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# A policy-centred approach to inter-municipal cooperation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how policy-specific characteristics affect inter-municipal cooperation. We investigate if a municipality's cooperation activity in a policy area hinges on whether the policy is considered relevant or politicized by local officials. Using data from two surveys of Swiss local administrators and officials conducted in 2017 that include detailed questions on public service provision, we find that the perceived relevance of a policy for a municipality is associated with more inter-municipal cooperation whereas perceived politicization goes along with less inter-municipal cooperation. These results suggest that policy-specific characteristics play a crucial role for understanding inter-municipal cooperation.


**KEYWORDS** Inter-municipal cooperation; public service provision; Switzerland; Public Administration; public policy

## 1 Introduction

Local governments serve as outposts of national states as they operate closest to the population by offering various services. They do not only choose which policies they implement but also how they deliver them. Besides producing services themselves, they can also decide to cooperate with other jurisdictions in order to reduce production costs. In particular, inter-municipal cooperation is one of the most widespread phenomena in modern democracies (Denters and Rose 2005; Teles and Swianiewicz 2018). Public administration research has shown a strong interest in the reasons behind that cooperation (Kwon and Feiock 2010; Bel, Fageda, and Mur 2013; Bel and Warner 2016), its institutional settings (Hulst and van Montfort 2007), and its effects (Steiner 2003; Bel, Fageda, and Mur 2012; Bel and Warner 2015; Silvestre, Marques, and Corrêa Gomes 2018).

Existing studies that assess the drivers of inter-municipal cooperation have investigated how local government characteristics impact the probability of cooperation. They show that the size and the fiscal situation of local governments affect cooperation probability – presumably because cooperation is expected to reduce costs and allows to reap scale benefits (see Bel and Warner 2015). In addition, the spatial context in which

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a municipality is located, e.g. a rural or an urban area, also impacts whether a municipality cooperates in service delivery or not – presumably because municipalities in urban areas have more options to cooperate than those in rural ones (see e.g. Brown and Potoski 2003; Hefetz and Warner 2012).

While these studies identify municipal-level determinants of inter-municipal cooperation, they do not account for policy-specific factors that might impact inter-municipal cooperation probability. That such policy-level differences are important to consider has been shown by scholars studying the effects of inter-municipal cooperation across policy domains: For example, they show that cooperation does not lead to cost savings in all domains (Aldag and Warner 2018). Moreover, several studies show that municipalities cooperate more intensely in some policy areas than in others (Steiner et al. 2019; Aldag, Warner, and Bel 2020). Yet, we know little about the policy-level drivers of inter-municipal cooperation, i.e. factors that vary across policies and not (only) across municipalities (but see Hefetz and Warner 2012).

In the following, we argue that it is not enough to look at local government characteristics – such as a municipality's population size, or its economic situation – for understanding inter-municipal cooperation. Rather, we need to take policy-level factors into account if we want to understand why municipalities cooperate more in some policy domains than in others. Bel and Warner (2015) suggest that differences across policy domains might be related to the perceived transaction costs. In general, cooperation is expected to reduce transaction costs, but this also depends on the cooperation context, i.e., the policy domain (Bel and Sebő 2021). Indeed, Aldag, Warner, and Bel (2020) show that transaction costs vary by policy area, which offer varying incentives for cooperation and might be the origin of differences in cooperation across policy domains. Based on this observation, we argue that local governments are less likely to cooperate in policy fields where policy-makers expect transaction costs to be higher as a function of certain policy characteristics such as the relevance and the politicization of a policy domain. We focus on local office holders' subjective perceptions of different policy characteristics. These perceptions are crucial, because they constitute the political conditions for cooperation: it is ultimately the local office holders which are responsible for initiating cooperation – at least in many countries (Hulst and van Montfort 2007). Thus, we investigate whether policy characteristics are related to different levels of inter-municipal cooperation across policy domains.

Empirically, we investigate the relationship between policy characteristics and inter-municipal cooperation with data on collaboration schemes in Switzerland. Using data from two different surveys of municipal secretaries and local officials (Freitag, Bundi, and Flick Witzig 2019; Steiner et al. 2019), we show that the variation in the cooperation intensity across policies is high. Furthermore, we find that municipalities are less likely to cooperate if local officials perceive a policy as politicized, while inter-municipal cooperation can be found more frequently in policy domains perceived as more relevant to the municipalities. Finally, municipalities tend to cooperate more when the perceived functional pressure – reaching capacity limits in a particular policy area – grows. Our results hold for different types of service provision, even if the latter analyses show a more nuanced picture of the relationship between policy characteristics and inter-municipal cooperation.

These findings constitute an important contribution to the literature on inter-municipal cooperation and public service provision as they demonstrate empirically that cooperation might be motivated by policy-specific factors. As these perceived policy characteristics vary across policy domains, our study shows that policy domains

that consist of different actor structures (e.g. policy subsystems, see Sabatier (1998)) affect the political framework of public service provision. Policy domains are characterized by different public and private actors who are interested in a policy problem or issue, but they perceive this issue differently. While inter-municipal cooperation can very well be based on cost savings, a municipality can also collaborate because its decision makers perceive a policy area to be particularly relevant or too politicized. The provision of more politicized policies might less often be delegated to other actors, since local decision makers want to closely observe and control this policy field (Bundi 2018). On the other hand, local office holders also consider the relevance of public service provision in certain domains and decide to cooperate with other municipalities, presumably in order to improve service quality (Bel and Belerdas-Castro 2021). Our findings have equally important implications for research beyond inter-municipal cooperation as they can shed light on the strategic incentives of office holders in their role as policy-makers.

The paper is structured as follows: the second section provides a review of the origins of inter-municipal cooperation and identifies the research gap in previous studies. The third section develops our policy-centred approach and proposes two hypotheses. In the fourth section, we describe the data used for the analysis and how we operationalize the variables. A discussion of our findings is then followed by a concluding section that discusses implications and limitations of the study.

## 2 Municipal-level drivers of inter-municipal cooperation

Numerous studies show that inter-municipal cooperation has increased in the last decades (Hulst and van Montfort 2007; Bel and Warner 2015; Teles and Swianiewicz 2018; Aldag, Warner, and Bel 2020). Since the 1970s, states have shifted from hierarchical top-down modes of governance to more cooperative forms where stakeholders participate more actively in the policy implementation process. This development has led to the delegation of public services to both public and private actors, which provides many advantages. However, it has also led to institutional collective action dilemmas. According to Feiock (2013), these dilemmas ‘arise directly from the division or partitioning of authority in which decisions by one government in one or more specific functional area impact other governments and other governmental functions’. Notably, the dilemmas manifest themselves vertically and horizontally. Institutional collective action dilemmas occur horizontally if governments are too small to efficiently produce a public service. This is why municipalities engage with other entities in order to make services more efficient and to benefit from scale economies (Bel and Sebo 2021).

