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EDITORIAL



# Between a rock and a hard place: mayors, migration challenges and multilevel political dynamics\*

Raffaele Bazurli <sup>a</sup>, Tiziana Caponio <sup>b</sup> and Els de Graauw <sup>c</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In this editorial, we highlight the crucial but understudied role of mayors in migration issues, especially as it relates to responding to the challenges posed by the local reception and integration of refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants. Drawing on key findings from this issue's nine articles that analyse mayoral leadership on migration issues in US and European municipalities, we argue that mayors' unique position at the intersection of horizontal and vertical governance structures forces them to navigate contrasting multilevel dynamics from below and above. This in turn shapes both opportunities and notable constraints for mayors to exert leadership on local migration issues, thereby calling into question conventional wisdom that mayors are all-powerful local actors guided by pragmatic rationales in the pursuit of inclusive policy change. We conclude by discussing possible directions for future research, underscoring the need for more comparative research, a greater focus on interaction effects, and more attention to the impact of mayoral actions on migrant integration.

## KEYWORDS


mayors; immigrants; local politics; multilevel governance; United States; Europe

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## INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of immigrants' inclusion and exclusion in host societies has notably changed in recent decades due to what is now commonly referred to in academic debates as the 'local turn in immigration'. Departing from earlier studies focused on national citizenship regimes and national models of incorporation, scholars in the United States and Europe have increasingly heeded the local dimension of migration policymaking (for recent reviews, see Filomeno, 2017; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). This shift has been informed by several societal and political transformations. Rising conflicts and inequalities have resulted in both voluntary and forced migrations from the Global South, marking a sea change in the demography of cities and towns on the other side of the world. Also, decentralization and rescaling trends have enhanced the autonomy of local governments in a range of policy domains, such as health, education,

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housing and law enforcement, that have direct impacts on the lives of immigrants. Even in countries with centralized governments, municipalities have enacted very diverse responses to migration-related challenges, with some localities extending a warm welcome to immigrants and others trying to keep them out of their jurisdictions.

The local turn in immigration has clear implications for the three conceptual pillars of this journal: *territory*, because it sheds light on how the specific qualities of urban, suburban and rural contexts shape immigrant integration and exclusion experiences; *politics*, because immigration raises the fundamental question of who gets to belong (or not) in the local communities where immigrants live and work, making this one of the thorniest political and policy topics of the present period; and *governance*, because assorted actors in- and outside of government across geographical scales are involved in the production of public services, rights, and modes of participation, thus questioning the idea of the state as a unified system with one coherent vision for immigrant incorporation.

From existing scholarship, we already know that there is a wide range of policy responses to immigration across different municipalities in the United States and Europe. Many scholars have highlighted municipalities that experiment with accommodative or integrative policies and practices, mirrored in the proliferation in academic debates of labels such as ‘sanctuary’, ‘solidarity’, ‘welcoming’ and ‘refuge’ cities (e.g., Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018; Bazurli, 2019; Darling & Bauder, 2019; de Graauw, 2021a; Mayer, 2018). At the same time, scholars have analysed the many local governments that instead have become laboratories of immigrant exclusion, whether through highly touted crackdowns or more informal practices of law enforcement as well as migrant exclusion from local services and decision-making arenas (e.g., Ambrosini, 2013; Bazurli & Delclós, 2021; de Graauw, 2017; Marchetti, 2020; Provine et al., 2016; Steil & Ridgley, 2012; Varsanyi, 2010).

To explain the range of local responses to migration, scholars on the one hand have emphasized the importance of local contextual factors, including the political ideology of local voters and politicians, the demographic characteristics of native- and foreign-born residents, and the characteristics of local civil society organizations (e.g., de Graauw, 2016; Gulasekaram & Ramakrishnan, 2015; Hopkins, 2010; Lidén & Nyhlén, 2022; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2017; Schiller, 2016; Steil & Vasi, 2014). On the other hand, scholars have also focused on how city policies relate to national policies targeting immigrants. This relational approach is evidenced by the burgeoning scholarship on multilevel governance (MLG), which highlights that local governments have room to pursue their own policy agendas, notwithstanding their hierarchical subordination to provincial, state, and national governments (e.g., Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2022; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018; de Graauw, 2021a; Doomernik & Glorius, 2016; Gulasekaram & Ramakrishnan, 2015; Scholten, 2013; Spencer, 2018).

Studies on the local turn in immigration have shed light on the preferences, mobilization, strategies and decision-making of both governmental and nongovernmental actors, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to *mayors*. While mayors are the chief executive officers and top politicians in municipal governments, they are rarely conceptualized as agentic actors in their own right (de Graauw, 2021b, in this issue). Notably, existing scholarship has not sufficiently problematized the internal complexity of local government, regularly conflating mayors with other local governmental actors such as elected legislative officials or appointed administrative officers, even though they serve different functions, possess different resources, and have distinct accountability mechanisms to local residents and community organizations. The lack of attention to mayors in migration studies is also puzzling given that the media and the public often see mayors as prominent figureheads embodying the ethos, needs, and demands of all municipal residents, in a way that local legislative and lower-level administrative officials do not.

