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research article

The dynamics of municipal contestation: responses from local government to perceived policy threats from higher authorities

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This article focuses on the conflictual relations at the heart of what we call 'municipal contestation'. This global phenomenon sees cities and other local governments – sometimes together with non-governmental players – contest policies proposed or implemented by higher governmental authorities, which they perceive as threats to their policy positions or local communities. Bridging public policy studies and social movement theory, we develop a new typology identifying conservative, moderate and radical ideal types of municipal contestation. In addition, we explore the dynamics of contestation, with municipalities 'moving away' from the institutional status quo when they shift from conservative to more moderate and radical forms of contestation, or 'moving towards' the status quo when they find it difficult to sustain such action. The article illustrates this typology and contestation dynamics by drawing on case studies involving resistance to central COVID-19 restrictions in England; municipal opposition to carbon capture and storage in the Netherlands; and a European campaign against a proposed European Union–United States trade agreement. We conclude how this general framework can be applied, refined, and adapted for further comparative and longitudinal studies.

Key words municipal contestation • non-governmental players • policy threats • strategic interaction • multi-level governance • policy conflict • social movements • contentious politics

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Introduction

Contestation of government policy is traditionally seen as the preserve of opposition parties, social movements, NGOs and citizen action groups. However, throughout the world *municipalities* have turned against national or supranational policies which they perceive as threats to their policy positions or to their local communities. Examples include municipalities contesting higher authorities over fracking (Fisk, 2016), resisting national immigration policies (Russell, 2019), or opposing water privatisation (Beveridge and Naumann, 2014). Cities are often at the forefront of municipal contestation, being confronted with national policy proposals or implementation processes over which they have limited mandates while still having sufficient capacity and clout to influence national policymaking (Bazurli, 2019).

Although municipal contestation is not new, it is a global phenomenon which remains under-theorised. In the policy conflict literature, clashes between national and subnational levels of government are a well-known aspect of how policy change occurs (Weible and Heikkila, 2017; Jenkins-Smith et al, 2018), but the agency of municipalities in such conflicts is given scant attention. In research on urban governance, local governments are seen as most exposed to public problems but remain subordinate to central government to varying degrees (Pierre, 2016). Urban and local government scholars, however, have recently argued for the need to better acknowledge local government as political actors which are less deferential to the national level than their position in intergovernmental systems might suggest (Gordon, 2018; Kuzemko, 2019; Pierre and Peters, 2020).

Conceptually, municipal contestation falls within the cracks between public policy studies – barring approaches to policy conflict, with its focus on deliberation-oriented collaborative governance between governmental and non-governmental players – and social movement theory – where government is either seen as the target or context of contestation initiated by non-governmental players (see Verhoeven and Duyvendak, 2017). Empirically speaking, processes of municipal contestation involve a range of political behaviour including various forms of protest, lobbying, negotiation and lawsuits. All these tactics serve the purpose of contesting a policy threat and, for that reason, become part of one broad behavioural repertoire on which municipalities and their allies draw. This eclectic mix of behaviours blurs the boundaries between extra-institutional and institutionalised forms of politics and between unconventional and conventional political means (Norris, 2002; Pettinicchio, 2016; Verhoeven and Duyvendak, 2017; Cooper, 2020). We move beyond the focus in public policy literature on consensual problem solving between governmental and non-governmental players at various levels, by importing concepts from social movements literature. These allow us to capture the conflictual and adversarial nature of municipal contestation and the fact that it can transcend conventional inter-governmental relations. Municipal contestation, we argue, is multifaceted, depending on and developing through strategic interactions (Jasper, 2006) between municipalities and higher tiers of government. In some cases, municipalities strategically interact with non-governmental players with whom they share the same sense of threat. When this happens, municipal contestation becomes a form of collaboration against the higher tier of government, which is also known as ‘contentious governance’ (Verhoeven et al, 2022).

Notable exceptions to the trend of under-theorising municipal contestation can be found in the literature on ‘new municipalism’, ‘municipal activism’, and ‘rebel cities’.

These studies analyse how cities and other municipalities challenge neoliberalism in their jurisdictions and beyond, including recent research on the ‘Fearless Cities’ network cutting across the Global South and North (Geddes, 2011; Harvey, 2012; Russell, 2019). However, we argue that municipal contestation stretches beyond radical forms of political behaviour and may include more institutionalised forms of political action, used for the purpose of contesting a policy threat. Our first contribution in this article is therefore to present a typology of municipal contestation that covers a broad range of municipal behaviours. Repurposing the concept of social movement flanks (Robnett et al, 2015), we argue that there are conservative, moderate and radical ideal typical forms of municipal contestation. Each represents different ways in which policy threats are contested, ranging from stealth opposition to open collaboration with non-governmental players, based on blurring the distinction between politicians and activists. Our second contribution is the dynamic perspective we develop on municipal contestation, where strategic interactions and events may lead municipalities to ‘move away’ from or ‘towards’ the institutional *status quo*: from conservative to moderate to radical contestation, or the other way around (see Figure 1).