The underlying rationale is that service production becomes more efficient and less costly, the more one can produce of a certain public good at once. With that rationale, one would expect that more populous jurisdictions cooperate less, because they already have a sufficiently large constituency to serve. Indeed, several studies show that cooperation contributes to reach economies of scale (Hefetz and Warner 2012; Warner, Aldag, and Kim 2021). Moreover, scholars indeed find that small municipalities are more likely to cooperate in public service provision than large ones Steiner (2003); Bel, Fageda, and Mur (2013); Bel and Warner (2016). A second important municipal-level driver of inter-municipal cooperation is fiscal stress (Bel and Warner 2015; Kim and Warner 2021). Scholars show that richer communities are less likely to

engage in cooperation. Governments that face economic problems – e.g. high debt levels – are expected to cooperate more. The rationale is again that through cooperation municipalities can reduce costs through scale economies (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014). Evidence for this is provided by Steiner (2003) for Swiss municipalities: Performance thresholds and economic hardship are among the most frequent reasons mentioned by local officials for engaging in inter-municipal cooperation.

Studies from the US context also emphasize the importance of the spatial context. Local governments located in metropolitan areas have more opportunities to cooperate than those in rural areas (Brown and Potoski 2003; Kwon and Feiock 2010). Yet, large cities are able to internally produce their services, because they reach the respective critical population thresholds. It is thus mostly suburban municipalities which are expected to cooperate: they have many potential cooperation partners while usually not having the critical size to produce all services internally. Finally, Aldag and Warner (2018) also show that previous experiences of cooperation positively affect current inter-municipal cooperation activity and thus point to the role of historical legacies and path dependencies.

While most existing studies focus on municipal-level drivers of inter-municipal cooperation, more recent studies highlight substantial differences in cooperation across policy fields, e.g. in terms of cost saving potential (Aldag, Warner, and Bel 2020), citizen's satisfaction of public services (Holum and Jakobsen 2016) and their attitudes towards tax increases (Elling, Krawczyk, and Carr 2014). These studies make an important contribution to understand why municipalities are more likely to collaborate in some areas than in others, but we are currently lacking a more profound understanding of the policy-level factors that are associated with the variation of municipalities' cooperation activity across policy domains. In what follows, we argue that the policy context, and in particular local officials' perceptions of it, is an important factor to consider when analysing inter-municipal cooperation. These theoretical considerations are followed by our two main hypotheses.

### **3 Policy-level drivers of inter-municipal cooperation**

Previous studies in public policy have mainly tried to answer questions such as how policies differ across countries, and why they diverge. Moreover, some scholars have focused on how different institutional arrangements affect policies and how different theories help explaining certain policy outcomes (Gupta 2012). A group of common policies also referred to as policy fields, areas, sectors, or domains usually cover a distinct arena that includes different actors, institutional settings, and decision rules (Pollack 1994). Public policy scholars share the view that in each of these areas political actors find different political conditions for making policy decisions (Lovi 1972; Sabatier 1998).

Attempts to explain the variance of cooperation across policies, based in policy- and not in municipality characteristics, were made early on. Williams (1967) suggests a distinction between 'system maintenance' and 'life-style' services to explain policy variation in inter-municipal cooperation in metropolitan areas. He argues that municipalities are more likely to cooperate in system-maintenance than in life-style services, since the former connect municipalities in a metropolitan area, while the latter differ across municipalities in a metropolitan area and hence allow municipalities to establish a distinct profile. In a similar vein, Post (2002, 19) distinguishes between capital- and

labour-intensive municipal services.<sup>1</sup> Her argument is that potential gains in terms of scale economies are bigger in capital-intensive policies and hence local governments will more often cooperate in these than in labour-intensive ones. More recently, Aldag, Warner, and Bel (2020) state that the decision to cooperate with other municipalities is affected by differences across policy domains (service characteristics, goals and outcomes, and governments arrangements), but the authors do not provide factors that vary across services in order to account for these differences (see also Bello-Gomez and Avellaneda 2021).

A limitation of these studies is that they do not rely on empirical indicators to distinguish different characteristics related to service areas, but the authors classify these services themselves (Williams 1967; Post 2002). We follow Aldag, Warner, and Bel (2020) in arguing that these services differ substantially from one another, but we argue that this is rooted in varying policy-perceptions of decision-makers depending on the service. Since decision-makers decide whether they want to collaborate with another jurisdiction, we also have to account for policy-makers' expectations concerning transaction costs in a policy domain. In general, organizations have the dilemma whether they internalize production (make it themselves) or externalize it (buy it through contracting). Transaction cost scholars argue that this choice reflects the relative costs of traditional production factors (fixed assets, labour, and capital) and the transaction costs. According to Williamson (1981), transaction costs are essentially the management costs associated with either internally producing the service or buying through a third actor and are determined by limited information and uncertainty. In the case of contracting-out, an organization cannot fully predict all possible outcomes, which is why an information asymmetry occurs. In this case vendors have more information about their activities and performance than the organization which has delegated the service. Hence, when the risk of vendor opportunism is high, the contracting organization must engage in post contract oversight, which results in high transaction costs and might be finally more expensive than producing the good itself. Aldag and Warner (2018) show that the longevity of shared service agreements can be explained by the decline of transaction costs. However, we know from the literature on bounded rationality that public managers' logical capacity is limited beyond a certain level of complexity (Simon 1947; Hong 2019; Hong, Kim, and Son 2020). As a consequence, they will rather choose shortcuts and choose actions which are perceived as 'good enough' instead of finding the best solution.

