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Clarification of the concepts and development of a conceptual model of the policy process regarding co-creation within MLG systems. This model will set out the different venues and arenas of co-creation and distinguish between co-creation at different stages of the policy cycle, notably agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy implementation. The result of this work will be a policy brief (D.2.2) and ultimately a research paper (D.2.3).

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Co-Creation and Polycentric Democracy in Multi-Level Governance

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Abstract

The horizontal dimension of multi-level governance (MLG) — especially the inclusion of non-state actors and citizens — remains underexplored. This paper examines whether co-creation can strengthen this aspect and contribute to democratizing multi-level politics. Drawing on the policy coordination literature, we distinguish the scope and depth of coordination in MLG, highlighting trade-offs that emerge when both expand. We then compare co-creation's potential across general-purpose (Type 1) and task-specific (Type 2) jurisdictions and introduce the concept of polycentric democracy. Central to our argument is that co-creation functions as a second-order democracy: it operates within and in the shadow of representative institutions, deriving legitimacy not from electoral competition but from collaborative problem-solving. This form of democracy is problem-oriented, locally anchored, and reliant on boundary-spanning capacities. Finally, we identify four structural tensions that constrain co-creation's democratizing promise and outline a research agenda treating co-creation in MLG as a diverse set of democratic practices.

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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been described as a multi-level governance (MLG) system that includes the European level, national governments, and regional and local authorities. MLG responds to the challenge of making authoritative decisions across multiple levels of jurisdictions (Benz 2024; Hooghe and Marks 2001, 2003; Marks 1993; Piattoni 2010). An important problem of multilevel governance is the coexistence between MLG and democracy, because the inclusion of multiple jurisdictional levels may lead to informal bargaining and opaque decision-making processes that impede democratic accountability. To put it simply, it undermines the principle of representative democracy at the national level (Benz 2024; Habermas 2015; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Papadopoulos 2003, 2007; Pierre and Peters 2005).

This means that citizens and other actors must comply with the outputs of multi-level decision-making, yet have limited means to hold decision-makers accountable through parliamentary oversight (Moravcsik 1994). At the national level, the Europeanization of domestic policy-making and MLG have reinforced the authority of national governments (Trein and Maggetti 2024). Complex decision-making processes such as those in MLG are also known to cause policy blockades and impede innovative policy solutions, due to multiple veto points that increase transaction costs and lead to the “joint-decision trap” (Scharpf 1988, 2006). As a result, the combination of vertical complexity and problem interdependence in MLG settings has made it more difficult to devise policy solutions that both address local challenges and enjoy high political legitimacy. This has intensified the search for governance approaches that can couple innovation and problem-solving with democratic legitimacy and social inclusion (Schakel and Tatham 2025).

Taking a more positive note, other authors argue that several levels of governance are not necessarily a problem. Firstly, some suggest that the multi-level system, which extends shared decision-making across multiple levels, is legitimate because it improves the problem-solving capacity of participating units (Scharpf 1997b, 1999; Trein, Thomann, and Maggetti 2019). This argument implies that the shift of authority from elected representatives to supranational institutions and bureaucratic structures is not inherently problematic, insofar as it is seen to produce better outcomes of decisions for everyone. In other words, the deficit of input- is compensated for by gains in output-legitimacy. Others, meanwhile, defend the democratic value of the EU MLG, arguing that there are plenty of abilities to control directly and indirectly European regulatory powers by elected representatives (Majone 2002; Pollack 2003).

Pushing this argument further, Simona Piattoni contends that while multi-level governance may undermine the historical form of representative democracy that shaped European nation states, it also engenders a new kind of democracy. On the one hand, it extends the realm of governance from intergovernmental relations to public-private modes of governance (Piattoni 2010). On the other hand, MLG in the EU allows subnational governments within nation states to actively shape their own public policies through European policy programs in a collaborative and democratic fashion, notably through EU cohesion policy (Piattoni 2016). Research on the implementation of European public policies reinforces this argument, showing that even though decisions are taken at the European level, national and subnational governments retain the authority to adapt European regulations to their own context (Gollata and Newig 2017; Thomann 2015).

