



## **SYMPOSIUM ON THE POLITICS OF LOCAL PUBLIC-SECTOR REFORM: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT REINVIGORATION**

In many countries around the world, local governments are taking center stage in debates and processes of public-sector reform. Compared to the large body of research that now exists on the politics of public-sector reform at the national level (e.g., Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017; Raadschelders and Vigoda-Gadot 2015), less work has been done on the impact of political forces, broadly conceived, on change at the local level. The reforms being debated and implemented are important because of their ability to reshape the form and functioning of the tier of government closest to citizens. They are also important because widespread processes of decentralization mean that local governments have come to assume greater responsibility in planning and delivering a wide range of goods and services on which citizens and communities depend. In light of the potential impact of the reform of local administrative and management practices, advancing our understanding of the political forces driving this reform agenda is paramount. That is the aim of this symposium.

Since the beginning of the new public management “revolution” in the 1980s, local governments have traditionally played second fiddle to national administrations in policy debates about public-sector modernization. This has changed, however, in recent years. Eager to reduce the cost of public services while also making them more responsive to the demands and needs of citizens and communities, local and national politicians have taken up the task of reinvigorating management practices and organizational forms in cities and municipalities across Europe, the United States, and beyond.

While increased public and political attention to local government reform may be more recent in many places, over the years, scholars working in the fields of public management and public administration, and to some extent political science, have produced a large number of studies about local public-sector reforms. This includes work on the managerial shift from centralized to decentralized and hybrid modes of governance (e.g., Kersting and Vetter 2003), work on the rise of NPM and post-NPM ideas related to open markets, performance management and measurement (e.g., Kuhlmann and Bouckaert 2016), as well as mechanisms for encouraging and coordinating the involvement of new actors in public problem solving (e.g., Vigoda-Gadot 2005). The result is that

a large body of research now exists on the question of local state reform from a management and organizational perspective as well as in terms of the policy consequences of different types of reforms. Less work has been done, however, on investigating the political factors and forces that propel or impede local public-sector reform, or indeed on identifying the politico-electoral consequences of local public-sector reform. This symposium aims to address the relative underdevelopment of political analysis within the local public-sector reform literature. In so doing, it brings together research that speaks to the political drivers and consequences of several reform processes that reflect important trends in local government administration and management.

The articles in this symposium deal with local public-sector reform in a variety of contemporary and historical political contexts and from a variety of methodological angles. Two of the articles address the issue of local public-sector reform from the perspective of municipal ownership and direct provision. As the essay by Helmut Wollman shows, this question of whether local governments should provide and manage goods and services by themselves or divest them to private (for-profit or non-profit) actors is an old one. Through an examination of electric and water utilities and social care services, Wollman identifies cycles of organizational transformation in European local government since the second half of the nineteenth century. Tracing ebbs and flows in municipalization, de-municipalization, and re-municipalization, Wollmann argues that changes over time in the organizational form of the local public sector are part of macro-political processes driven by the rise and fall of ideas and discourses about the state and market.

The second article on how reform processes affect where the local state begins and ends is by José Alonso and Rhys Andrews. It focuses on local governments in England, between 2001 and 2014, and their decision to retain or transfer ownership of public housing. Alonso and Andrews examine the association between levels of public housing, on the one hand, and the ideology of the local governing party and the electoral proclivities of the local voting public, on the other. They find that, by the start of their period of analysis, Conservative-led local governments in England were more likely to have removed themselves entirely from providing public housing compared to those governed by other political parties. Interestingly, in the subsequent period of analysis, Labour-controlled local governments are no more likely to expand publicly owned social housing than other local governments. Alonso and Andrews propose that the absence of any association between government ideology and public-sector organizational form may well be due to left-right policy convergence on the issue of public ownership. That said, they find that the more left-leaning local voters are, the more likely local governments are to be home to larger stocks of public housing. This suggests that partisan politics at the ballot box is still able to impact local public-sector organizational reform, despite policy convergence among elites.

The other two articles in this symposium address key currents in public-sector modernization at the local level. The article by Wouter Jans, Ariana Need, Minna Van Gerven, and Bas Denters focuses on “silo-busting” reform efforts aimed at facilitating joined-up governance within the local state. They examine this important trend in the context of youth services in the Netherlands, and the creation of one-stop-shop Centers for Youth and Family. Jans and his colleagues take analytic advantage of the fact that some local

governments were faster than others in responding to the Dutch national government's mandate and setting up these centers. They examine this variation in the speed of local public-sector reform and investigate whether political factors play any role in explaining it. A number of theoretically important political variables end up not showing any sign of association with the speed of reform in municipalities' delivery of youth services. This includes the ideological persuasion of the local government, levels of electoral competition, and party fragmentation in local councils. A composite indicator of the objective need for youth services (measured using data on, among other things, youth crime, child poverty, school absenteeism, and teenage pregnancy) also fails to explain the speed of reform. The one political variable that does stand out as positively associated with reform efforts is the degree of alignment between the party make-up of local councils and that of the national government. Specifically, the greater local-national party alignment, the faster local public-sector reform occurs. The other variable that Jans and his colleagues identify as a key driver of local institutional reform is the organizational capacity of municipal governments. At first blush, this is certainly a measure of how able, operationally speaking, local governments are to take on the substantial task of joined-up governance; a municipality's organizational endowments might, however, very likely be a product of politically motivated investment decisions in the past.

