalities, political representation is thus formally legal but only weakly anchored in terms of support. Despite extensive research on voter turnout and political legitimacy (TYLER 1990, SUCHMAN 1995, PATEL et al. 2005, LEVI et al. 2009), the relationship between electoral participation and the effective mandate of local political elites remains insufficiently explored, particularly at the municipal level. The gap is especially relevant in post-socialist contexts, where fragmented settlement structures and evolving local governance systems shape both participation and representation. These dynamics are particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe (DOBOS 2021, SWIANIEWICZ 2021, TAVARES 2024), where the legacies of state socialism and ongoing reforms of municipal self-government have produced distinctive trajectories of local democratic consolidation.



Existing research has largely focused on voter turnout (LIJPHART 1997, FRANKLIN 2004) or local governance (JOHN 2001, SWIANIEWICZ 2021) separately, with little systematic attention to how electoral participation translates into the actual mandate of municipal representatives. This descriptive article asks whether municipal representatives, under conditions of low voter turnout, can be regarded as elites with a sufficient majority mandate. It focuses on identifying spatial differences in voter turnout in municipal elections and in the legitimacy of local political elites (members of assembly). The contribution of the article lies in three areas. Theoretically, it links the concept of legitimacy with municipal voter turnout. Empirically, it emphasizes differences in spatial and local factors that shape voter turnout. Socially, it raises the question of how to strengthen citizens' trust in local politics and how to prevent situations in which decisions about public affairs remain in the hands of a narrow group of actors without broader support.

Given the above, the objectives of the study are as follows: a) Identify spatial differences in voter turnout in municipal elections and in the share of votes (%) for elected municipal representatives in municipalities in Czechia. b) Explain spatial differences in political legitimacy and voter turnout as spatially conditioned phenomena that cannot be understood without considering the local socio-spatial context. c) Test whether there are statistically significant differences in voter turnout across municipality size categories. The general aim is to link the theory of political legitimacy with electoral participation and to demonstrate that the legitimacy of local political representation is not merely a social phenomenon, but also a geographically embedded one.

2 Theoretical background

Political legitimacy and voter turnout are specific phenomena that manifest in different forms across countries. This is particularly evident in the countries of Central Europe, whose political systems have developed in distinctive ways since the 1990s (KOSTELECKÝ 2002, EKIERT & HANSON 2003, ROBERTS 2009, ZARYCKI 2015, TAVARES 2018). The differing levels of political mobilization (see LINEK 2013, GRAY & CAUL 2000, BHATTI et al. 2019), and thus voter turnout in Central and Eastern Europe, need to be interpreted differently from those in long-established democracies. Changing patterns of political mobilization and electoral legitimacy may have

far-reaching consequences for the future development of democracy in these countries as pointed out by NORRIS (1999) and NORRIS & INGLEHART (2019). Lower levels of electoral participation also result in lower legitimacy (Fig. 1) of elected representatives, with whom residents of a given territory may not fully identify.

This situation is illustrated in Fig. 1, which organises this relationship along three analytical levels – a theoretical shift of voter turnout from a measurable fact to a normative conception. At the empirical level, voter turnout represents a directly observable (quantifiable) phenomenon. At the procedural level, low turnout translates into reduced representativeness as a structural consequence. At the normative level, the legitimacy of local political representation emerges as a theoretical evaluation derived from the preceding two. In many cases, situations arise in which a minority of the population determines political representation (LEIGHLEY & NAGLER 2013), which may further reinforce declining trust in political elites. Higher voter turnout allows elected actors to achieve a higher degree of legitimacy and provides greater scope for policymaking. Low voter turnout may signal apathy, alienation, or a lack of trust in government (LINEK 2013, BHATTI et al. 2019, SLEE & DESMOND 2023).

However, low participation is a phenomenon that is, at the individual level, partly defined by socioeconomic resources (LIJPHART 1997, SLEE & DESMOND 2023). The perceived salience of elections and the competitiveness of political parties also play a role (GRAY & CAUL 2000, FRANKLIN 2004, BHATTI et al. 2019), complemented in post-communist countries by post-transformational dynamics and weak party identification (ROSE & MISHLER 1998, KOSTADINOVA 2003). For the Czech context, LINEK (2013) shows that the decline in turnout after 1990 was driven primarily by the weakening of party attachment and the erosion of the norm of voting as a civic duty. Low turnout in municipal elections may therefore reflect a combination of resource-based, motivational, and mobilization-related factors, whose intensity may vary across different types of municipalities.

At the same time, the relationship between voter turnout and legitimacy should be approached with caution. High voter turnout does not automatically guarantee substantive legitimacy, just as low turnout does not necessarily imply its absence. In some contexts, high participation may result from protest mobilization, populist appeals, or strong polarization rather than genuine trust in democratic institutions as suggested by MUDDÉ & KALTWASSER