Both our typology of municipal contestation and the dynamics of movement between categories are illustrated with case studies from England (conservative-moderate), the Netherlands (conservative-moderate) and a transnational European campaign (radical). These case-based illustrations are used to demonstrate the empirical validity of our theoretical claims in relation to both the typology and the dynamics of municipal contestation. The Dutch and European cases draw on work exploring, respectively, climate and global trade politics (Siles-Brügge and Strange, 2020; Verhoeven, 2020), while the English case is based on research into the impacts of COVID-19 for devolution to city regions. It should be clarified that the three cases are selected for their utility in illustrating the different components of our typology and the dynamics of contestation. They are not meant as a comparative study of municipal contestation.

In the next section we first conceptualise municipal contestation and distinguish it from several related concepts. This conceptualisation is followed by our typology of conservative, moderate and radical ideal typical forms of municipal contestation, after which we develop our perspective on the dynamics of movement between these forms. We then use the three cases to illustrate our typology. In the conclusion, we reflect on the strengths of our dynamics of municipal contestation framework and how it can be applied, further refined, and adapted to different settings in future comparative and longitudinal research.

Conceptualising municipal contestation

Since the mid-1990s the development of governance perspectives has created new vocabularies to talk about ‘the state’ or ‘the government’ as a multiplicity of players operating at multiple levels of governing and working with a broad variety of non-governmental players on public problems (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Kooiman, 2003). Although adversarialism and conflict are important aspects of such governing processes, most attention has been placed on reaching shared public purpose through consensus-building, based on negotiation and deliberation (Ansell and Torfing, 2015; Pierre and Peters, 2020). Conflict and power struggles mostly appear as background concepts in public policy literature, whereas they deserve to be centre stage to

better understand current practices of policymaking and to critically rethink current governance theories (Weible and Heikkila, 2017). This is especially so if we consider the phenomenon of municipal contestation.

To conceptualise municipal contestation, it first needs to be understood as a multi-level governance phenomenon, developing from the dynamics between national, regional, and local layers of government, and on occasion also involving supranational governmental players. For a long time, intergovernmental dynamics within states consisted of top-down policymaking, hierarchy and a legalistic orientation regarding the correct operation of public administrations (Olsen, 2008). Contrary to such tendencies, processes of rescaling have destabilised and rearticulated hierarchical relations between levels of government, leading to increasing autonomy and economic self-reliance of regional and local governments (Pierre and Peters, 2020). However, even in states where local governments hold formal autonomy, they do so in the shadow of the regional or national government's ability to impose its will (Pierre and Peters, 2020). The exact nature of these dynamics of contestation will therefore vary across different countries and institutional contexts. Meanwhile, municipalities are most exposed to public problems such as migration, poverty or economic restructuring for which regional or national governments might propose solutions or on which they expect local cooperation with implementation (Pierre, 2016). Therefore, we see a combination of more assertive local governments and regional or national governments proposing and implementing policies, or hierarchically intervening with local governing processes.

A second aspect of municipal contestation can be found in the contentious politics literature, where governmental players are no longer exclusively seen as targets of claims by social movements, but also as initiators of claims based on 'strident demands' or 'direct attacks' to contest the legitimacy of policy claims put forward by others (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). The bases of such contentious claims are policy proposals or implementation practices by regional or national governments, which can be perceived as threats that represent potential costs, harm or negative consequences for municipalities and their policy positions or to the interests of their local communities (Jasper, 1997; Weible and Heikkila, 2017). The element of perception is crucial, indicating that a policy threat does not have to be material or tangible. Hence a sense of threat can trigger municipalities to engage in contentious claims that focus on how their own interests, needs and values stand in opposition to attempts by regional and national governments to impose their preferred solutions (see Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Municipal contestation can involve local governments acting on their own, but it can also involve collaboration with social movement organisations (SMOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or citizen action groups in what has been referred to as 'contentious governance' (Verhoeven, 2020; Verhoeven et al, 2022). These non-governmental players may also perceive policy proposals or implementation practices as threats, whether to policy positions or to local communities (Jasper, 1997). When threats to policy positions and to communities converge, municipalities and non-governmental players join forces as they can harness more resources to benefit from each other's knowledge, networks and deployment of tactics (Gordon, 2018; Kuzemko, 2019).