The literature on policy instruments provides different reasons for decision-makers' behaviour. In general, policy instruments<sup>2</sup> are seen as the convergence of 'rational' design by decision makers and a by-product of contextual factors (Linder and Peters 1991). In a similar vein, Capano and Lippi (2017) argue that the basic motivation to use policy instruments can be reduced to two analytical dimensions: instrumentality and legitimacy. While instrumentality influences the way instruments are individually perceived to be useful for the purpose of decision makers, legitimacy is strictly related to their political context. First, the instrumentality dimension is shaped by the perceived effectiveness and problem-solving capacity of the policy tools. Inter-municipal cooperation, which can be conceived as a policy tool in a broader sense, is expected to reduce transaction costs that the decision-makers believe to achieve when they collaborate with another municipality. However, decision-makers might only consider cooperation if they do not have to give up too much power. Several studies show that cooperation reduces accountability and transparency, which might lead to the

exploitation of power asymmetries (Feiock 2009; Andersen and Pierre 2008; Rayle and Zegras 2013). Moreover, cooperation might also lead to the predominance of a single municipality in a cooperative governance scheme. Thus, cooperation bears an important instrumental risk for local governments, which is why local office holders' perceptions of a policy domain is crucial. If decision makers perceive a service as particularly relevant, they will more likely be worried about a potential loss of power and therefore will avoid to collaborate with other municipalities. Hence, we are formulating the following hypothesis:

H<sub>1</sub>: The higher the perceived relevance of a policy field, the lower the probability of inter-municipal cooperation in this policy field.

In addition, Capano and Lippi (2017) identify legitimacy as a second factor that drives decision-makers' choice of policy instruments. Related to inter-municipal cooperation, the decision for local governments can depend on the political context of the policy domain. In principle, managers can not only select a policy instrument on the basis of personal preferences, but they are 'also obliged to take account of the symbols, opinions, coalitions, interests, and trust' (Capano and Lippi 2017, 276). The authors distinguish between internal and external legitimacy. While the former implies that the decision-makers are the source of legitimation, the latter is exogenous and related to the specific policy area. Internal legitimacy is established by practices, the legal framework and the ethical culture of the policy domain, while external legitimacy can be shaped by outsiders, e.g. by challenging current policies. In relation to inter-municipal cooperation, decision makers can thus be influenced by the (internal and external) context of the policy, which can also be described as the policy domain's politicization. According to (Lancaster 2017, 93), politicized policy domains are those where professional, personal, and political stakes are making their actors vulnerable. In this sense, decision makers feel either internal or external pressure to legitimize their activities in politicized policy domains, which leads them to be more careful when cooperating. Even though transaction costs might be smaller by cooperating with other municipalities, they might refuse to cooperate, since the domain is too delicate and they want to keep control. Therefore, we postulate the following hypothesis:

H<sub>2</sub>: The more politicized a policy field, the lower the probability of inter-municipal cooperation in this policy field.

## **4 Research design**

### **4.1 Case selection**

Inter-municipal cooperation is a phenomenon which can be widely observed around the world. There is a strong tradition in the United States (Warner 2006; Aldag and Warner 2018; Aldag, Warner, and Bel 2020), but it is also fairly common in Europe (Hulst and van Montfort 2007; Teles and Swianiewicz 2018) and beyond (Braadbaart, Zhang, and Wang 2009; Dollery, Akimov, and Byrnes 2009; Yi et al. 2018). We focus our analysis on inter-municipal cooperation in Switzerland. Municipalities in Switzerland are important entities – both for political participation and for public

service provision (Ladner et al. 2019). Moreover, local governments have the authority to decide whether they want to cooperate in a particular policy area or not – much like in the US case. Finally, intermunicipal cooperation is a very widespread phenomenon in Switzerland and it exists in all local policy areas (Steiner 2003, 558–559). This case, thus, allows us to track policy characteristics across multiple policy domains.

## 4.2 Data

For our analysis, we combine data from two surveys. The first survey – which allows to operationalize our dependent variable – is conducted periodically (every 4–7 years) since 1988 among all Swiss municipal secretaries. Municipal secretaries are the top civil servants and figure as heads of the local administration. They are hence highly familiar with questions regarding service provision (Steiner and Kaiser 2017, 238). We mainly use data from the latest wave of this survey, conducted in 2017 (hereafter referred to as MSS17). The survey was sent to all 2,255 Swiss municipalities that existed in 2017 and 1,868 municipal secretaries participated, which corresponds to a response rate of 83%. The second survey is a weighted sample of Swiss municipalities, which have been carefully selected based on the population size, the language region and type of settlement (urban/rural). It was conducted shortly after the first survey in 2017 among 1,792 local office holders in 75 Swiss municipalities (hereafter referred to as LMS17) and we use this survey to capture the policy characteristics ‘relevance’ and ‘politicization’. Traunmüller et al. (2012, 79) show that the selected municipalities are representative of all Swiss municipalities. They closely mirror the full population in terms of educational structure, the proportion of foreigners and local associations. The response rate of this survey was also particularly high for an elite survey with 47.5% (Freitag, Bundi, and Flick Witzig 2019).

Both surveys provide necessary information for our endeavour to analyse how the extent of inter-municipal cooperation in a given municipality and policy is linked to the politicization and relevance of a policy as perceived by local officials. In MSS17, each municipal secretary had to indicate for 32 different policies whether and in what form her municipality cooperates to provide the respective service. In LMS17, each local militia politician had to select the one out of 21 policies she deals with most frequently and to characterize it based on five items. We use the information from MSS17 to operationalize whether a municipality cooperates in a particular policy area. The responses from LMS17 are aggregated by each of the 21 policy areas – after a factor analysis has been conducted (see below) – which gives us a policy-level measure of perceived relevance and politicization. We then match the information from the two data sources based on the policy which serves as a common attribute linking the two data sources (see Table A.1 in Appendix A for how the matching based on policies is done). It is thus important to note that – while the information for our indicators comes from elite surveys – the unit of analysis is not a survey respondent, but a policy nested in a municipality. The surveys are merely used as information sources from which we aggregate data at the level of the policy and the municipality. Combining different surveys and aggregating their information is a common practice in studies that assess variation in inter-municipal cooperation across policies (Brown and Potoski 2003, 2005; Hefetz and Warner 2012; Levin and Tadelis 2010) and in our case, the two



surveys were fielded shortly after one another (MSS17: January 2017; LMS17: October 2017-January 2018) and hence cover the same year. In addition to this municipality-policy, and policy-variant factors, we also use data from the Federal Statistical Office to capture municipal-level variation in indicators deemed important by previous research for explaining inter-municipal cooperation. These variables vary across municipalities, but not across policies.