This special issue analyses the role of mayors in local immigration issues. Bridging localist and relational perspectives, we show that mayors are uniquely situated at the crossroads of two dimensions of governance (Bazurli, 2020; Caponio & Clément, 2021; Hillmann, 2021, in this issue; Trucco, 2021, in this issue). First, mayors must navigate *horizontal governance structures and dynamics*, that is, the institutional, social, economic and political context of their own municipalities. In leading on migration issues, mayors have to reckon with the formal powers of the mayoralty, the often antagonistic media framing of migration issues, the municipal resources they can draw on, the preferences and ideology of local legislative and administrative officials and of the general public, and the demands and capabilities of local community organizations. Second, mayors must also navigate *vertical governance structures and dynamics* given that migration issues tend to be the exclusive policy domain of national governments to which mayors are subservient. Here, mayors must consider their limited degree of autonomy as local government sits at the bottom of this multilevel institutional landscape and the increasingly exclusionary nature of national immigration and citizenship regimes. These different and often contradictory forces shape the opportunities and constraints for mayoral leadership on local migration issues.

Specifically, this special issue addresses how US and European mayors cope with the dilemmas posed by the reception and integration of vulnerable and highly politicized migrant populations, including refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants. When and why do mayors welcome migrant populations or, alternatively, oppose and resist their arrival and settlement? How can mayors build consensus around thorny issues such as providing (or not) housing and other essential social services for newcomers? In times of financial austerity and rampant right-wing populism notably at the national level, addressing migration issues is challenging for mayors. Often the one government official who represents an entire municipality, mayors are best positioned to coordinate a swift response to emerging and rapidly changing migrant needs. Yet, they also need to keep both consensus among local residents who are ambivalent if not hostile to immigrants and productive relationships with assorted stakeholders at different government tiers.

This special issue includes nine theoretically-informed and empirically-grounded articles that offer valuable comparative insights about mayoral leadership on migration issues. The contributors include public policy scholars, political scientists, sociologists, geographers and anthropologists who investigate mayoral responses to migration issues in municipalities in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and the United States. Besides mayors in a large central city (de Graauw, 2021b, in this issue), the contributions also analyse mayors in suburban cities (de Wilde & Nicholls, 2021, in this issue), small-to-medium towns (Hillmann, 2021, in this issue; Pettrachin, 2021, in this issue; Sabchev, 2021, in this issue), rural villages (Caponio et al., 2021, in this issue; Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021, in this issue; Miellet, 2021, in this issue), and a border town (Trucco, 2021, in this issue). Collectively, the articles analyse mayors responding to migration issues in different partisan (progressive versus conservative local voters), economic (affluent versus struggling and declining areas), and institutional (elected versus appointed mayors; strong versus weak mayors) contexts. They draw on assorted data derived from single case studies as well as comparative municipal studies, including interviews with mayors and other stakeholders, in-depth ethnographies, qualitative and quantitative analysis of media reporting and policy documents, and social network analysis.

## MAYORAL LEADERSHIP ON MIGRATION ISSUES

One key finding emerging from this special issue is that mayoral leadership on migration issues contravenes conventional wisdom on mayors on several fronts. First, the contributions caution against *mayoral triumphalism*, or the idea that mayors are exceptionally influential and able to address complex social problems with innovative solutions due to their central position in

local government and outstanding leadership qualities (e.g., Barber, 2013). For example, de Graauw (2021b, in this issue) analyses how San Francisco's successive mayors have had to recalibrate city sanctuary policies in response to scrutiny from California state and US federal authorities, forces clearly outside their control. Second, the contributions also warn against *mayoral romanticism*, referring to the idea that mayors want to realize inclusive change (e.g., Barber, 2013). Mayors are in fact strategic and will support immigrant exclusion if that advances their own political objectives. Trucco (2021, in this issue), for example, discusses how a left-leaning mayor in an Italian border town supported the exclusionary stances of far-right opponents, possibly as a defensive electoral strategy. Third, the contributions in this issue question *mayoral pragmatism*, or the idea that mayors tend to be pragmatic, rather than ideological, when dealing with migration issues (Penninx & Martiniello, 2004). Pettrachin (2021, in this issue), for example, shows how migration crises can drive mayors to make decisions that reinforce their own biases and do not really contribute to solving problems.