Municipal contestation needs to be clearly distinguished from a variety of related concepts such as bureaucratic activists (Abers, 2019), institutional activists (Pettinichio, 2012) and inside activists (Hysing and Olsson, 2011). A difference to municipal contestation is that all these activists are *individuals* scattered throughout

governmental organisations with a common affinity for and varying affiliations with social movement activities. Municipal contestation builds on *collective* governmental efforts based on an explicit political decision to engage in contestation. Municipal contestation also differs in its focus on contestation *between* various governmental players, where bureaucratic, institutional or inside activists are focused on changing policy *within* a governmental player. Much closer to municipal contestation are issue coalitions, consisting of governmental, corporate and civil society players jointly working on societal problems, such as substance abuse (McCarthy, 2005). However, and in contrast to the focus on more adversarial dynamics within municipal contestation, issue coalitions do not pit governmental players against each other.

Conservative, moderate and radical ideal typical forms

One of the main contributions of our article is that we circumscribe three ideal typical forms of municipal contestation, building on the distinction between conservative, moderate and radical SMOs developed by Robnett, Glasser and Trammell (2015). Since municipalities differ substantively from SMOs, we will adapt this distinction to fit with various ideal typical forms of municipal contestation. It is important to note that Robnett et al's distinction serves the purpose of delineating different flanks or more central organisations within one social movement, while we apply it to different municipalities or their behaviour at different times.

Our typology provides five categories characterising forms of municipal contestation along the conservative-to-radical spectrum (see Table 1). We take the first two categories – strategy dynamics (orientation on social change and goals) and differences in tactics (the means of collective action to enact the strategy) – from Robnett et al (2015). The remaining categories serve to delineate the variety of ways in which municipal contestation may appear closer to the behaviour of governmental or non-governmental players. Municipalities may choose to accept existing institutional rules and discourses, or in some cases seek to co-opt or transform them (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013), as considered in our third category. The fourth category distinguishes between whether, when seeking recognition, municipalities look primarily to higher governmental authorities or, rather, activists. From whom governance actors seek recognition is seen as important to how they act as well as what further relations they form (Kooiman, 2003; Ansell and Torfing, 2015). And, finally, our typology allows differentiation according to whether municipalities engage in contestation on their own or collaborate with non-governmental players, based on the extent to which boundaries between these players become blurred (Verhoeven and Duyvendak, 2017). While it might seem intuitive that left-leaning municipalities are more likely to adopt radical forms of behaviour, our typology avoids this presumption to focus on the five key categories outlined earlier. This opens the door to future research examining the correlates of municipal contestation.

Municipalities are multi-issue political actors, meaning that in practice their actions will reflect more than just one of the ideal typical forms of municipal contestation presented here. Our typology serves to draw out the key dynamics at play within the relationship between municipalities and their higher authority, including how this dyad is challenged by municipalities collaborating with non-governmental players. It is focused on the political behaviour of municipalities rather than the extent of policy change proposed or achieved by the municipality.

Table 1: Three ideal types of municipal contestation

	Conservative	Moderate	Radical
Strategy dynamics	Mitigating	Redressing	Replacing
Tactical choices	Normal political means	Lobby and protest	Prefiguration and protest
Interaction with institutions (rules and discourses)	Accepting	Co-opting	Transforming
Seeking recognition from	Higher level of authority	Higher level of authority/society	Activists
Boundary between municipal and non-government players (NGPs)	Municipalities resist on their own	Municipalities collaborate with NGPs	Deeper blurring of boundaries between municipalities and NGPs

Conservative contestation

[Robnett et al \(2015\)](#) define conservative movement flanks as those maintaining close ties with government officials, based on a strategy of inclusion–accommodation to reach modest goals, such as adding to new policy ideas. Accordingly, their tactics tend to focus on routine political processes instead of protest or violence ([Robnett et al, 2015: 75](#)). If a regional government were to propose allowing a private business to build a waste incinerator close to municipality X, conservative contestation entails agreeing with building the incinerator but also, for example, arguing for a change in its location, or in the measures to safeguard public health. In terms of tactics, we expect conservative contestation to primarily involve consensus-oriented political means, such as negotiation or deliberation, for municipalities to make their governmental targets change their minds. However, these institutional political means are used for the unconventional purpose of addressing the threat to their policy position (see [Verhoeven and Duyvendak, 2017: 574](#)). The interactions with institutions involve accepting the rules and discourses within which the contested policy is made by embracing the institutional *status quo*. Contestation will draw upon these rules to mitigate the proposed policy or implementation practice seen as causing the threat. This acceptance of institutions is related to the municipalities seeking recognition from the higher level of government. They may find themselves too dependent on higher authorities for various reasons, so they believe that they cannot be too assertive, and above all do not want to appear too activist. We expect that municipalities engaging in conservative contestation will act independently against the threat posed by the policy. Such municipalities will not want to be associated with activists that may nevertheless be advocating for the same cause, for fear that such a collaboration would undermine their authoritative status as governmental players. There are, of course, many instances where municipalities will feel threatened by policies imposed from above, meaning that the ‘conservative’ ideal type can be read as institutionalised politics between municipalities and a relevant higher authority.