### 4.3 Operationalization

Table 1 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analysis as well as of the respective level of measurement and the data sources used. To measure our dependent variable, we rely on one question from MSS17. Municipal secretaries are asked to indicate for each of 32 different policy areas whether their municipality cooperates with other municipalities or with private companies to provide the respective services. Details on the question wording and the 32 policy areas are provided in Tables A.1 and A.2 in Appendix A. Respondents could indicate whether they produce the service internally (=no cooperation), whether they jointly provide them with other municipalities, whether they delegate them to another municipality, or whether they outsource them to a private contractor. The latter three answer options are considered as different forms of cooperation. Table 1 shows how municipal secretaries' responses are distributed across the different categories. Not surprisingly,

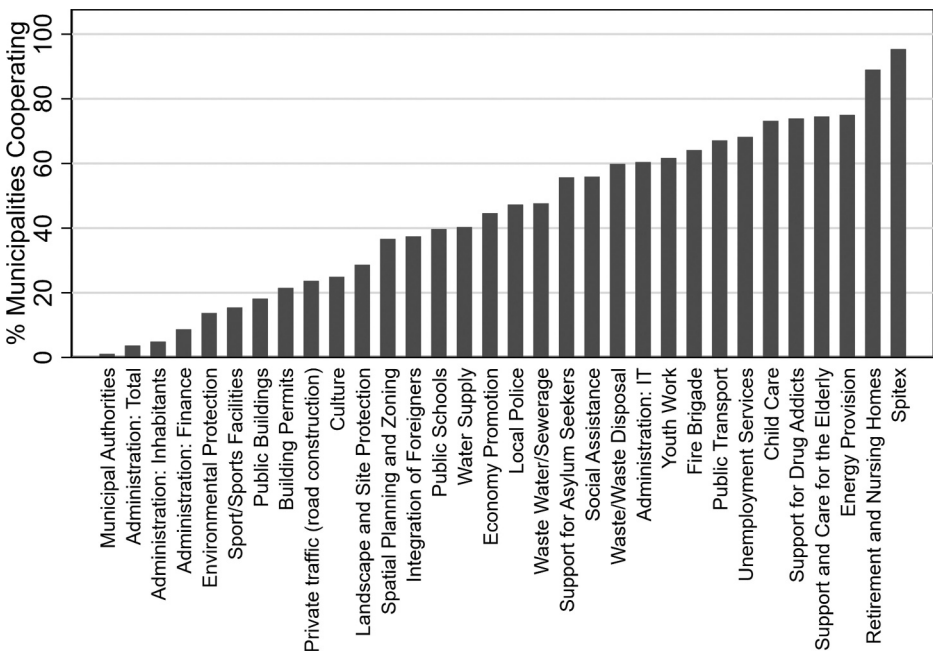
Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Measurement Level	Data
Cooperation (=1)	47,224	.42	.49	P-M	MSS17
Type of Service Provision					
Internal Production	47,224	.58	.49	P-M	MSS17
Joint Service Provision	47,224	.23	.42	P-M	MSS17
Delegation	47,224	.11	.31	P-M	MSS17
Outsourcing	47,224	.09	.28	P-M	MSS17
Relevance	32	3.14	.18	P	LMS17
Importance	32	3.67	.2	P	LMS17
Autonomy	32	2.63	.26	P	LMS17
Politicization	32	2.79	.34	P	LMS17
Saliency	32	2.94	.33	P	LMS17
Conflictiveness	32	2.77	.46	P	LMS17
Legitimacy Pressure	32	2.66	.3	P	LMS17
Functional Pressure (2009)					
No Pressure	28,363	.67	.47	P-M	MSS09
Low Pressure	28,363	.23	.42	P-M	MSS09
Medium Pressure	28,363	.08	.28	P-M	MSS09
High Pressure	28,363	.02	.14	P-M	MSS09
Cooperation in same Policy (2009)	29,538	.38	.48	P-M	MSS09
% Policy Fields Cooperating (2009)	1214	.4	.2	M	MSS09
Log(Population)	2255	7.32	1.26	M	FSO17
Spatial Context					
Rural	2255	.55	.5	M	FSO17
Suburban	2255	.4	.49	M	FSO17
Urban	2255	.04	.2	M	FSO17
Tax Revenues/Capita (1,000 CHF)	2249	1.62	3.86	M	FSO17

Note. Measurement Level: P-M = Policy-Municipality, P = Policy, M = Municipality. Data Source: LMS17 = Local Militia Survey 2017, MSS09 = Municipal Secretaries Survey 2009, MSS17 = Municipal Secretaries Survey 2017, FSO17 = Federal Statistical Office 2017

internal production is the most frequent way of providing a service. Yet, 42% of the services are provided in cooperation with other municipalities or with private companies among the municipalities represented in the survey. For the empirical analysis, we generate a binary variable that indicates whether a municipality cooperates in a particular area or not. In a second step, we distinguish different types of service provision to assess in more detail how policy characteristics are linked to them. [Figure 1](#) shows the univariate distribution of the binary dependent variable across policy fields. We can see that there is substantive variation in the amount of cooperation across policy fields – an additional empirical motivation for our analysis.<sup>3</sup>

In local government studies, in particular five dimensions have been identified to be important for service production (Kersbergen van and van Waarden 2004; Lee, Rainey, and Chun 2009; Steiner and Kaiser 2017). Local militia politicians were asked to select one out of 21 policy fields with which they most frequently deal with. In a subsequent step, they were asked to evaluate five characteristics of that policy area: (1) its importance, (2) the autonomy a municipality has in it, (3) its public salience, (4) its conflictivity, and (5) legitimacy pressures coming from outside actors. The question wording and the policy fields can be found in Tables A.1 and A.2 in Appendix A. [Table 2](#) shows the results of a principal component analysis on these five items. It shows that these five items cluster on two components. The first component encompasses salience, conflictivity, and legitimacy pressures and is thus labelled ‘politicization’. The second component consists of a policy field’s importance and a municipality’s decision-making autonomy in it and is thus termed ‘relevance’. We additionally calculate Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the items of the two components. While the three items that load on the component ‘politicization’ exhibit a high  $\alpha$  of .76 and thus



**Figure 1.** Cooperation intensity by policy field.

**Table 2.** Principal component analysis: policy perceptions.

	Politicization	Relevance
Importance	0.10	<b>0.71</b>
Autonomy	-0.11	<b>0.78</b>
Saliency	<b>0.76</b>	0.17
Conflictivity	<b>0.89</b>	-0.05
Legitimacy Pressure	<b>0.81</b>	-0.10
Eigenvalues	2.04	1.19
% Variance	40.86	23.73
Cronbach's $\alpha$	.76	.23
N		1,328

Note: Data from Freitag, Bundi, and Flick Witzig (2019): Perceptions of local militia politicians on 21 different policy areas in 75 Swiss municipalities.

clearly constitute one scale, the scalability of the two items capturing the component 'relevance' is less good, with an  $\alpha$ -value of .26. This is mainly due to the low variation of the item importance. Here, most local militia politicians indicate that the policy area they are most frequently dealing with is very important for municipalities. This is not surprising and can explain the low  $\alpha$ -value.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the low  $\alpha$ -value for 'relevance' we use the two components for our main analysis, but we also provide results with the individual items in Appendix C as a robustness check.<sup>5</sup> To match local militia politicians' policy perceptions to the MSS17 data, we calculate the mean of the corresponding items of the two components for each of the 21 policy areas. We then match these policy-specific means to the corresponding policies of the MSS17 survey (based on the correspondence indicated in Table A.1 in Appendix A.1). These two indicators thus vary across policies, but not across municipalities.