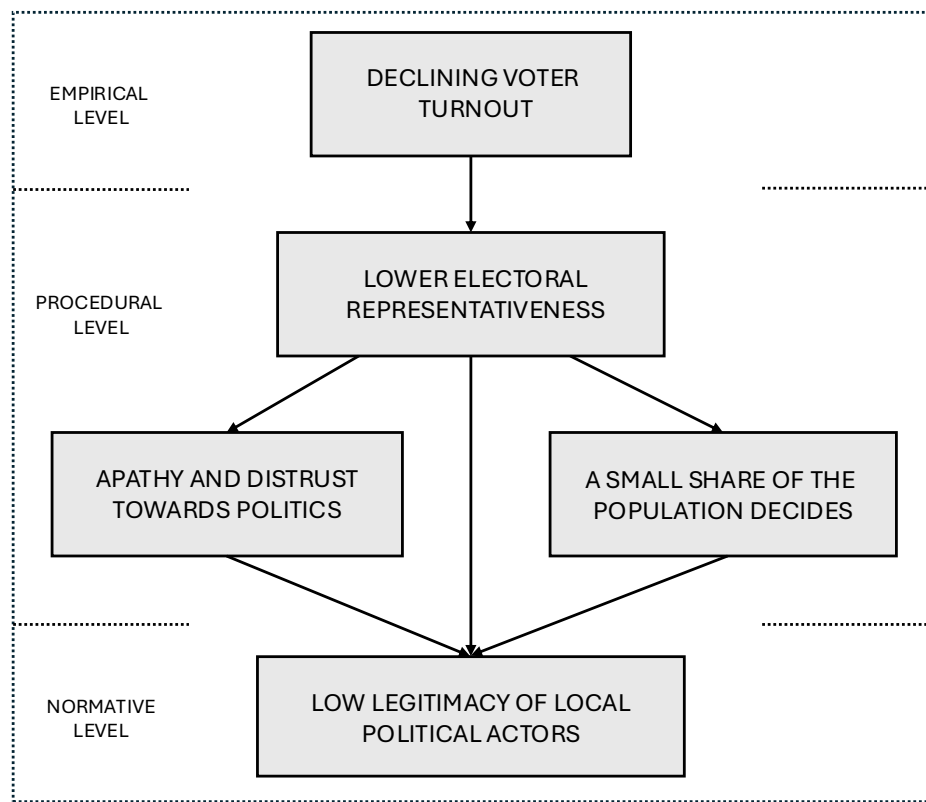


Fig. 1: Analytical framework of voter turnout and the legitimacy of local political elites

(2017). Relatively low turnout can coexist with stable governance and a broadly accepted institutional framework, particularly in consolidated democracies where legitimacy is rooted not only in electoral participation but also in the long-term performance of institutions and respect for the rule of law (EASTON 1975, DALTON 2004, LEVI et al. 2009, MAIR 2023).

Another important aspect is the socio-spatial differentiation of voter turnout and legitimacy. Electoral participation is unevenly distributed across regions, social groups, and types of settlements, which may lead to systematic inequalities in representation. Peripheral or economically disadvantaged areas often exhibit lower voter turnout, which may result in their weaker representation in decision-making processes.

This may create a feedback mechanism in which already marginalized regions have less influence over political decisions, thereby further deepening territorial inequalities and weakening perceived legitimacy at the local level. In this sense, legitimacy is not merely a political category but a spatially conditioned phenomenon, shaped by the distribution of resources, opportunities, and social capital (PUTNAM 1993, AGNEW 2002, COX 2008, RODRÍGUEZ-POSE 2018, PIKE et al. 2016).

Equally important is the role of political elites and institutional arrangements in shaping both voter turnout and legitimacy. In many Central and Eastern European contexts, local political arenas are characterized by relatively stable and sometimes closed elite structures, which may reduce incentives for broader participation. Where political competition is weak or perceived as such, citizens may see little reason to participate in elections. This may lead to a situation of “procedural legitimacy,” where institutions formally function but lack deeper societal anchoring. Such an environment may also foster the persistence of clientelistic ties or the dominance of local notables, further complicating the relationship between participation and legitimacy (BOURDIEU 2019, HIGLEY & BURTON 2006, KITSCHOLT 2000, LEDENEVA 2013, BEST & HIGLEY 2017).

In some cases, a higher share of votes cast for elected representatives may therefore reflect limited competition or structural characteristics of the local environment rather than genuinely strong political legitimacy. This is usually evident in the smallest municipalities, where the supply of candidates tends to be narrow, candidate lists often barely cover the number of seats to be filled, and elections may thus

take on a confirmatory rather than competitive character. A high share of votes obtained in such an environment also reflects the absence of alternatives and the closure of local networks, which facilitate the reproduction of existing elites (GRANOVETTER 1983, ENOS 2017). It is therefore necessary to distinguish between a high share of votes as an expression of consensus and as a manifestation of the structural closure of the local political space.

It is necessary to take into account generational change and evolving patterns of political participation, which challenge traditional understandings of legitimacy based on voter turnout. Younger generations often express their political preferences through non-electoral forms of engagement, such as online activities and protests, which are not captured by conventional voter turnout. Declining voter turnout, therefore, does not necessarily indicate apathy or alienation but rather a transformation in the forms of civic engagement. This shift raises important questions about how legitimacy is constructed and measured in contemporary democracies and whether traditional indicators remain sufficient to capture citizens' relationship to politics (INGLEHART 2020, NORRIS 2002, DALTON 2020, VAN DETH 2014, THEOCHARIS & VAN DETH 2018).

Research on the relationship to politics or spatial differentiation of voting behaviour represents a traditional component of electoral geography as a discipline, not only in Czechia. However, studies focusing on the stability of voting behaviour and its impacts have tended to remain at the margins of geographical interest. Since the first post-socialist elections, Czech electoral geography has paid considerable attention to the spatial differentiation of voting behaviour and its evolution over time, including the study of the stability of electoral support (JEHLÍČKA & SÝKORA 1991, DANĚK 1993, KOSTELECKÝ et al. 2014, LYSEK & MACKŮ 2022). These approaches typically employ methods that visualize spatial differentiation (e.g. stability of electoral support) and its changes over time at the local scale. Voting behaviour can be examined at lower spatial scales as pointed out by GREGORY et al. (2009) and COX (1969), allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. This level of analysis is also preferred in the present descriptive research on the legitimacy of local political elites (Fig. 1).

Beyond the question of scale, voting behaviour is shaped by a wide range of social, political, cultural, and economic factors, including the economic level of the region and the development of the municipality (PATTIE et al. 1997). However, in addition to these more traditional explanatory factors, it is also neces-

sary to consider broader contextual influences (AGNEW 1996, PAASI 2002). One such interactive influence is the neighbourhood effect (JOHNSTON & PATTIE 2017). This effect is based on the assumption that an individual's voting behaviour is shaped not only by their personal characteristics (such as age, education, or income), but also by the social and spatial environment in which they live. These neighbourhood and community influences are particularly evident in small municipalities, where social ties are usually denser and more frequent (PUTNAM 2000), and are likely to play a significant role in shaping political attitudes and voting behaviour. Such processes may be strengthened by social control mechanisms associated with close-knit communities, where individual political participation is more visible to other residents (GERBER et al. 2008).