Moderate contestation

While conservative contestation is common, we are also interested in where municipalities exceed the institutional *status quo*. According to [Robnett et al \(2015: 76\)](#) moderate SMOs are open to compromise, negotiation and making concessions,

but will also countenance protest activities and direct activism. Building on these ideas, we expect moderate forms of municipal contestation to have a strategic orientation that demands that the policy threat be substantively redressed or blocked altogether. Hence, moderate municipalities may be more outspoken in their contestation of the policy threat by using institutional tactics such as negotiation, lawsuits or lobbying, and by combining these with extra-institutional tactics such as petitions, demonstrations or strikes, which are somewhat unconventional means for municipalities. It is likely that moderate municipalities co-opt rules and institutional discourses to create strategic advantages wherever they can. If we go back to the waste incinerator example, moderate municipality Y would use the procedures in the decision-making process of the government proposing the facility to obstruct decisions and organise protest and lobby activities around important moments in these procedures. Moderate municipalities may see themselves as less dependent on the higher authority as they also sense an important responsibility toward their local communities. This mixed bag of dependencies may make them more willing to risk damage to the relationships with higher authorities. It may also make them willing to collaborate with SMOs, NGOs or citizen action groups in a division of oppositional labour (Verhoeven and Duyvendak, 2017).

Radical contestation

A radical movement flank has heterodox or extreme goals – such as challenging the system – and uses extra-institutional or subversive tactics to meet them. Radicals are not as interested in maintaining relations with governments as other flanks are, and they often have ambiguous relationships with conservative or moderate flanks in a movement (Robnett et al, 2015: 76–7). Translated to municipalities, we do expect that they can become radical but in a more limited way. Municipalities are always embedded in a constraining institutional structure and do not have the luxury of engaging with a single issue as most SMOs do. Municipalities engaging in radical contestation may respond to the imminent threat caused by policy proposals or implementation practices by replacing them with policy alternatives. Predominant tactics that fit this strategic orientation are protest and prefiguration. In the social movement literature, prefiguration refers to processes in which activists act *as if* the world they are campaigning for already exists (Cooper, 2020). Tactics range from enacting utopian practices, such as imaginative performances, to more critical activities such as mock trials. Radical municipalities transform formal rules and discourses related to the policy threat. They draw on formal and informal rules to create a replacement policy and will additionally create their own discourse to legitimise these actions. When engaged in prefiguration, a municipality might act *as if* it had jurisdiction over policy domains – for example, international trade policy – where it clearly does not. Municipalities practising radicalism care less about their relationship to higher tiers of government, as their prime reference points are their local communities and activists. This leads to very close ties between local politicians, civil servants and activists, moving beyond the dyad between municipalities and the higher authority. Returning to our example of a waste incinerator, in radical municipality Z, the local government is closely collaborating with NGOs or SMOs to envisage alternatives to burning and generating waste. It might pass a symbolic ordinance that bans the siting of such plants on municipal land and asserts local autonomy over such

decisions. It might also collaborate with other municipalities to mimic international diplomacy and propose an alternative global waste treaty that bypasses the authority of national governments.