Another key finding emerging from this special issue is that mayoral leadership on migration issues is strategic, adaptive, and contingent. Mayors, despite notable constraints on their power and resources, can craft effective strategies to respond to assorted migration challenges and crises. Indeed, they are not relegated to be powerless policy-takers at the bottom of the multilevel government hierarchy, and often their substantive powers are greater than what their limited formal prerogatives would suggest. Mayors, for example, have consciously and strategically alternated their leadership strategies depending on the type of intergovernmental challenges their local migration and integration policies face (e.g., de Graauw, 2021b, in this issue). Mayors have also spearheaded or expanded local coalitions of governmental and especially nongovernmental actors to strengthen their position in local and multilevel negotiations about migration and integration issues (e.g., Caponio et al., 2021, in this issue; Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021, in this issue; Hillmann, 2021, in this issue). And mayors have engaged in venue shopping and sought out decision settings that are more favourable to their migration or integration objectives, such as by joining or creating networks of mayors or civil society actors that span different municipalities, even those in other countries (e.g., de Graauw, 2021b, in this issue; Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021, in this issue; Mielle, 2021, in this issue).

## WHEN MAYORS CAN LEAD ON MIGRATION ISSUES

Collectively, the articles provide important insights about the conditions enabling mayors to exert leadership on migration issues. More specifically, they highlight four relevant factors: local institutional settings, relations with civil society, degree of problem pressure, and locality type.

First, and perhaps not surprisingly, mayors operating in favourable institutional settings appear better positioned to lead on migration issues. For example, mayors in mayor–council systems, where an executive mayor is separately elected from the legislative council, appear more impactful on migration issues than those in council–manager ones, where the mayor is the first among equals on the council that has both legislative and executive powers (de Graauw, 2021b, in this issue; de Wilde & Nicholls, 2021, in this issue). Mayor–council systems provide mayors with notable administrative and budgetary authority as well as electoral incentives to heed migrants' interests, while council–manager systems often focus on managerial efficiency that makes addressing migrants' interests less attractive or less lucrative (de Wilde & Nicholls, 2021, in this issue).

Second, mayors are more likely to lead on migration issues when there are local civil society actors they can collaborate with (Caponio et al., 2021, in this issue; de Graauw, 2021b, in this issue; Hillmann, 2021, in this issue; Pettrachin, 2021, in this issue). Civil society actors have long been and continue to be critical allies to mayors of large established gateway cities such

as San Francisco (de Graauw, 2021b, in this issue). Yet also in deprived rural areas, where migration is likely to be perceived as yet another problem, civil society actors can provide critical ‘relational and reputational resources’ that help mayors to avoid conflict and engage the local community in the integration of newcomers (Caponio et al., 2021, in this issue).

Third, the degree of problem pressure also matters. The contributions in this special issue make clear that mayors have been able to exert leadership on migration issues especially in crisis situations, as has been the case in recent years when many European cities have had to deal with the arrival of large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers almost overnight. When migration amounts to a crisis at the national level and migrants increasingly get offloaded to municipalities to deal with, intergovernmental institutional coordination to address the crisis can be non-existent or can fail, local politics can become unstable, and the formal framework of authority and division of responsibilities among local governmental actors can become unclear. This creates opportunities for entrepreneurial mayors – often the only political actor that represents an entire municipality and that can take centralized action – to step into the local governance vacuum and devise policies, initiatives and programmes to address the local consequences of the migration crisis. These dynamics are well reflected in the analyses of how mayors in rural communities in Italy (Caponio et al., 2021, in this issue), medium-sized municipalities in Greece (Sabchev, 2021, in this issue), small cities in Germany (Hillmann, 2021, in this issue), and assorted cities, towns and villages in Italy’s Tuscan region (Pettrachin, 2021, in this issue) responded to forced migrants during the European ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015–16.

Fourth, with respect to locality type, the specific characteristics of rural communities can also enable mayors to exert leadership on migration issues. The smaller scale of rural municipalities can elevate the importance of personal contacts in local politics and policymaking over traditional left–right political ideologies (Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021, in this issue; Miellet, 2021, in this issue). Additionally, compared with cities, rural communities are newer to hosting migrants and often do not have strong infrastructures of governmental and nongovernmental support services targeting migrant needs (Caponio et al., 2021, in this issue; Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021, in this issue; Miellet, 2021, in this issue). Finally, rural communities can place a premium on preserving cultural homogeneity in the face of changes such as those brought by the arrival of migrants (Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021, in this issue). In such contexts, mayors can become key leaders, even kingpins, in addressing migration issues. Their central position in rural government enables them to orchestrate, in a rather top-down fashion, the design and implementation of policies and programmes that compensate for the thin infrastructure of migrant support services, while constructing migration-related discourses that underscore community cohesion.