In large cities, the anonymity of the urban environment reduces the likelihood of spontaneous political communication among neighbours (SCIARINI et al. 2015). Rather, if social interactions do take place, they are more likely to occur among acquaintances. COX (1969) builds on this idea by arguing that communication facilitates the transfer of opinions and persuasion, which can subsequently lead to changes in voting behaviour. According to COX, such changes most frequently occur in places where people meet often. It can therefore be assumed that in smaller municipalities, more pronounced political conversion, a stronger sense of belonging, and greater political support for elected representatives are more likely to occur. These patterns may be particularly visible in areas that are remote from core centres or otherwise disadvantaged or territorially fragmented (STĂNUȘ 2021, DOBOS 2021). Municipal politics in Czechia became particularly important in these areas after 1989, when voter turnout was shaped by a range of dynamic processes (LINEK 2013, KOSTADINOVÁ 2003) that contributed to broader societal transformations. These trends are also visible in Fig. 2, which clearly shows a gradual decline in voter turnout in municipal elections in Czechia followed by stabilization.

Some studies (NORRIS 1999, NORRIS & INGLEHART 2019) point to widening generational differences in political mobilization, particularly in voter turnout. These differences primarily concern younger voters on the one hand and older voters on the other, whose participation in elections is statistically more likely than that of the former group (SCIARINI et al. 2015, NORRIS & INGLEHART 2019). In this context, the mandate of elected representatives may be disproportionately based on the support of specific parts of the population, which has direct implica-

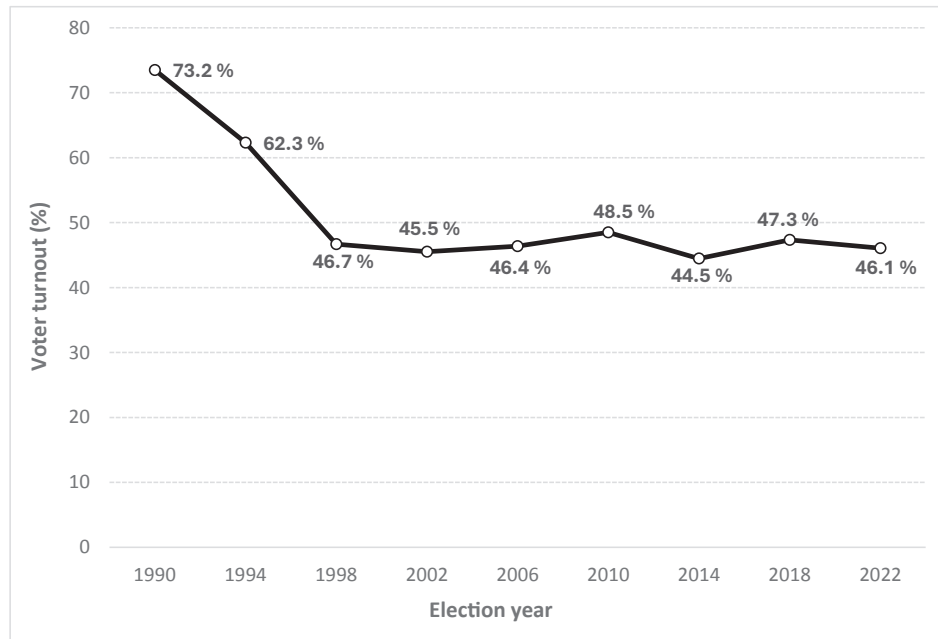


Fig. 2: Voter turnout in Czech municipal elections over the long term.
Source: CSO (2022b), own elaboration.

tions for the issue of political legitimacy. Examining voter turnout and the support received by elected representatives therefore makes it possible to better understand the extent to which local political elites represent the socially differentiated structure of municipal populations.

3 Data & methods

The presented analysis of the spatial differentiation of electoral support is based on electoral data (municipal elections) published by the Czech Statistical Office (CSO 2022b) for the years 2014, 2018, and 2022. The examined period can be characterized as relatively stable in terms of both institutional and electoral development and was therefore selected as an appropriate analytical framework. The selected period is methodologically advantageous because the structure of electoral data published by the CSO is consistent, comparable over time and the territorial structure of municipalities remained stable. The selected period covers three distinct phases of Czech political development: the transformation of the party system after 2013 and the emergence of new political actors, the period of dominance of the ANO movement, and the post-pandemic re-configuration of political preferences following the COVID-19 crisis. The robustness of the findings is enhanced by covering three elections rather than

a single contest. The fact that the observed spatial patterns persist despite these substantially different political contexts indicates that they are not driven by contingent or short-term political developments.

The analysis focuses on the indicator of the share of votes received by elected local political elites (%) and voter turnout (%) in municipal elections. The vote share of local elites (CSO variable POCPROCSE) is defined as a percentage calculated as the proportion of votes obtained by the elected candidate relative to the total number of votes received by the electoral list for which the candidate stood in the election. Voter turnout is a traditional indicator, defined as the ratio of the number of issued envelopes to the number of registered voters, expressed as a percentage. In addition to the two main indicators, the number of candidates per seat was used as an auxiliary variable providing empirical support for the interpretation of the share of votes and voter turnout, particularly with respect to the structural conditions.

This method therefore goes beyond voter turnout alone and captures the proportion of all eligible residents of a municipality who actually cast their vote for candidates who subsequently exercise a mandate in the municipal assembly (PRENER et al. 2025). The basic spatial unit of analysis is the municipality, representing a suitable spatial scale (GREGORY et al. 2009). The analysis includes all municipalities in Czechia with the exception of military

areas (the analysis covered 6 254 territorially comparable units), regardless of their formal municipal status, i.e. municipalities, market towns, and cities. This level of detail makes it possible to capture significant local differences between small rural municipalities, suburban settlements, and large cities. Such detailed territorial division is particularly suitable for analysing local political representation, as municipal politics is closely tied to a specific place (DENTERS 2017).