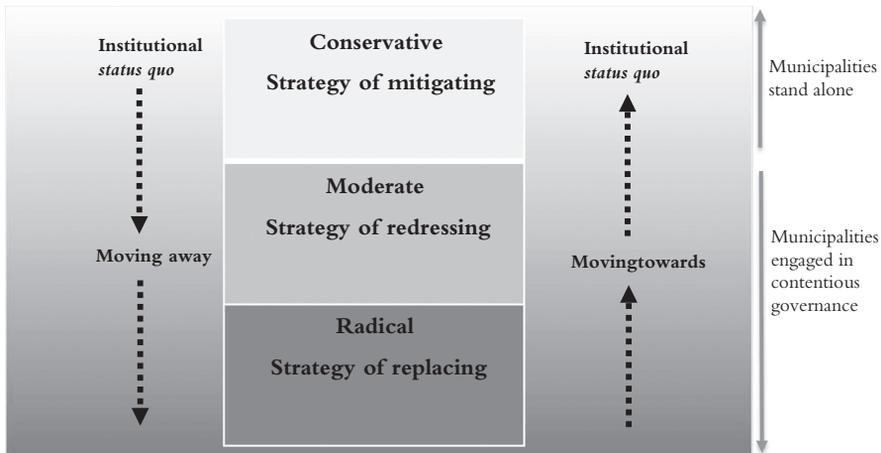
The dynamics of municipal contestation

Up to this point we have examined municipal contestation as snapshots taken at specific moments in time to be able to distinguish between its three different ideal typical forms. However, contestation is dynamic. As municipalities make claims vis-à-vis governmental targets seen as causing a threat, the targets will respond, eliciting a further response by the municipalities, and so on. This pattern will become even more complex in the moderate or radical forms of contestation as SMOs, NGOs or citizen action groups also react and are responded to. All these players thus engage with each other in strategic interactions, during which they constantly make sense of what other players are saying, doing and feeling in relation to the cultural and institutional contexts in which this happens (Jasper, 2006). Interacting players create and adapt their strategies 'in response to others, anticipating their reaction in turn' (Jasper, 2006: 6). Strategic interactions create dilemmas for players needing to choose between two or more options, which imply their own risks, costs and potential benefits, without there being a single right answer (Jasper, 2006). Strategic plans and goals are dynamic, embedded in the relationship between the involved players. Exogenous events are another element adding to the complexity of these strategic interactions. Elections or scandals, natural disasters, accidents in policy implementation, critical encounters between authorities and citizens, or policy outcomes can all punctuate strategic interactions, trigger sense making processes and, through players' interpretations, influence strategic dilemmas (Staggenborg, 1993). Ultimately, both the strategic interactions themselves and the events that punctuate these interactions may lead players to revise or adapt their strategies.

The idea of strategic interactions leading to strategic adaptation creates the space for processes of municipal contestation to move away from the institutional *status quo*, from conservative to moderate or from moderate to radical forms, or for them to move (back) towards the *status quo* from radical to moderate and from moderate to conservative contestation (see Figure 1). The rate at which municipalities move away or toward, and the extent, will vary by case.

Formal rules, informal rules and discourses create path dependencies (Pierson, 2000), meaning municipalities need to exert energy to move away from the institutional *status quo*. Does the municipality risk breaking out of the institutional boundaries, as part of the governmental machinery, that legitimise its authority and tax-spending powers? To move away from the *status quo* to moderate forms of contestation, municipalities need to acknowledge that they cannot maintain conventional relations with their governmental targets based on a strategy of mitigation of the policy threat. They need to be prepared to co-opt dominant rules and discourses to enact a strategy of redressing and blocking unwanted policies by lobbying and protesting. Such municipalities also need to be prepared to collaborate with SMOs, NGOs and citizen actions groups, which will affect their political reputation among their targets and how their exercise of authority and spending are perceived. This will most likely also interfere with the informal rules of how politics is done. Hence, moving from conservative to moderate forms of municipal contestation comes with potential risks and costs that cannot be avoided.

Figure 1: The dynamics of municipal contestation



Once they enter the sphere of moderate contestation, however, a further move away towards radical forms of contestation seems much easier. Municipalities are already trying to redress unwanted policies or implementation practices. Events such as a change in elected officials or incidents related to the contested policy topic may push municipalities to adapt their strategy towards creating social change by replacing the policy threat with their own alternative policies through prefiguration and protest. There is an institutional *status quo* to move away from, since national rules and regulations may stand in the way of local policy alternatives to the unwanted policy. In addition, informal rules of what is seen as appropriate political conduct will be broken and many formal relationships may need to be put on hold as municipalities transform prevailing institutions and re-orient themselves towards seeking recognition from and engaging with activists to create policy alternatives.

Sustaining radical contestation is likely to be extremely time-consuming and resource intensive, with prefiguration requiring high levels of creativity while municipalities reconstruct their roles. This can only be sustained if civil servants and politicians can be confident of long career paths, as well as being relatively insulated from national policy changes that might undermine their standing. For these reasons, in the long run, we can expect radical contestation to move towards moderate contestation that municipalities can sustain much more easily. Moving from moderate to conservative contestation, in turn, can face obstacles since fences need to be mended with governmental opponents. This might go as far as reopening institutionalised avenues for negotiation and deliberation that were closed in response to moderate or radical contestation by municipalities. It can also be challenging for municipalities to re-align again with the institutions that were transgressed while lobbying and protesting and abandon their previously more autonomous way of thinking and acting on the policy threat.

COVID-19 and the English city regions: from conservative to moderate contestation

We begin the demonstration of our typology with a case of conservative to moderate municipal contestation: the resistance of several English city regions, and most

prominently Greater Manchester, to being placed under a higher tier of COVID-19 restrictions by central government in 2020. Coming on the back of a constitutional debate prompted by the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, English devolution was billed as a way to address the traditional neglect of regional economic development outside of London, especially in the post-industrial North and Midlands (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016). While ostensibly representing a decentralisation of power, with the establishment of visible and accountable elected mayoral figureheads, it has occurred against a backdrop of continued central government, especially Treasury, control. Metro mayors have often resorted to *ad hoc* negotiations over funding, against the backdrop of years of UK government austerity (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016; Warner et al, 2021). Turning to COVID-19 measures, while English local councils and metro-regions were consulted and even granted some powers, central government held the purse strings and retained the ability to unilaterally impose restrictions.