We include a number of additional variables in our analysis to capture additional policy- and municipal-level indicators that might covary with the way services are provided. Two additional variables which vary across policies and municipalities come from a previous wave of the municipal secretaries' survey conducted in 2009 (hereafter referred to as MSS09). The first one, which we label 'functional pressures' captures the extent to which municipal secretaries perceive performance limits for their municipality in each of the 32 policy areas (see Table A.2 in Appendix A for question wording). They had four different answer options: no performance limits, limits in sight (=low), limits reached (=medium), limits passed (=high). This variable thus allows us to assess whether cooperation in a given policy area is more likely in 2017 when municipal secretaries indicated higher functional pressures in this policy area in 2009. The second variable ('Cooperation in same Policy (2009)') indicates whether a municipality already cooperated in the same policy area in 2009. These two indicators thus allow us to incorporate a time dimension in our analysis and to assess whether previously perceived functional pressures translate into higher cooperation probability and how 'sticky' cooperation is over time.

The models also incorporate four indicators that vary across municipalities, but not across policies. They allow to capture existing explanations discussed in Section 2. First, we include the overall extent to which a municipality engages in cooperation, calculated based on the 2009 wave of the municipal secretaries' survey. The variable indicates the % of the 32 policy fields in which a municipality is cooperating in 2009, thereby giving an indication of its prior willingness and ability to cooperate. Second,

we include a municipality's logged population size in the analysis, allowing to capture arguments on scale economies. Third, we include a measure for the spatial context – rural, suburban, urban – in which a municipality is situated, which captures arguments on the availability of cooperation partners as well as on the functional interdependencies between municipalities – with cooperation being more likely in urban contexts. Finally, we include an indicator for the socio-economic situation of a municipality, namely its tax base. Local taxes are the most important source of revenue for Swiss municipalities (Brühlhart and Jametti 2006, 2040–2041). Since municipalities can set their own tax rates, we use the amount of federal taxes that are paid per inhabitant in a municipality to have a comparable indicator across municipalities.

#### 4.4 Estimation strategy

Our data contains indicators at three different levels of aggregation (see Table 1): indicators that vary across policies and municipalities, indicators varying across policies but not municipalities, and indicators varying across municipalities but not policies. Due to these different levels of analysis, we use multilevel logistic regression models, with policies as level-1 and municipalities as level-2, to study our first dependent variable: whether a municipality cooperates in a particular policy domain or not. We estimate the following model:

$$y_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_{ij}X_{ij} + \gamma_jX_j + \lambda_iX_i + E_{ij}$$

where

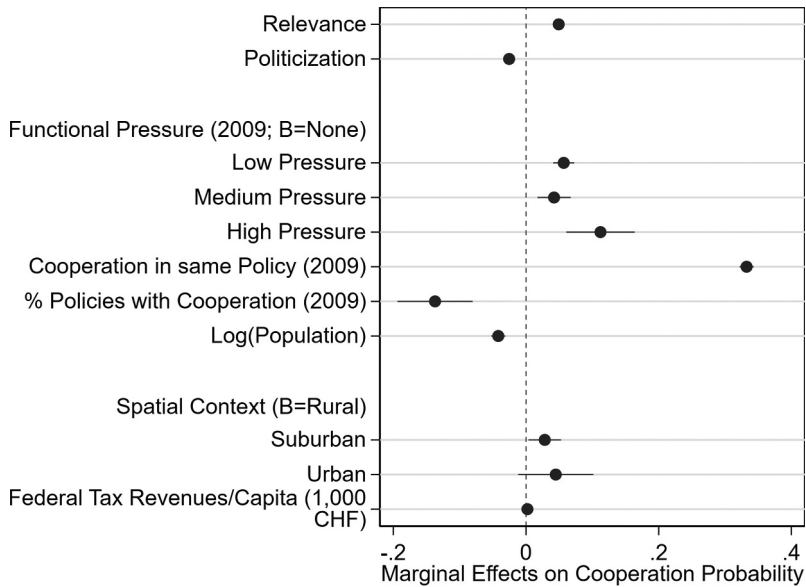
$$\alpha = \delta_{ij} + \eta_i$$

$y_{ij}$  depicts the binary dependent variable (intermunicipal cooperation = 1),  $\beta_{ij}$ ,  $\gamma_j$  and  $\lambda_i$  are coefficient vectors for policy- and municipality-variant ( $X_{ij}$ ), policy-variant ( $X_j$ ), and municipality-variant ( $X_i$ ) predictors.  $\delta_{ij}$  designates the grand mean of the dependent variable, and  $\eta_i$  the municipality-level variation around that grand mean. We thus estimate a random intercept regression model with municipalities as level-2. In a second step, we use multinomial regression models to study our second dependent variable, namely different types of service provision. This allows to see whether the correlations between our predictor and our dependent variable operate in the same way across different forms of cooperation, or whether they vary depending on the type of service provision.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Internal production vs. cooperation

How does inter-municipal cooperation vary across policy areas as a function of policy characteristics? Figure 2 provides answers to this question. It shows the average marginal effects of the different predictor variables based on a multilevel logistic regression model. The dots display the average marginal effects, whereas the lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals. The relevance of a policy as perceived by the local militia politicians is positively correlated with the possibility to cooperate in a particular policy area. A one standard deviation increase in relevance is associated