It is important to mention data limitations. While the data enable the identification of spatial patterns, they do not provide insight into individual voting behaviour, attitudes, or perceptions of the legitimacy of representatives. It is therefore not possible to determine which groups of residents participate in elections and which remain outside the political process. This is particularly important in relation to legitimacy, as a relatively high share of votes for elected representatives may in fact result from the participation of only a limited segment of the population. The interpretation of results must therefore remain at the level of structural relationships and cannot extend to individual motivations. Another important aspect is the specific nature of the municipal electoral system (JOHN 2001, GOLDSMITH 2002), in which voters can allocate preferential votes across candidate lists and where personal reputation often plays a more significant role than political parties. Despite these limitations, the data represent a strong empirical indicator for analysing the relationship between electoral participation and the legitimacy of municipal representatives. They make it possible to show what share of residents contributed to the mandate of local political elites who decide on local affairs, thus providing an important basis for reflecting on the character of these elites across different types of municipalities and regions over time.

The choice of the municipality as the basic unit of analysis simultaneously raises a broader question concerning the relationship between the scale of analysis and the interpretation of results. Although spatial resolution undoubtedly allows for the identification of detailed local variability, it also complicates the generalization of observed patterns. The substantial differences between very small municipalities and large cities do not merely reflect distinct electoral behaviours, but also fundamentally different institutional, social, and demographic contexts. Comparing such units may therefore lead to an oversimplified interpretation if these contextual differences are not sufficiently taken into account.

In line with the above-mentioned theoretical considerations and in order to verify the results, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed as a supporting analytical tool. This method is used to test whether a selected categorical variable (municipality size category) has a statistically significant effect on the value of the examined dependent variable (voter turnout). Thus, the municipalities were divided into five categories according to population size, taking into account the structure of the Czech settlement system and the differences between rural municipalities, small towns, medium-sized towns, and larger urban centres. The Czech settlement system is fragmented, with a large proportion of municipalities falling into the smallest size categories. Therefore, it is appropriate to distinguish the smallest municipalities from the others. Based on this, municipalities were classified as follows: (i) up to 499 inhabitants, (ii) 500–1 999 inhabitants, (iii) 2 000–4 999 inhabitants, (iv) 5 000–19 999 inhabitants, and (v) 20 000 or more inhabitants.

This classification reflects the structure of the Czech settlement system, in which the smallest municipalities are exceptionally numerous (CSO 2022a). Local politics shifts gradually with size—from highly personalized, community-based politics in the smallest municipalities toward more party-based competition in larger towns and cities. It should be emphasised that, at the local level, Czechia uses a system of proportional representation with a substantial possibility of personalised voting (CSO 2026). Voters may choose not only an electoral list, but also individual candidates. For the interpretation of the results, it is therefore important to know who was elected, but also the level of support they received. In open-list systems, candidate-level support is more important than in closed-list systems or direct election (cf. BALDINI 2002). For this reason, the approach adopted in this study cannot be automatically transferred to other countries, given the diversity of local electoral systems across Europe.

The specific nature of the municipal electoral system further complicates a straightforward interpretation. In a context where political competition is highly personalized and party identification is relatively weak, a high share of votes for elected representatives cannot be interpreted solely as an expression of political support in the traditional sense. In many cases, it reflects local social ties, and the embeddedness of candidates within the community. This aspect suggests that electoral behaviour at the local level is strongly shaped by informal mechanisms that are only indirectly captured by standard quantitative indicators.

4 Results

The results reveal a pronounced spatial differentiation of both observed phenomena. Regarding the legitimacy of local political elites, higher values can be identified in inner peripheral areas (MUSIL & MÜLLER 2008), in small rural municipalities, and in municipalities with a higher ageing index (CSO 2022a). Lower shares are typical of large cities and suburbanized areas. This pattern suggests that in smaller settlements, votes tend to be concentrated among a limited number of candidates, whereas in cities electoral support is more dispersed across a broader spectrum of individuals. This differentiation is closely related to municipality size and the character of the local social environment. In small municipalities, municipal politics is highly personalized, candidates are often personally known, and voting decisions are strongly based on social ties (ENOS 2017). In contrast, political environments in large cities are more pluralistic and structured along party lines, leading to greater dispersion of votes. The observed pattern can also be interpreted within a broader socio-spatial context. A higher share of votes for elected representatives in

peripheral areas may be associated with a stronger local identity (CHROMÝ & SKÁLA 2010), greater population stability (CSO 2022a), and higher levels of social cohesion (JOHN 2001). At the same time, it may simply reflect the low level of political competition in small municipalities, where the limited number of candidates concentrates votes among a narrow group of contenders.

Fig. 3 indirectly captures differences in the social organization of space between rural and urban areas. Here, the share of votes cast for elected representatives functions as a proxy variable for the character of local political competition and the strength of local social ties, both of which influence voting behaviour across different types of territories. It should be noted that the results may also be influenced by structural factors, such as the number of political representatives or the number of voters or candidates per seat. The interpretation of the share of votes for elected representatives at the local level must also take into account the institutional design of the municipal electoral system (see Section 3).