Greater Manchester, and in particular its mayor Andy Burnham, came to increased prominence in the Autumn of 2020, during the early days of the UK's second pandemic wave. A national set of 'tiered' restrictions had been rolled out across England to replace piecemeal local restrictions. The central government was proposing to move Greater Manchester to the highest level of restrictions ('tier 3'), meaning the closure of pubs and bars not serving food and the banning of indoor mixing between households. This was perceived as a threat to businesses and peoples' livelihoods by the metro authority and local councils, especially as Greater Manchester councils had already been subject to localised restrictions from the summer (Stewart and Walker, 2020).

Greater Manchester was not alone in asking central government for an improved package of financial support for local businesses and residents. But other city regions such as Liverpool and Sheffield eventually fell into line and accepted the funding made available (Nurse, 2020). We can characterise their behaviour as more conservative municipal contestation. They accepted the institutional *status quo*, the normal, established political channels under the English devolution settlement, and subsequent localised COVID-19 restrictions, of *ad hoc* negotiations with central government over funding without challenging the latter's pre-eminent role.

Greater Manchester, however, moved away from this *status quo* over the course of its negotiations with central government. It held out to the very end for a better financial deal. When negotiations eventually collapsed on 20 October, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and councils had been unwilling to accept the offer of £60 million in support from central government, just shy of the £65 million it had been willing to take (Halliday, 2020). The unilateral imposition of tier 3 by the UK government followed a couple of days later. As the sums involved in the disagreement suggest, 'it also became increasingly clear that this was not about money' (Nurse, 2020).

Burnham, but also other Greater Manchester leaders, were progressively moving onto the terrain of moderate contestation, focused on the redressing of deeper-seated grievances. In their view, the experience around COVID-19 funding negotiations pointed to wider issues concerning the devolution settlement and the continued neglect of the economic needs of the English regions, especially in the North. As Burnham went on to tell a UK House of Lords Committee on 27 October, 'Devolution cannot be begging-bowl devolution' (cited in Committee on Economic Affairs, 2020: Q116). There was a concerted effort to raise the public profile of the negotiations, with the mayor and other local leaders holding press conferences and issuing critical public statements. *Game of Thrones*-inspired popular references to

Burnham as the ‘King in the North’ became quite prominent. Finally, the municipal authorities also collaborated closely with local business leaders to make their case ([Kenny and Telsey, 2020](#)). Against the backdrop of an alleged threat from Burnham to take legal measures against the central government, the city region’s official ‘Night-time Economy Advisor’, businessman Sacha Lord, even went as far as to initiate a legal challenge against the imposition of the tier 3 restrictions ([Carter, 2020](#)).

Subsequent developments on national COVID-19 policy have highlighted the risks of moving into moderate contestation. Citing the Manchester episode, the UK government announced in November 2020 it would no longer negotiate with local authorities on tiers ([BBC News, 2020](#)), and then (re)introduced national (England)-level restrictions (January 2021). Moderate contestation of COVID-19 policy and the wider devolution settlement also has its risks in a system where funding remains very tied to central government discretion.

Conservative-moderate contestation of carbon capture and storage in Barendrecht

In 2008, the Dutch national government stimulated the commercial implementation of carbon capture and storage (CCS). Shell won a tender for demonstration projects with a proposal to capture CO₂ at their Rotterdam oil refinery and store it about 17 kilometres southeast in two depleted gas fields under the municipality of Barendrecht. Local politicians became aware of the policy proposal when Shell organised two information evenings, after which they had many outstanding questions and doubts about safety issues and technical details ([Verhoeven, 2020](#)).

These questions and doubts marked the start of conservative contestation by the municipality, which focused on the politics of knowledge and facts (see [Stone, 2012](#)) and modifying the proposal through negotiation, mitigating its worst effects. Stimulated by several political parties, the responsible deputy mayor set up a ‘review framework’ with 90 questions and formulated 55 demands related to risks, safety and several other matters. In their quest for answers, the municipality organised four expert meetings and one information evening attended by 1,000 residents ([Verhoeven, 2020](#)). Meanwhile, the deputy mayor met with representatives of Shell to make them change their mind through negotiations. By Spring 2009 many questions were still unanswered and demands unmet, leading to an increasing number of political parties questioning the CCS proposal. On 29 June 2009, the municipal council, largely consisting of liberal, religious and conservative parties, unanimously voted for a motion ordering the municipal executive to do everything in their power to stop the CCS project ([Verhoeven, 2020](#)). This decision marked the move from conservative towards moderate contestation, from modifying the policy proposal to blocking it, from mitigation to seeking redress.