In this paper, we contribute to research on the link between multi-level governance and democracy by examining whether, and in what ways, co-creation can contribute to democratizing multi-level politics. In recent years, scholars in public administration and public policy have increasingly turned to the concept of co-creation to better understand how public governance might address complex problems while at the same time providing policy solutions that are legitimate (Ansell and Torfing 2021b). Drawing on insights from the management literature, this scholarship argues that in order to create more effective solutions, decision-makers should rely more heavily on the participation of non-state actors — which includes interest groups but also citizens — not only in the implementation of public policies but also in their design (Ansell and Torfing 2021a; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021; Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016). Notably, some authors contend that these actors should be involved in the development of new policy solutions in a more systematic fashion, which in turn renders governance more democratic (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2023).

Against this background, this paper examines and unpacks the horizontal dimension of MLG (Mende 2021). A recent review of the literature notes that many parts of the research on MLG have focused on its vertical dimension, while the horizontal dimension, especially the inclusion of non-state actors and citizens, has been given much less attention (Papadopoulos, Tortola, and Geyer 2025). This paper contributes to this literature through a theoretical exploration of how co-creation may strengthen this neglected aspect. We do not, however, assess the democratic quality of MLG against different models of democracy, as other theoretical pieces have done (Hurrelmann and DeBardeleben 2009; Olsson 2003). Rather, we adopt an original approach to analyze the degree of democratization that may be achieved by focusing instead on the implications drawn from the theory of coordination (Braun 2008; Peters 2018; Schout et al. 2006).

In a first step, we rely on insights from the literature on policy coordination regarding the consequences of horizontal and vertical coordination processes, and of different degrees of actors' involvement in decision-making. We then delve deeper into the notion of co-creation to explain how the horizontal dimension of MLG can be viewed from this perspective, before zooming in on differences in the application of co-creation across various types of MLG. We then introduce the concept of polycentric democracy to better understand the role of co-creation in MLG. To avoid an overly optimistic account, we then highlight tensions and challenges associated with this role. We conclude by outlining some elements of a future research-agenda. In doing so, the paper contributes to the literature on MLG by depicting the often-overlooked horizontal dimension in co-creation terms, while also contributing to the literature on collaborative governance, which has so far only marginally scrutinized how such forms of governance scale up.

2. Coordination in multi-level governance

The first step to understand how co-creation might be coupled with MLG is to unpack further the meaning and role of coordination of actors' behaviour within multi-level settings. We distinguish two analytical dimensions. The first one is the number of actors that are included, or in other words, the scope of coordination. Here, as we noted in the introduction, MLG has a dual scope: one that is vertical and another that is horizontal. The second dimension concerns the depth of coordination, that is, whether coordination means simply interaction and sharing information or also implies shared decision-making (Sager 2005, 2006). We describe these two

dimensions and then revisit evidence that indicates why the multiplication of included actors may make it difficult to generate effective and legitimate policy solutions.

2.1 Scope: vertical and horizontal coordination

The term multi-level governance (MLG) emerged in early 1990s research on European integration, which was in search of a concept capable of capturing the increasingly complex patterns of decision-making in the EU. Traditional state-centred and intergovernmental perspectives no longer sufficed once a growing number of authoritative actors began to operate across multiple territorial scales (Marks 1993). Since then, MLG has become a central reference in the broader fields of European integration, international relations, comparative politics, and public policy. In a widely cited formulation, Piattoni (Piattoni 2010, 1) describes MLG as evoking “increasingly complex arrangements for arriving at authoritative decisions in increasingly dense networks of public and private, individual, and collective actors,” particularly in the EU. For this author, MLG is not just a convenient shorthand for European policymaking, but a sign of “structural transformations” in contemporary statehood and an invitation to rethink what constitutes legitimate rule in both state and non-state contexts.