The size of municipal assemblies increases gradually with population size, meaning that the num-

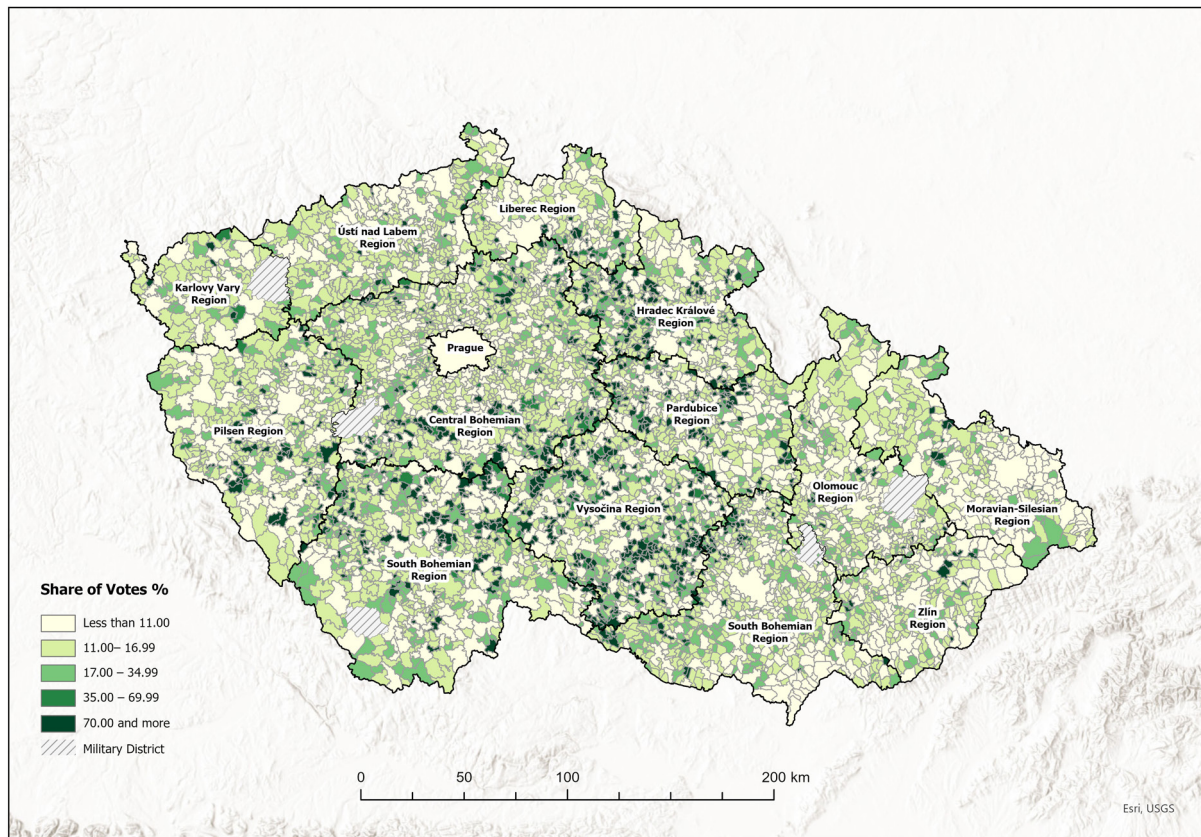


Fig. 3: Share of votes received by elected local political elites. Source: CSO (2022b), own elaboration.

ber of votes per seat differs substantially between the smallest municipalities and large cities. In small municipalities with limited candidate lists and independent candidates running individually, a single candidate may structurally obtain a large share of the votes cast. A higher share of votes for elected representatives in small municipalities is therefore partly a mechanical consequence of the electoral system, rather than solely an expression of stronger ties between voters and representatives. This structural conditioning does not undermine the indicator, but it requires its joint interpretation with voter turnout, which is not affected by the number of voters per seat. Where the spatial patterns of both indicators converge, the observed differentiation cannot be understood merely as a structural effect of the electoral system. To examine these structural and socio-spatial relationships more directly, Spearman's rank-order correlations were calculated between the number of candidates per seat, the share of votes, and voter turnout across all municipalities for which the three indicators were available (see Tab. 1).

The number of candidates per seat correlates negatively with the share of votes ($\rho = -0.34$), a moderate relationship indicating that where more candidates compete for each seat – typically in larger municipalities with greater competition – the share of votes is lower. This is consistent with the structural mechanism discussed above. In small municipalities with a single candidate list, even a small number of marks translates into a high percentage. The share of votes correlates positively with voter turnout ($\rho = +0.45$), a moderate relationship suggesting that municipalities with higher turnout also tend to display a higher share of votes. Most likely small municipalities where voters are personally acquainted with the candidates. The number of candidates per seat correlates weakly and negatively with voter turnout ($\rho = -0.11$), indicating that larger municipalities, with greater candidate competition, tend to exhibit somewhat lower turnout. These correlations confirm that the share of votes is shaped partly by the structural competitiveness of the contest, yet its positive association with turnout indicates that both indicators

capture a shared socio-spatial dimension rather than a purely mechanical effect. The convergence becomes clearer when the spatial patterns themselves are compared.

A closer look at Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 reveals the recurrence of very similar spatial patterns. Although overall turnout changes slightly between elections, the geographical distribution of participation remains remarkably stable. Electoral behaviour including voter turnout thus does not fluctuate randomly but reflects the long-term character of specific areas. In all three elections, higher turnout is clearly concentrated in smaller municipalities and peripheral rural areas characterized by stronger social cohesion (cf. PUTNAM 2000). These include traditional rural regions (Vysočina Region), sparsely populated areas (South Bohemia Region), border regions, and certain (sub)mountainous areas where local belonging is stronger. Here, municipal politics has a distinctly personal dimension, and participation in elections forms part of local public life.

In contrast, lower turnout has long been observed in large cities and their hinterlands. In these areas, local politics tends to be more anonymous, the population more cosmopolitan, and attachment to a specific place weaker, which could be reflected in lower electoral participation. Settlement size thus emerges as one of the key factors influencing voter turnout. While turnout in small municipalities often reaches above-average levels, in large cities it is lower and internally differentiated. This suggests that voter turnout in municipal elections is strongly conditioned by structural and socio-spatial factors rather than by current political motivation (BAUHR & CHARRON 2025). This pattern is presented in more detail in Tab. 2, which shows that there are statistically significant differences in voter turnout among categories of municipalities based on population size. This finding is consistent with previous approaches suggesting higher levels of social cohesion and community pressure in smaller municipalities.