Some moderate contestation had in fact already occurred in March 2009 when the GreenLeft political party organised a demonstration called the ‘Walk against CO₂’ and when they mobilised about 1,570 residents to file a complaint against Shell’s EIA report. At that time the GreenLeft party stood alone, as other political parties had not yet made up their minds. After the adoption of the motion in June, moderate contestation took off through lobbying and loose collaboration with citizen action group CO₂isNo, which was established late in the contestation process at the end of October 2009 ([Verhoeven, 2020](#)). To block the CCS proposal, the municipality

first lobbied the provincial authority about the required environmental permit. Local politicians got in touch with their fellow party members in the Provincial Council to voice their concerns. In addition, they presented their point of view during a Provincial Council Committee meeting, where they pointed out that safety could not be guaranteed and that there was a lack of support among the local population. During the same meeting, members from CO2isNo spoke up critically by talking about CCS creating a burden for future generations, CCS as only treating the symptoms of the bigger problem of fuel use, or Barendrecht as a new Niger Delta for Shell. Through these lobby activities the local politicians and CO2isNo managed to convince the Provincial Council to refuse the environmental permit (on 11 November 2009) and call upon the two ministers and the national parliament to reject the project (Verhoeven, 2020).

Subsequently, the municipality unsuccessfully lobbied the two responsible national ministers and parliament as final decision-makers. On 18 November 2009 the ministers decided to go ahead with the project and parliament decided in favour on 26 January 2010. However, in February 2010 the cabinet fell, after which the outgoing Minister of Economic Affairs tried to move full speed ahead with the implementation of the CCS project. With their back to the wall the municipality, aided by CO2isNo, at first became more activist by mobilising citizens for protest meetings and by encouraging them to submit mass responses to a ministerial planning proposal that was open to consultation. Soon the deputy mayor discovered that this activist approach was somewhat ineffective, which made the municipality return to lobbying, this time supported by a professional lobbyist. After the national elections, when a new coalition government was formed, the municipalities and CO2isNo managed to convince the coalition parties that there was not enough public support for the project in Barendrecht, which made the government decide to cancel the CCS project (Verhoeven, 2020).

Prefiguratively taking European municipalities into global trade negotiations

Our final case falls under the more radical end of our typology. ‘Municipal-level trade contestation’ (Siles-Brügge and Strange, 2020), which saw municipalities join campaigns against trade and investment agreements, first appeared in the late 1990s in North America to oppose the later-abandoned negotiations on a Multilateral Agreement on Investment. It has since become more prominent, shifting its geographic focus to Europe. During the European campaign against the EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which also spilled over into opposition against the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) (2010–2017), a dedicated website (<https://www.ttip-free-zones.eu/>) was set-up to visually record the growing list of municipalities expressing concern; in the end, the campaign was supported by around 2,200 municipalities (Siles-Brügge and Strange, 2020).

To be clear, anti-TTIP/CETA campaigning provides a very different case of municipal contestation to those we have considered so far. In contrast to health policy or planning processes, where municipalities often do have a formal competence, international negotiations over trade and investment policy exceed the jurisdiction of even cities, which we consider to be the most powerful local governments. That

said, international agreements on such matters do represent a potential threat to their policy space, by, for example, introducing constraints on local procurement practice or affecting the provision of public services. By formally endorsing the campaign critical of the TTIP/CETA negotiations, municipalities could be said to have moved away from the institutional *status quo* in three ways to challenge these perceived threats to their autonomy: a) bypassing the normal hierarchy to publicly take a position in opposition to that of national governments, and/or the European Commission negotiating these agreements; b) collaborating closely with non-governmental players, and particularly SMO activists, to be a part of their transnational activism; and, c) pre-figuratively acting ‘as if’ they have a competence within a field in which they clearly do not.

For many of the municipalities involved, activity was limited to formally passing a motion critical of the TTIP/CETA negotiations. A significant number of the motions passed were based closely on templates provided by SMOs, which produced materials on their websites that local activists could use to lobby their local councils. The motions often expressed a general concern with, but not necessarily an outright rejection of, the TTIP negotiations (Siles-Brügge and Strange, 2020).

Some municipalities took matters further by declaring their cities, towns and villages to be ‘TTIP-Free Zones’. This was accompanied, sometimes, by road signs stating the municipality’s new self-declared status. Such declarations are obvious examples of prefiguration, running counter to wider political, legal and economic realities. Though only symbolic, with no additional actions attempting to enforce the declaration, municipalities aligned themselves closely to activists critical of TTIP, and in opposition to the national governments that were, at least initially, highly positive of the EU-led negotiations.

Barcelona became a focal point within the municipal campaign, with the city council coordinating a meeting of municipalities and SMO activists in April 2016 that produced the ‘Barcelona Declaration’ opposing TTIP and CETA and established a network of anti-TTIP/CETA municipalities (Municipality of Barcelona, 2016). This tied into the global ‘new municipalism’ movement in which Barcelona was a leading player (Russell, 2019), and that included other prefigurative actions such as the ‘Cities of Welcome’ network to counter national policies excluding undocumented and forced migrants (Bazurli, 2019).