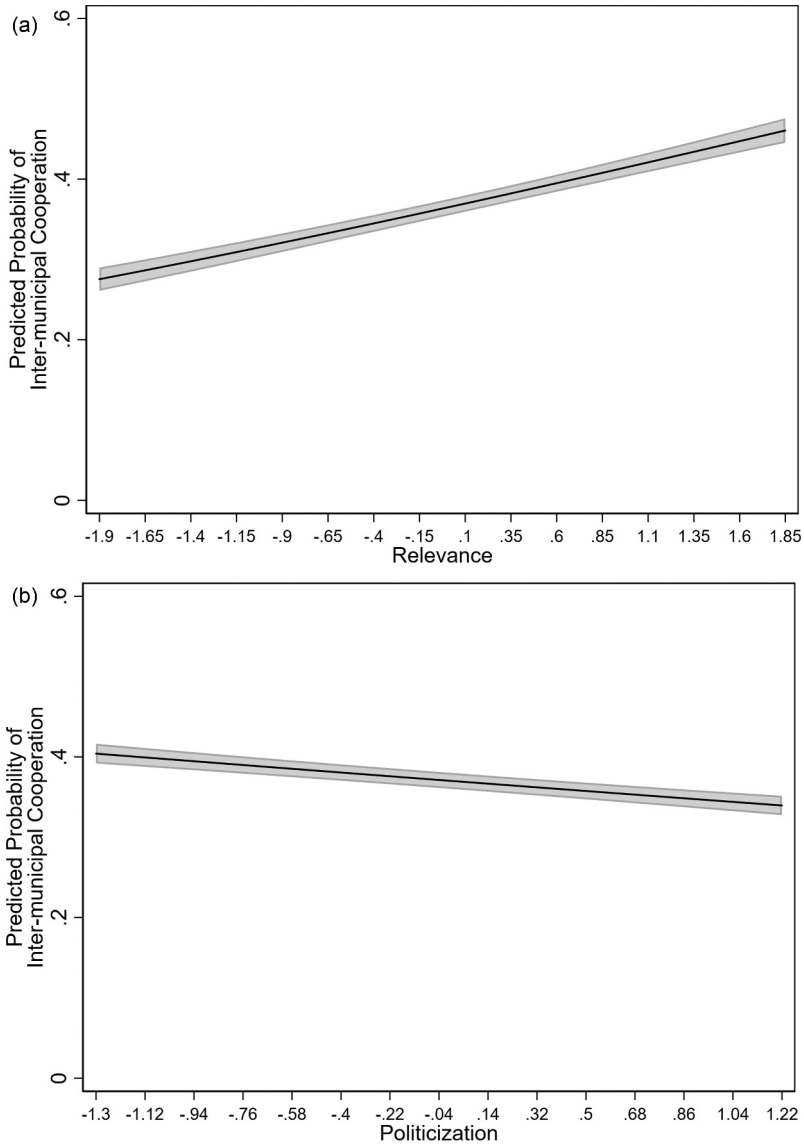


**Figure 2.** Inter-municipal cooperation: multilevel logistic regression model.

with a 5 percentage point increase in cooperation probability. The same change in perceived politicization is associated with a 2.5 percentage point lower cooperation probability.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 3 display the predicted probabilities of inter-municipal cooperation as relevance and politicization vary from minimum to maximum. As the perceived relevance of a policy changes from its minimum to its maximum value, the probability of inter-municipal cooperation increases from 27.5% to 44.7%, holding everything else constant. Perceived politicization is associated with a smaller change in cooperation probability. Here, cooperation probability decreases from 40% to 33% as perceived politicization changes from minimum to maximum. These are substantial changes and this highlights the importance of policy-level factors for studying inter-municipal cooperation.

These results are robust to the inclusion of control variables. The perceived functional pressures in a policy area in 2009 are positively linked to the probability that a municipality cooperates in said policy area in 2017. Compared to policy areas where policy makers do not perceive any performance limits, cooperation probability in policy areas where performance limits are in sight (=low pressure), reached (=medium pressure), and passed (=high pressure) is 5, 4, and 11 percentage points higher. Performance limits and difficulties of providing services thus play an important role for inter-municipal cooperation in a particular policy area. Moreover, if a municipality already cooperated in a particular policy area in 2009, the probability that it (still) cooperates in 2017 is 33 percentage points higher. Previous cooperation is thus a key predictor for contemporary cooperation. For the covariates that vary across municipalities we find that the share of policies in which a municipality cooperated in 2009 is negatively linked to cooperation probability in a particular policy area in 2017. Cooperation in one policy field, thus, does not seem to spill over into cooperation in other policy fields. In line with previous research, our results show that larger



**Figure 3.** Predicted probabilities: inter-municipal cooperation **(a)** Relevance **(b)** Politicization.

municipalities are less likely to cooperate and that suburban and urban municipalities are more likely to do so (Brown and Potoski 2003; Kwon and Feiock 2010). Finally, the economic situation of a municipality – captured by its tax base – is not significantly linked to the probability to cooperate in a particular policy area.

These results are largely robust when we look at the individual indicators that constitute the components ‘relevance’ and ‘politicization’ (see Figure C.1 in Appendix C) – particularly for the items that constitute ‘relevance’. With respect to the ‘politicization’ items, two differences are noteworthy. First, the perceived salience item is not significantly linked to cooperation probability. Second, perceived legitimacy pressure is

positively and not negatively linked to the probability of inter-municipal cooperation. This might be due to the demands of other actors in such policy areas: when local militia politicians are more often exposed to pressures from other actors, e.g. higher-tier governments, they might choose to share responsibility and accountability and cooperate. The negative relationship between the perceived politicization of and the probability to cooperate in a particular policy area, thus, seems to be driven mainly by the perceived level of conflict in a policy area. This makes sense against the backdrop that in more conflictive policy areas, finding agreements with additional actors might be more difficult than in less conflictive ones. Krause and Van Thiel (2019) show that policy conflict lowers the extent of perceived managerial autonomy, which could lead to less collaboration.

How can we explain that municipalities cooperate more often in policy domains, which are perceived as more relevant? Municipalities' decisions to cooperate might not only result from local policy-makers' aim to make services more efficient and to reduce transaction costs, but also to produce better goods (Bel and Belerdas-Castro 2021). Several studies show that the quality of public goods provision is linked to electoral gains (Lizzeri and Persico 2001; James and John 2007). Providing good public services through cooperation might also be motivated by local office holders' electoral concerns. The literature on issue ownership shows that politicians focus on specific policy domains to appeal to their voters (Bélanger and Meguid 2008), while local governments in particular concentrate on policy matters of direct concern to the local community (Breeman, Scholten, and Timmermans 2015). As a consequence, local office holders might seek cooperation more often in policies they perceive as relevant, since they might want to ensure that good quality services are provided in these domains.