This evolution is reflected in the movement from relatively formal, state-centric definitions to broader, more sociological understandings. Hooghe and Marks (Hooghe and Marks 2001, xi) famously defined MLG as “the dispersion of authoritative decision making across multiple territorial levels,” a definition that highlights the vertical distribution of authority but says little about who participates or how decisions are made. More recent accounts explicitly bring “governance” back in. Trein (2022, 64–65), for example, describes MLG as a complex structure that links levels of government organised in general-purpose and task-specific jurisdictions,

while “combin[ing] the presence of state actors, especially governments and bureaucracies but also parliaments, as well as non-state actors, such as private organizations, that self-regulate and organize specific policy problems.” A systematic review of 590 publications from 1993–2018 shows that this broader perspective is now dominant: most of the 110 conceptual papers in the sample explicitly include non-public actors (Papadopoulos, Tortola, and Geyer 2025). As Benz notes, this inclusion of private actors “distinguish[es] MLG from the traditional concept of ‘intergovernmental relations’ among executives, and should imply a broader perspective on actors and structures” (Benz 2019, 392)

These considerations make it quite clear that MLG has both a horizontal and a vertical form. Regarding the *vertical form*, MLG requires the coordination of a variety of jurisdictions, which are nested within different levels of government. These can include the supranational level, the national level, the regional level, as well as the municipal level. This arrangement of jurisdictions has given rise to different types of governance (Hooghe et al. 2016; Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019; Hooghe and Marks 2003), which we will discuss later in the paper.

Conversely, the *horizontal form* primarily encompasses collaboration among different jurisdictions; for example, in the context of European public policy programs, various regions work with each other rather than compete (Ansell 2000; Piattoni 2016). Beyond that, MLG also explicitly encompasses non-state actors, such as interest groups and firms, that are part of national governance arrangements (Mende 2021). Here, the idea is that MLG is not only a network of different territories but also a network of public and private actors (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006). From the perspective of present research, MLG implies potentially maximizing the number of actors included in the decision-making process by extending it

across different levels of government, as well as to both state and non-state actors. In doing so, this insight extends the potential uses of MLG into a variety of research fields; however, we are aware that it also poses the risk of excessive concept stretching (Piattoni 2010).

2.2 Depth: consultation vs. decision-making

The second important dimension concerns the extent to which coordination between multiple actors in a multi-level setting also entails shared decision-making. In the most general terms, researchers in governance distinguish different forms of coordination, each implying a distinct type of interaction. For example, governance networks produce interaction through negotiation, hierarchies produce command and control decisions, markets produce competition, and parliamentary arenas produce deliberation and decision-making through voting (Peters 2018; Scharpf 1997a). Making things more specific, other scholars have defined scales of coordination which allow them to analyze whether interaction in coordination settings actually produces shared results. The most general scales of coordination, for instance, range from no genuine coordination, through the mere sharing of information, to negative coordination — that is, avoiding conflicts — to positive coordination — that is, formulating shared positions — up to strategic coordination, which involves developing a plan together (Braun 2008; Schout et al. 2006).

At this point, the most basic distinction relevant to this paper is whether coordination entails only interaction, such as sharing information or consultation, or also implies shared decision-making authority. The theory of collaborative governance emphasizes that, in order for collaborative arrangements to be effective, decision-making should be shared among those involved in a collaborative endeavor. Therein, existing power differences amongst actors

naturally impact on decision-making process and outcomes (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012).

2.3 Trade-offs and challenges related to coordination

These insights suggest a potential trade-off between the number of included actors and the depth of the decisions that can be taken together. This observation, of course, is not at all new in the study of politics and governance. It already underpins the work of George Tsebelis, which shows that the number of possible solutions declines as more actors with different preferences enter a decision-making arena (Tsebelis 1995, 2003). Tsebelis assumes that actors are rational and pursue their self-interest, but even if we relax this assumption considerably and assume that participating actors may prefer reaching a decision over maximizing their own interests, it still leads us to the simple conclusion that merely involving more actors does not necessarily increase the ability to find shared decisions that are broadly acceptable.