We recognise that in the case of trade policy campaigning municipalities were acting in a policy area where they were likely perceived as less of a challenge to the authority of national governments than in a field such as immigration policy. Nevertheless, we would argue that their behaviour, like the ‘new municipalism’, still represented radical contestation. Whether that activity made a difference or not to the TTIP negotiations is not the issue. What matters for our purposes is what it tells us about the changing behaviour of municipalities vis-à-vis governmental and non-governmental players. Here, we observed a significant growth of a prefigurative mode through which municipalities could move away from the institutional *status quo*, and in which the boundary between them and non-governmental players began to blur. However, this move away from the *status quo* was difficult to sustain. In most cases municipalities did not continue their activism on trade beyond the passing of certain motions. Even the more activist Barcelona-inspired network’s activities petered out after two follow-up summits in Grenoble (2017) and Antwerp (2019).

Conclusions

This article has focused on an overlooked empirical phenomenon: municipal contestation, where cities and other local governments challenge policies proposed or implemented by higher governmental authorities, sometimes in collaboration with non-governmental players. After differentiating municipal contestation from similar concepts, our central contributions have been to, first develop a typology and, second, account for the dynamics of municipal contestation, including the institutional constraints and opportunities it faces. We have focused on how municipal contestation is enacted and the extent to which it remains within the dyad between the local and higher authorities or comes to include other non-governmental players.

Bridging public policy studies and social movement theory, the conceptual typology presented here enables us to trace different varieties and dynamics of municipal contestation. Our framework therefore has three advantages over previous scholarly research. First, our typology spans the more common patterns of intergovernmental relations characterised by conservative contestation to the more infrequent moderate and radical forms of contestation, where municipalities move away from the institutional *status quo*. In this way, we move beyond dichotomising institutional and extra-institutional forms of political behaviour. Our approach does not adopt a particular normative position on specific modes of municipal contestation, accounting for a broader spectrum of behaviour beyond the predominant focus in previous work on radical and prefigurative politics, ‘municipal activism’, ‘outsider’ strategies or ‘rebel cities’ (for example, [Geddes, 2011](#); [Harvey, 2012](#); [Cooper, 2020](#)). Our typology also highlights that no side of the ideological spectrum holds a monopoly over municipal contestation. It is not a purely progressive or left-wing phenomenon, as illustrated by municipalities in Poland passing motions declaring themselves ‘LGBT-free zones’ in response to the perceived threat of ‘Western liberalism’ emanating from such bodies as the EU ([Zuk et al, 2021](#)). Municipal contestation may involve inter-party competition, such as in the case of English COVID-19 restrictions, but it can also lead to intra-party disagreements: when they passed anti-TTIP motions, local parties often adopted a different position to their central leadership (see motions cited in [Siles-Brügge and Strange, 2020](#)). A second key advantage of our typology is that it opens the study of municipal contestation to a more systematic comparative analysis within and between countries, providing ideal typical forms to map onto empirical findings. It is compatible with different institutional contexts and multi-level governance arrangements, as illustrated in our three case studies, which may have varying effects on municipal autonomy. Third, our focus on dynamics of contestation will allow researchers to take a longer-term perspective on how municipal contestation might evolve over time, rather than treating it as a static phenomenon. As a general framework of municipal contestation, our typology and dynamics are designed to operate across a variety of institutions, ideologies and party politics.

Future applications of our framework would help to evaluate, refine and adapt it to different settings, developing a deeper understanding of conflictual relations between cities or other local governments and higher authorities. This includes work applying the typology beyond Europe and the Global North. Comparison across and within countries of varieties of municipal contestation would allow researchers to identify the impact of local institutional settings, both formal (for

example, variations in the powers afforded to municipalities), and informal (for example, cultural differences) on the ability and willingness of municipalities to move away from the institutional *status quo*. Are certain settings more conducive to the less frequent moderate or radical forms of contestation? Applying the framework for systematic comparisons could also improve our understanding of perceived hotbeds of local radicalism and why in other municipalities contestation has been more conservative. Similarly, longitudinal studies of municipal contestation – whether these are based on long-term time series data or an in-depth analysis of case studies – can help to evaluate and refine our understanding of the dynamics of contestation, notably the movement of local governments between the ideal typical forms in our typology. What factors facilitate and hinder municipalities' ability to sustain moderate or radical forms of contestation or move back towards the institutional *status quo*? By moving the accent from the activities of 'rebel cities' and prefigurative radical municipal action to the different *varieties* and *dynamics* of municipal contestation, we hope to contribute to a broadening of the study of this global phenomenon in urban and local governance.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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