## 5.2 Types of service provision

Do we find the same results if we disentangle inter-municipal cooperation into its different components? Figure 4 provides answers to this question. It contains the average marginal effects based on a multinomial regression model, which distinguishes four different types of service provision. The findings on our two main independent variables become more nuanced through this analysis. While we see that higher perceived relevance is associated with a lower, and higher perceived politicization with a higher propensity to produce a service internally – and thus not to cooperate – these two factors do not play out in the same way across different types of cooperation. The perceived relevance of a policy is associated with an increase in joint service provision and in outsourcing probability, but not in delegation. By contrast, the perceived politicization is associated with a decrease in the probability of delegation, but not of joint service provision or outsourcing.

This is also visible from Figure 5 which shows the predicted probabilities for the four types of service provision as a function of relevance and politicization. As the perceived relevance of a policy changes from minimum to maximum, the predicted probability of outsourcing the service to a private contractor increases from 4 to 14% and the probability of joint service provision with other municipalities from 14 to 20%. While delegation probability of a policy is not linked to the perceived relevance of

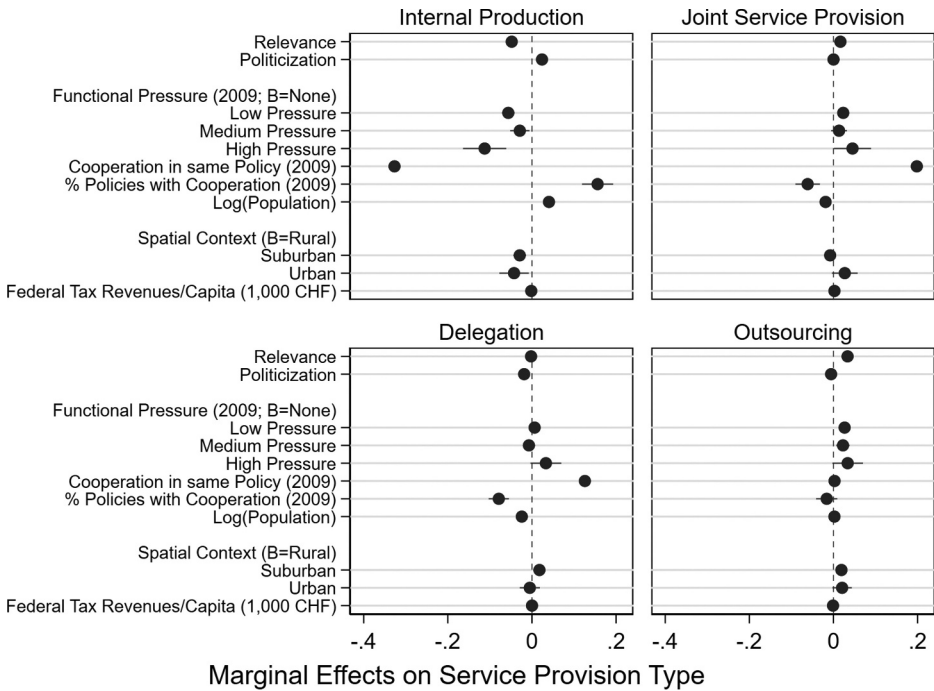


Figure 4. Types of service provision: multinomial logistic regression model.

a polity, it is linked to its perceived politicization: the change from minimum to maximum politicization decreases delegation probability by 5 percentage points from 12 to 7%.

When we look at the individual items that make up ‘relevance’ and ‘politicization’ (Figure C.2 in Appendix C), the results echo these more nuanced patterns. They show different relationships with different types of service provision. Noteworthy is the negative relationship between the perceived conflictivity of a policy and the probability that its provision is delegated to another municipality or outsourced to a private company, but not between conflictivity and joint service provision. In more conflictive policy areas it, thus, seems important for municipalities that they keep a direct influence on service provision – even if they have to share it with other municipalities. At the same time, higher legitimacy pressures from other actors in a policy area are associated with a higher probability to outsource services to a private contractor. This is in line with our interpretation above: outsourcing is a particularly well-suited way to dilute or shift responsibility in a policy area to another actor. This result provides some evidence for our interpretation of relevance and confirms previous studies on public-private partnerships (Thümmler 2011; Ter Bogt 2018).

The more nuanced findings across different types of service provision are not limited to our main independent variables. We find that functional pressures increase the probability for joint service provision and outsourcing, but not for delegation. Moreover, the relationship of previous cooperation in a policy area as