Tab. 2 presents the results of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), which revealed highly significant differences in voter turnout across municipality

Tab. 1: Spearman's rank-order correlations between candidates per seat, share of votes, and voter turnout

Indicators	Candidates per seat	Share of votes	Voter turnout
Candidates per seat	–	-0.3431	-0.1084
Share of votes	–	–	0.4454
Voter turnout	–	–	–

Source: CSO (2022b), own processing

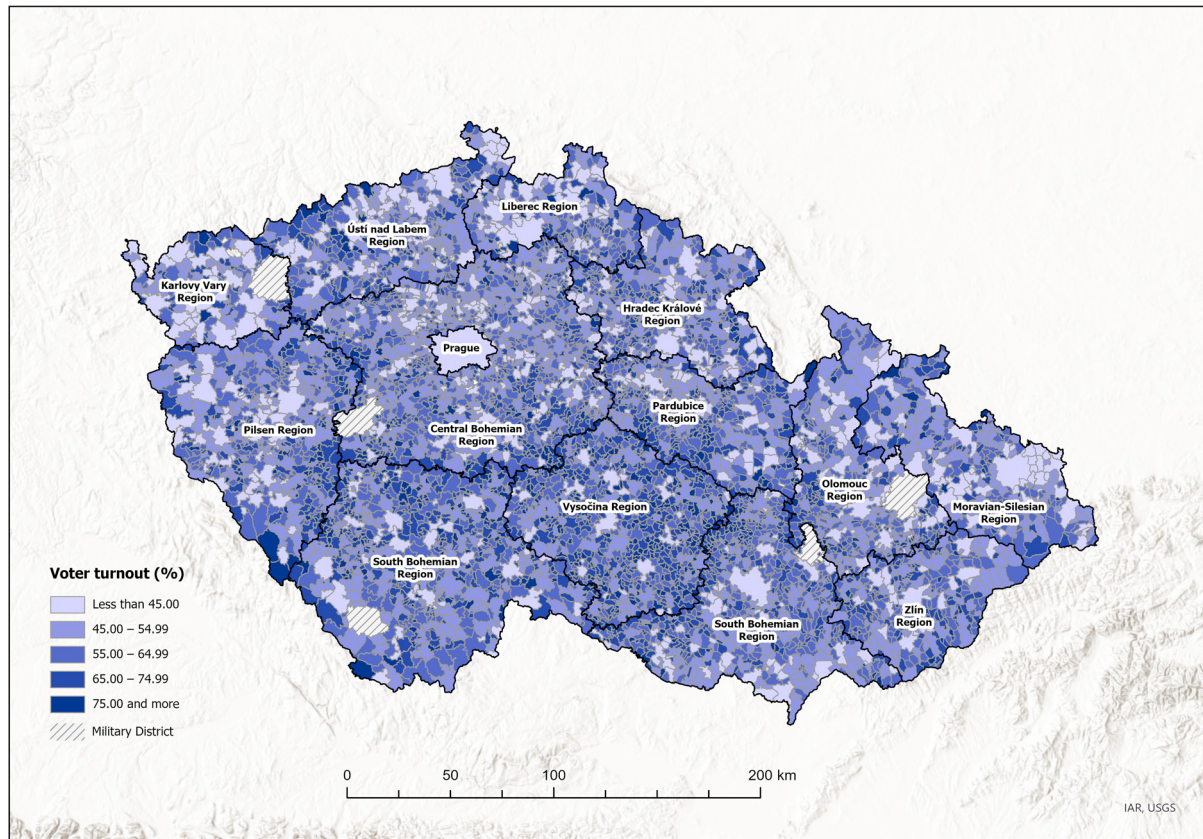


Fig. 4: Voter turnout in municipal elections in Czechia. Source: CSO (2022b), own elaboration..

size categories. The ratio of between-group to within-group variability indicates that turnout differences are strongly associated with municipality size. The pattern reported in Tab. 2 reveals more than a simple gradient. As municipality size increases, both the mean turnout and the relative within-category variability decline systematically. This is also confirmed by the coefficient of variation (CV), which provides an appropriate measure of within-category heterogeneity. The CV decreases monotonically from 20.3 %

in the smallest municipalities to 9.1 % in cities above 20 000 inhabitants, confirming that the declining variability is not merely an effect of lower mean turnout. This dual decrease is theoretically meaningful. In the smallest municipalities, the relatively high variance indicates considerable differences between individual settlements with otherwise similar profiles.

Larger municipalities converge toward more uniform turnout levels, indicating that structural features of urban life – anonymity and more plural-

Tab. 2: Differences in voter turnout across municipality size categories (ANOVA results)

Category	Count	Mean	Variance	CV
Up to 499	3 350	61.98	158.34	20.30
500–1 999	2 177	54.39	108.09	19.11
2 000–4 999	448	48.48	58.17	15.73
5 000–19 999	216	43.99	29.92	12.43
20 000 and more	63	39.37	12.77	9.08
Total	6254	57.52	157.30	21.80

Source: CSO (2022b), own processing. Note: CV = coefficient.variation

istic political competition (see SCIARINI ET AL. 2015, NORRIS & INGLEHART 2019) – operate in a relatively homogeneous manner across cities of comparable size. The differences across categories thus reflect not merely a quantitative gradient but qualitatively distinct modes of local political engagement. The aggregate data cannot directly capture the underlying mechanisms; however, the observed pattern is consistent with theoretical expectations that in small municipalities, voting appears anchored in face-to-face interactions, dense communication networks (COX 1969), and stronger local identity (PUTNAM 2000), whereas in larger cities it is embedded in more anonymous and institutionalized forms of mobilization that respond less directly to community-level dynamics. Verifying these mechanisms directly would require individual-level or qualitative data, which lies beyond the scope of the present aggregate analysis. It is evident that voter turnout in Czechia exhibits pronounced spatial differences (see Fig. 4). It is associated with settlement fragmentation, municipality size, peripheral or metropolitan location, and the degree of local belonging among residents. These factors create a long-term spatial unevenness

in electoral participation across the country and may contribute to varying levels of legitimacy among municipal politicians.