Similar concerns have also been voiced in research on MLG. For example, scholarship in public administration has emphasized that in the European regulatory space, it is only possible to coordinate — meaning harmonize — agencies either horizontally across sectors or vertically across levels of government (Egeberg and Trondal 2016). Moreover, the authors who criticize MLG for its accountability problems have stressed that, although the system may maximize the inclusion of actors, there is a risk that power shifts to the most powerful units — in this case, national governments and their administrations, as well as technocratic bodies at the European level (Benz 2024; Habermas 2015; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Papadopoulos 2003, 2007; Pierre and Peters 2005). Comparative politics scholarship has linked these dynamics to the electoral backlash against the European Union and the related rise of populist politics (Hooghe and

Marks 2009; Kriesi 2025). Likewise, research on comparative public policy suggests that the delegation of competencies to the European public administration leads to a recentering of sectoral policies at the level of nation states, meaning that policy communities at the national level experience some level of recentralization under more political control (Trein and Maggetti 2024). Finally, scholarly work on vertical policy integration shows that even outside the European Union context, national policies are particularly effective when integrated vertically, which leaves less room for regions to develop their own solutions (Fernández-I-Marín et al. 2024).

The literature on collaborative and network governance has also addressed these concerns by examining whether including more actors leads to more effective decisions within governance networks. A common argument is that increasing the number of actors from multiple levels and diverse sectors increases heterogeneity and the cost of collaboration (Ansell and Torfing 2015). Much of the empirical research from this perspective has focused on specific policy issues (Douglas et al. 2020), and its findings are more mixed. On the one hand, “macro-collaborative” (polycentric) approaches have been found to lead to more successful governance outcomes, for example in environmental policy (Newig and Fritsch 2009). On the other hand, some cases show that governance networks need to be managed carefully, and that the overrepresentation of certain stakeholders may lead to suboptimal outcomes (Johnston et al. 2011; Schalk 2017). In summary, these insights suggest that augmenting the scope of collaboration — by including actors from multiple jurisdictions as well as non-state actors, — may produce difficulties in terms of arriving at binding decisions that are legitimate and effective, as often implied in the MLG literature. This is an important point to bear in mind when examining the potential of co-creation in the context of MLG.

3. Co-creation as horizontal multi-level governance

In recent years, the term co-creation has gained traction in research on public governance. Scholars in this field have increasingly turned to this concept as a promising route to improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of public policies (Osborne and Stokosch 2013; Voorberg et al. 2017b; Rodriguez Müller et al. 2021). The idea of co-creation originated in management studies, where it was used to examine how companies collaborate with consumers in product development (Xie et al. 2016; Leminen et al. 2020; John and Supramaniam 2024). In parallel, the literature on knowledge co-production studied how professional experts and laypeople jointly produce broader knowledge (Armitage et al. 2011; Djenontin and Meadow 2018). Building on these intellectual roots, recent public administration and public policy scholarship has argued that citizens and other non-state actors should participate not only in consultation processes or in providing feedback on public services, but also directly in the design of public policies (Ansell and Torfing 2021b; Torfing et al. 2023). The underlying rationale is that involving them as early and as deeply as possible in the policy process can ensure that public policy and service provision are more deeply anchored in society (Torfing et al. 2021; Van Gestel et al. 2023).