The final article in our symposium sheds light on the political factors and forces shaping local public-sector reform in the non-democratic context of contemporary China. In this article, Matthew Mingus and Jing Zhu provide a case-study analysis of the implementation of a large-scale, geogrid responsiveness and service-delivery system in Yichang, a city-level prefecture in central China. The reform aims to make it easier for Yichang officials to identify the problems and needs of citizens and to respond to them more effectively by, among other things, improving performance management and cross-departmental coordination. At the core of this new system is the deployment of some 1,100 public-service liaison officers, each tasked with serving a geogrid made up of roughly 300 households. These so-called geogrid cell administrators are employed to help citizens access public services; crucially, they are also responsible for collecting information on residents and businesses, as well as buildings and infrastructure. This is then provided to officials with the aim of facilitating speedy government action, from fixing potholes and enforcing building code violations to responding to public safety issues like crime and fires. The expanding geogrid e-governance system amounts to an organizational and management reform with many of the same policy and program objectives as those of reform efforts undertaken by local public officials in middle- and high-income democracies: namely, to enhance service quality and policy responsiveness and shore up citizen support for the public sector in the process. Yet, the fact that the reforming local public sector in question is a key point of contact between citizens and a non-democratic and, at times, repressive regime gives pause for thinking about the political forces driving the quest for system legitimation through service-quality improvements. As Mingus and Zhu discuss, there is good reason to view local public-sector modernization as the latest phase in social control by Chinese authorities—one that engages with citizens and seeks to respond effectively to their material needs, but nonetheless is driven by a pragmatic authoritarian impulse to maintain the political status quo.

The collection of articles included in this symposium is a small step forward in better understanding how local governments operate in dynamic political environments. Efforts to reform the local public sector are often framed, however, in apolitical terms as enhancing efficiency and therefore good for the public purse. They are also commonly justified on equally apolitical grounds as necessary for better responding to the objective needs of citizens and communities. As the articles in this collection show, political factors play a significant role in explaining the form and timing of local public-sector reform. Though the research assembled here reflects only a fraction of the reform work currently underway at the local level across the globe, it highlights directions of travel for future research, both in terms of topic areas and research methods.

One important topic area for future research relates to the role of partisan politics and the motives of governing elites to use local public-sector reform to win votes and gain or retain power. Depending on the electoral incentives they face, parties on the left or right may pursue different kinds of local reform agendas. Alternatively, due to political convergence, some kinds of local public-sector reform may become accepted as a new normal, beyond partisan politics. Similarly, an important area of future research will be to better understand how political motivations shape the actions of public-sector reformers in non-democratic contexts. Organizational and management reform at the local level may be strategically designed to move officialdom and society slowly toward democracy, or the modernization of the local state may instead be used to forestall democracy.

In addition to examining why politicians seek to reform the local public sector in the ways that they do, a key area of future research will be to examine whether these reforms produce intended or unintended political effects, above and beyond their impact on the form and content of policy. More specifically, do local public-sector reforms affect how citizens and communities think about politics and engage with officials and politicians? Do alterations in how the local state is organized and managed enhance trust and efficacy? Do they dampen or boost turnout? Do they influence the parties that voters support? Research already exists on some of these questions, but understanding whether and how local public-sector reform, directly and indirectly, impacts political attitudes and behavior holds great potential as an area of research for scholars of public administration, public management, and political science.

In sum, much is to be gained by improving our understanding of the political causes and consequences of local public-sector reform. Not only can this research shed light on when political considerations trump, and even undermine, those related to the efficiency or responsiveness of public goods and services. Crucially, it also provides important insights into when and why some kinds of local public-sector change are more politically feasible than others. As a result, taking politics as seriously at the local as at the national level provides useful information for reformers and modernizers who seek to contain costs and improve service quality. Though substantively important, isolating the direct and indirect political causes and effects of local public-sector reform is not without methodological and research-design challenges. As the work in this symposium highlights, answering the call of political analysis will involve a range of methodological approaches, from case-study research and process tracing to econometric work using observational and even experimental data. As this area of research expands in the future,

much is also to be gained from a greater focus on question-driven case selection and cross-national comparative work.

Quinton Mayne  
*Harvard Kennedy School*

Eran Vigoda-Gadot  
*University of Haifa*

## REFERENCES

- Kersting, N., and A. Vetter (Eds.). 2003. *Reforming Local Government in Europe: Closing the Gap between Democracy and Efficiency*. Berlin, Germany: Springer.
- Kuhlmann, S., and G. Bouckaert (Eds.). 2016. *Local Public Sector Reforms in Times of Crisis: National Trajectories and International Comparisons*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pollitt, C. and G. Bouckaert. 2017. *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis—Into the Age of Austerity*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Raadschelders, J. and E. Vigoda-Gadot. 2015. *Global Dimensions of Public Administration and Governance: A Comparative Voyage*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Vigoda-Gadot, E. 2003. *Managing Collaboration in Public Administration: Governance, Businesses, and Citizens in the Service of Modern Society*. Westport, CT: Praeger.