A similar spatial differentiation can also be observed in Fig. 5, which displays the combination of votes received by local political elites and voter turnout. The spatial pattern is strongly structured according to settlement type. In smaller rural municipalities and peripheral regions, combinations of higher turnout and a higher share of votes for elected representatives occur more frequently (e.g. the South Bohemian Region or Vysočina Region). It is not uncommon that these types of areas tend to be demographically more stable (CSO 2022a), as a rule with lower residential mobility, a higher share of native residents (ŠERÝ 2018), and usually a stronger local identity (CHROMÝ & SKÁLA 2010). This supports both higher participation and more concentrated support for particular individuals.

In contrast, metropolitan, suburbanized, and some border regions more often display combinations of lower turnout and a lower share of votes cast for elected representatives. Large cities (e.g., Prague, Brno) and their hinterlands tend to exhibit greater

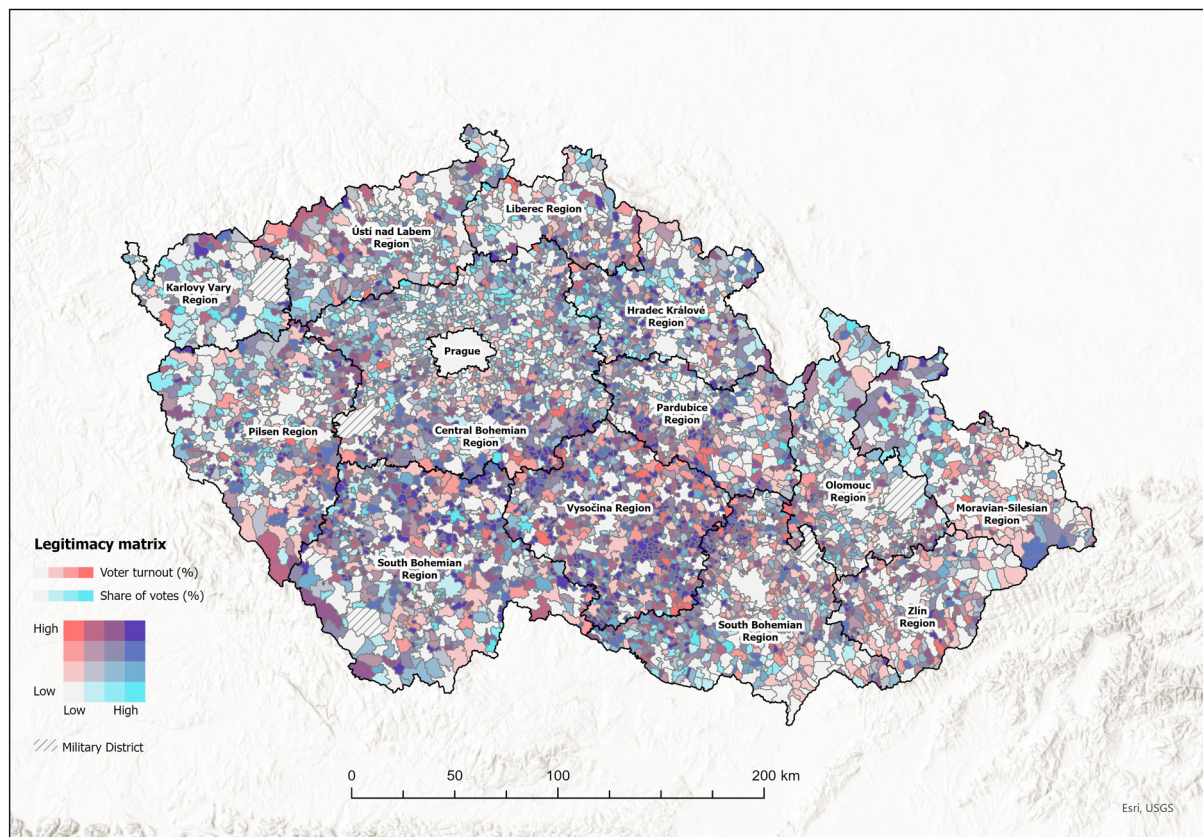


Fig. 5: Legitimacy of elected municipal representatives in Czechia. Source: CSO (2022b), own elaboration.

social heterogeneity and usually higher population mobility. This tendency may be reflected in both a lower share of votes for elected local political elites and lower voter turnout. Transitional areas between rural and urban territory often show mixed values—relatively lower turnout combined with more dispersed electoral support. These areas are usually characterized by high in-migration (CSO 2022a), often weaker neighbourhood ties, and more limited familiarity with local candidates.

The observed differences can be linked to the diversity of interests and the structure of the population. Economically more differentiated urban environments generate a wider range of political preferences, leading to a dispersion of votes. In contrast, in socioeconomically more homogeneous rural areas, it is easier to achieve consensual support (legitimacy) for particular individuals. Fig. 5 thus reflects discrepancies in the social organization of territory – the degree of social cohesion, population stability, local identity, and the character of political competition. The combination of voter turnout and votes received serves here as an indicator of where municipal politics is more strongly based on personal ties and where it is shaped by more pluralistic political competition.

5 Discussion

The results of this article extend the findings of Czech electoral geography on the long-term persistence of spatial structures of voting behaviour (JEHLÍČKA & SÝKORA 1991, KOSTELECKÝ et al. 2014, LYSEK & MACKŮ 2022) in two directions. Persistence characterizes not only party support in national elections but also participation and the distribution of personal support in municipal elections, and it applies to the legitimacy dimension of local representation. The spatial anchoring of local electoral behaviour thus appears to operate largely independently of short-term political dynamics (AGNEW 1996, NORRIS 2011).

Another finding concerns the direction of the participation gradient. Much of the literature expects peripheral and economically disadvantaged areas to exhibit lower participation and consequently weaker representation, creating a feedback mechanism of marginalization (NORRIS 2011, RODRÍGUEZ-POSE 2018). At the municipal level in Czechia, however, this gradient is inverted. The highest turnout and the most concentrated support for elected representatives are found precisely in small municipalities of inner peripheries (MUSIL & MÜLLER 2008). This points to the scale-dependence of political margin-

alization. Areas that are marginal to national politics may simultaneously constitute strongholds of local democratic participation, sustained by dense social networks, individual participation, and associated mechanisms of social control (COX 1969, PUTNAM 2000, GERBER et al. 2008, ENOS 2017).