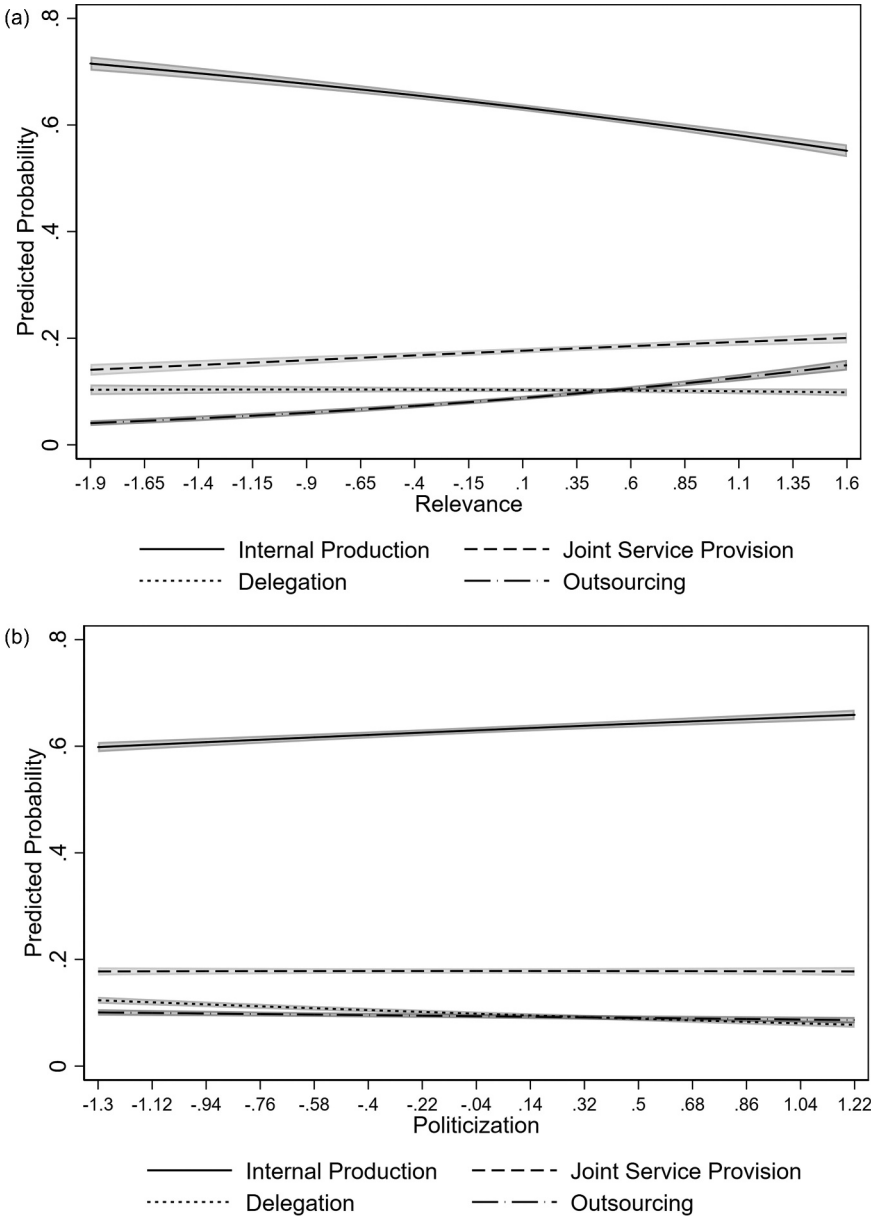


Figure 5. Predicted probabilities: types of service provision (a) Relevance (b) Politicization.

well as the overall level of cooperation a municipality was previously engaged in, are associated with the probability of joint service provision and delegation in the same ways as for overall cooperation, but not in the case of outsourcing. The same is true for population size: it does not impact the probability of outsourcing a service. Finally, municipalities located in a suburban context are more likely to delegate or outsource services than rural municipalities, while urban municipalities are more

likely to engage in joint service provision and in outsourcing than rural municipalities. Again, this makes sense, since suburban municipalities might lack the capacity to jointly provide services, but they have options to delegate or outsource service provision – an option that seems less available or used by rural municipalities. Urban municipalities, by contrast, do not delegate service provision, but they cooperate with others on an equal footing. Yet, they also resort to private contractors and outsource service provision – more often than rural municipalities.

## 6 Conclusion

Scholarly interest for inter-municipal cooperation is persistently high. While previous studies have focused on municipal-level factors to explain cooperation, there is still little research that studies differences in inter-municipal cooperation across policy areas and how policy characteristics shape these differences. By studying the relationship between inter-municipal cooperation and the relevance and politicization of a policy as perceived by local office holders in Swiss municipalities, this study makes several contributions.

First, it shows that the substantial differences in cooperation activity across policy areas follows clear patterns that correlate with policy-specific characteristics: municipalities cooperate more in policy areas perceived as more relevant and less politicized by local office holders. This shows that policy characteristics and local office holders' perceptions of them matter.

Second, a common argument for differences in cooperation activity is that office holders expect lower transaction costs in some policies, which is why they are more likely to cooperate (Bel and Warner 2016). However, previous studies disagree about the effect inter-municipal cooperation has on transaction costs. While some scholars argue that the complexity of cooperation can raise transaction costs (Feiock 2013; Bel and Warner 2015), others argue that transaction costs decline over time due to institutional learning (Ansell and Gash 2008; Dollery, Akimov, and Byrnes 2009). Our results suggest that the politicization of a policy might be an additional factor to consider when assessing transaction costs: it is more difficult to agree on politicized issues. This increases transaction costs and hence poses a disincentive to cooperate.

Finally, the role of policy characteristics varies across types of service provision. This suggests that depending on a policy's characteristics, policy-makers choose different strategies to provide services. Whether these strategies are motivated by electoral or other incentives of office holders is an important avenue for future research. For instance, Bischoff and Wolfschütz (2021) show that inter-municipal cooperation is more likely among municipalities characterized by a high fiscal capacity and administrative expenditure in election years.

Our study design has some limitations. First, we have to rely on different data sources to measure the variables for our unit of analysis (policies nested in municipalities). While this is not a problem in itself (given that we aggregate the data at the level of the policy and/or municipality, which allows us to have corresponding units), it poses challenges in the case at hand: the two data sources use somewhat different classifications and numbers of policy areas which sometimes made the assignment challenging. Second, our data does not allow us to make causal claims as we do not know when municipality *i* started to cooperate in policy area *j*. While we incorporate data from a previous survey wave – which captures the longevity of cooperation to

some extent – our main independent variables are cross-sectional. Therefore, the present analysis is correlational and does not allow for causal inference. Yet, we believe it still has great value in that it uncovers how policy characteristics and inter-municipal cooperation covary. Uncovering such general patterns represents a crucial first step towards a causal assessment of how policy characteristics impact inter-municipal cooperation. For instance, this could be done in future research by using a survey experiment, in which local officials are treated with different information concerning the politicization or relevance of a policy and then asked to indicate the likelihood that they would support cooperation in such a policy field. Such experiments have, for example, recently been used to study representatives' propensity to sell public real estate (Huijbregts, George, and Bekkers 2007) and municipal managers' conflict management strategies (Sun, Peng, and Liao 2021).

Notwithstanding these limitations, our study represents an important first step towards a better understanding of policy-specific variation of public service provision by uncovering systematic patterns of covariation between policy characteristics and policy-specific intermunicipal cooperation. It points to new theoretical mechanisms beyond economic and institutional considerations. Policy contexts matter for local governments and local office holders' perceptions might be key for understanding how. While local governance is said to be driven by economic efficiency and is sometimes considered apolitical, local officials' policy perceptions, which go beyond technical aspects, seem to matter. This study shows that we should devote more time to study these perceptions, their variation across policies, and their impact on local governance.

## Endnotes

1. Capital-intensive services: airports, highways, housing, libraries, natural resources, parking, parks, sewerage, and water transportation; labour-intensive services: administration, corrections, education, fire, health, hospitals, police, protective inspections, welfare, solid waste management and general control.
2. Interventions made by government or public authorities in local, national or international states in order to achieve specific political outcome
3. Figure B.1 shows the policy-level variation of inter-municipal cooperation for the 75 municipalities from the LMS17 survey only. This variation, as well as the ranking of the different policies, closely resembles the one in the overall sample, which is an additional indication of the representativeness of the 75 municipalities from LMS17 for Swiss municipalities in general.
4. This is common problem in the study of portfolio importance, which is why studies often rely on expert opinion (Laver and Hunt 1992; Druckman and Warwick 2005).
5. An additional, methodological, motivation to use the components are the high correlations between the politicization survey items (see Table B.1).
6. The variables 'relevance' and 'politicization' are standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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