## WHEN MAYORS STRUGGLE TO LEAD ON MIGRATION ISSUES

The articles also highlight conditions that make it challenging for mayors to exert leadership on migration issues. Here, we focus on two such conditions highlighted across several articles in the special issue: mayors operating at the crossroads of multilevel political dynamics and mayors operating in economically struggling areas.

First, mayors’ position at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical governance structures and dynamics discussed earlier means that mayors constantly need to navigate contrasting multi-level forces from below and above. Rarely do local residents, community activists and local government officials view migration the same way as higher-up government officials at the provincial, state or national levels (e.g., de Graauw, 2021b, in this issue; de Wilde & Nicholls, 2021, in this issue; Miellet, 2021, in this issue; Trucco, 2021, in this issue). Mayors do not readily *find* opportunities to create local migration policies and programmes, such as the opening of refugee and asylee reception centres (Caponio et al., 2021, in this issue; Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021, in this issue; Miellet, 2021, in this issue); rather, they need to *actively pursue, create, and*

*at times force* such opportunities for policy change. This of course is more challenging when government officials higher up in the intergovernmental hierarchy purposely challenge mayoral decisions and policies, such as when California state and US federal officials pressured San Francisco mayors to end their lenient treatment of undocumented city residents (de Graauw, 2021b, in this issue).

Second, mayors appear especially constrained when they govern immigrant-receiving municipalities that in one way or another are left behind, because they have lost out to globalization (Trucco, 2021, in this issue) or have fragile, weak or long declining economies, such as those in post-industrial regions (Hillmann, 2021, in this issue) or deprived rural areas (Caponio et al., 2021, in this issue). These municipalities often struggle with population loss and high unemployment, which make them fertile ground for right-wing politicians and community activists who want to whip up nativist and xenophobic sentiments among local residents. In the Italian border town of Ventimiglia analysed by Trucco (2021, in this issue), for example, the local economy declined when the Schengen Agreement reduced local employment related to customs and money exchange transactions in the late 1990s, leaving the mayor with few resources to address the needs of migrants passing through the town on their way to elsewhere in Europe. Similarly, mayors in smaller and economically restructuring cities ringing Berlin, Germany, struggled to act as ‘glocal bureaucrats’ in responding to refugee newcomers in their jurisdictions (Hillmann, 2021, in this issue), and mayors in the declining rural areas of the Piedmontese Alpine valleys in Italy would not be able to engage on migration issues were it not for key resources from local civil society organizations they could draw on (Caponio et al., 2021, in this issue).

## THE NEED FOR MORE RESEARCH

The contributions in this special issue point to at least three fruitful directions for future research. With the goal of pushing forward more robust theorizing about mayoral leadership on migration issues, we highlight the need for more comparison, a greater focus on interaction effects, and attention to the impact of mayoral actions on migrant integration.

As for comparison, the articles in this issue draw prevalently on single case studies or a comparison of a small number of municipalities in the same country. These are certainly insightful and help identify important local, national, and intergovernmental factors that shape mayoral leadership on migration issues in a particular municipality or a small number of municipalities. For even more robust theorizing, we need scholarship that investigates mayoral leadership on migration issues in similar municipalities in different countries and in different types of municipalities in the same country, as well as scholarship that tracks mayoral leadership on migration issues over time and engages in cross-time comparative analysis. Such comparative research designs can potentially offer more generalizable lessons about why, how, and to what end mayors seek to address migration issues in their municipalities and beyond.

Related to the need for more comparative research, scholars also want to pay more attention to how the interaction of local and multilevel political, institutional, demographic, and economic factors shape mayoral leadership on migration issues (e.g., de Wilde & Nicholls, 2021, in this issue; Sabchev, 2021, in this issue). Investigating interactions and relational policymaking processes through a comparative lens can be particularly challenging when dealing with mayors because multiple factors and actors impinge on local territories and local governance. Traditional comparative approaches to studying local policymaking might not be helpful here. As the local turn in immigration is not likely to dissipate any time soon, it is critically important to devise new rigorous methodological approaches to help us better understand the complexity of local migration policy environments and the role of mayors in them.

Finally, future research will want to pay more attention to what mayoral involvement in migration issues means for immigrants, in line with how Sabchev (2021, in this issue) discusses

the role of mayoral leadership in transforming a municipality into a refuge for forced migrants. How do mayors fare in improving immigrants' access to critical social services, rights protections, and modes of democratic participation? How do they compare to municipal legislative and administrative officials and to officials at other levels of government in addressing immigrants' needs and protecting and fulfilling their fundamental rights? Are mayors better or worse, compared with other governmental actors, at involving migrants in the governance process? While we welcome more studies that emphasize the agency of mayors in migration governance, we think it is important also to explore in greater depth what mayoral leadership means for migrants, whose daily lives are directly affected by the policies, initiatives, and programmes that mayors may or may not decide to promote.

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