The analysis of variance revealed more than turnout declining with population size of municipality. The within-category variance of turnout also decreases systematically with municipality size. This dual decrease suggests that municipality size operates not merely as a quantitative variable but as a proxy for qualitatively distinct local political worlds, in line with comparative research on municipality size and local democracy (SWIANIEWICZ 2021, AARS & CHRISTENSEN 2020, USTER et al. 2025). In the smallest municipalities, participation is strongly shaped by idiosyncratic local contexts, the personalization of politics and the structure of community ties (BALMAS et al. 2012), producing considerable differences between otherwise similar settlements. In larger cities, by contrast, the structural features of urban life converge towards uniformly low participation, and electoral support is dispersed across a broader spectrum of candidates, a pattern consistent with findings on urban electoral behaviour (SCIARINI et al. 2015, NORRIS & INGLEHART 2019). In the aggregate results, metropolitan hinterlands usually combine low turnout with a low share of votes cast for elected representatives, as electoral support is dispersed across a broader field of candidates. It is primarily the low turnout that raises questions about the anchoring of local representation. Case studies by VOBECKÁ & KOSTELECKÝ (2007), however, documented that suburbanization does not necessarily depress local participation and that partisanship in Czech suburbs has been increasing.

As outlined in the theoretical section, these findings must not be read normatively. A high share of votes for elected representatives may reflect consensus rooted in social cohesion as well as the structural closure of the local political arena (GRANOVETTER 1983, ENOS 2017, JOHN 2001). The dispersion of votes and low turnout in cities may signal weak engagement as well as an open, pluralistic political environment (BALMAS et al. 2012, DALTON 2020). Part of the observed share of votes for elected representatives is also mechanically conditioned by the electoral system, as the number of voters per seat is far lower in small municipalities (see Section 4). However, the convergence of these patterns with voter turnout, which is unaffected by this mechanism, suggests that the spatial differentiation is not merely a structural

effect. The contribution of the present analysis lies not in resolving this ambivalence, but in demonstrating that in a substantial part of the urbanized territory, formally legitimate representation rests on the active support of only a narrow segment of the eligible population. The question of whether the identified structural conditions foster open political competition, or rather contribute to the reproduction of existing power structures (LIJPHART 1997, SCIARINI et al. 2015, BOURDIEU 2019, PUTNAM 2000), therefore remains open for research designs operating below the municipal level.

6 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to determine whether municipal representatives elected under conditions of low voter turnout can be regarded as elites with a sufficient majority mandate. The answer is differentiated in space. In small and peripheral municipalities, where turnout is high and support for elected representatives is strongly concentrated, the mandate rests on a broad share of the local electorate. In large cities and suburbanized areas the combination of low turnout and dispersed electoral support means that formally legitimate representatives are frequently elected by only a minority of eligible voters. The notion of “elites without a mandate” therefore cannot be applied uniformly. Each situation must be assessed idiographically. This condition can nonetheless be identified more frequently in more urbanized areas.

In light of the stated objectives, a) pronounced spatial differences in both voter turnout and the electoral support for elected representatives were identified, with higher values in small and peripheral municipalities and lower values in large cities and metropolitan regions. b) These differences were shown to be usually spatially conditioned, linked to settlement size, peripherality, demographic stability, and the character of local social ties rather than to short-term political dynamics. c) The analysis of variance confirmed statistically significant differences in turnout across municipality size categories, with turnout declining systematically as municipality size increases.

The presented study shows that the relationship between electoral participation and the mandate of municipal political elites in Czechia has an evident spatial character. Based on CSO data from the 2014, 2018, and 2022 municipal elections, two stable patterns can be identified. Voter turnout is higher

in smaller and peripheral municipalities, while it is lower in metropolitan regions. The share of votes received by elected political elites also varies across space. This confirms that in many municipalities, local representation is formally legitimate, yet its effective political support within the population may remain relatively narrow, particularly in urbanized areas where votes are more dispersed among candidates and turnout is weaker. These findings suggest that the democratic mandate of local elites is not uniformly distributed across space, but rather reflects underlying territorial inequalities in participation and political engagement.

The main contribution of this study lies in introducing an explicit focus on the legitimacy of municipal elites into electoral geography and operationalizing it through a combined indicator of the share of votes for elected representatives relative to voter turnout. This approach moves beyond traditional analyses of turnout alone and offers a more nuanced understanding of how political authority is constituted at the local level. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to bridging electoral geography with broader debates on political legitimacy, local governance, and spatial inequalities. It demonstrates that legitimacy is not merely an abstract normative concept or an institutional attribute, but a measurable and spatially differentiated phenomenon shaped by long-term socio-spatial processes.

The findings further point to the possibility that electoral participation and the effective mandate of local representatives are shaped by stable territorial patterns that persist over time. By working at a municipal scale, the study emphasizes variations that remain obscured in analyses conducted at higher levels of aggregation. It contributes to a more detailed understanding of how democratic processes operate in everyday life, and how local political representation is conditioned by settlement structure, peripherality, and demographic stability.

Although the analysis is rooted in the Czech context, its implications extend beyond a single country. Similar patterns of uneven participation and territorially differentiated legitimacy can be expected in other European countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, where historical trajectories, settlement fragmentation, and post-socialist transformations have shaped local governance structures. The study therefore contributes to broader European debates on the quality of local democracy by emphasizing that democratic legitimacy is territorially contingent and cannot be fully understood without considering spatial context.

The practical relevance of the study lies in identifying areas where the mandate of municipal representatives is systematically weaker. At the same time, the findings invite a more cautious interpretation of high participation in small municipalities, where strong local ties may coexist with limited political competition. The study identifies the importance of incorporating spatial perspectives into the analysis of democratic legitimacy. Understanding where and why the mandate of local political elites varies is essential not only for academic research, but also for policy-making and the design of systems of local governance.

7 References

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