Co-creation in public governance has been defined as, “a process through which two or more public and private actors attempt to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task through a constructive exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences, and ideas that enhance the production of public value in terms of visions, plans, policies, strategies, regulatory frameworks, or services, either through a continuous improvement of outputs or outcomes or through innovative step-changes that transform the understanding of the problem or task at hand and lead to new ways of solving it” (Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019, p. 802). Although

this definition is rather broad, the literature has distinguished co-creation from other forms of collaboration. It differs from corporatism, which refers to associations between peak-level interest groups only, and from collaborative governance, in which public administration co-decides with affected third parties on specific projects without developing shared partnerships for solutions (Ansell and Torfing 2021b). At the same time, it is also distinct from the co-production of services, where citizens work closely with public administration in the delivery of specific public services, yet without developing visions through shared planning (Ansell and Torfing 2021a). In our understanding, co-creation entails a direct involvement of citizens alongside other actors. In contrast to deliberation, which may also entail debates about broader principles, co-creation seeks to produce shared expertise and solutions to solve a specific problem.

Defined this way, the idea of co-creation implies that citizens, citizen organizations, businesses, and experts jointly define the problem to be addressed and implement effective solutions that generate additional public value, thereby strengthening output legitimacy. At the same time, co-creation scholars have held that such an approach may also enhance democracy by reinforcing input legitimacy through participatory arrangements, for example in local partnerships (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2023; Ansell and Torfing 2021b). Against this background, co-creation provides a useful entry point for researchers and practitioners to rethink the democratic quality of MLG. Notably, it helps foreground two things that are important here. On the one hand, co-creation allows for the conceptualization of the horizontal dimension of MLG by exploring new ways in which non-state actors can be more meaningfully included in decision-making processes (Alcantara, Broschek, and Nelles 2016; Alcantara and Nelles 2014). On the other hand, as understood in the literature cited above, it aspires to go beyond the mere consultation of selected stakeholders. Instead, it points to a process of partnership in which authorities take

seriously the contributions of citizens and other stakeholders to the design and implementation of public policies and other authoritative decisions.

4. Co-creation in different types of MLG

Although co-creation can be considered a promising avenue to capture and design interactions that are part of the horizontal dimension of MLG, its potential is likely to vary. It is therefore useful to conduct a comparison of the ability to reinforce horizontal coordination in the context of different types of jurisdictions that are central to MLG architectures. For this purpose, we draw on the distinction made by Hooghe and Marks, who have disentangled MLG in two distinct types of jurisdictions: Type 1 and Type 2 (Hooghe and Marks 2003). Type 1 jurisdictions are general-purpose. They have non-intersecting memberships, a limited number of levels, and a system-wide architecture. This is the typical formal multi-level arrangement involving governmental authorities across jurisdictional levels. Type 2 jurisdictions, by contrast, are task-specific. They allow for intersecting memberships, have no limit on the number of jurisdiction levels, and are flexible by design (Hooghe and Marks 2003, 236). Examples include jurisdictions that govern specific problems such as shared services between different municipalities, or cross-border governance arrangements that bring different jurisdictions together to address specific policy problems.

Based on this categorisation, the comparison presented in Table 1 situates co-creation within the institutional setting of MLG and maps the ways it contributes to the inclusion of non-state actors and citizens in the design, decision-making, and implementation of public policies and public services across the defined jurisdictional models. The developed comparison, in

particular, highlights the extent and form of their inclusion and the decision-making possibilities available to them, as well as the impact of co-creation arrangements on the effectiveness and legitimacy of public policies. It also introduces a distinction between jurisdiction spaces and problem spaces by drawing on the notion of functional regulatory spaces. This notion takes into account that certain types of contemporary societal challenges, such as the optimal management of natural resources, climate extremes, and wider social and economic problems, cannot be adequately addressed within existing jurisdictional boundaries alone and therefore require responses that cut across regions, national borders, and policy sectors (Varone et al. 2013). All these elements are unpacked further in the sections that follow.

Table 1: Multilevel governance and co-creation

	Type I jurisdictions	Type II jurisdictions
<i>Definition</i>	General-purpose jurisdictions Nonintersecting memberships Limited number of jurisdictional levels Systemwide architecture	Task-specific jurisdictions Intersecting memberships No limit to the number of jurisdictional levels Flexible design
<i>Including non-state actors and citizens</i>	Constrained in existing architectures Power differences are inflexible	Jurisdictional design can be flexibly adapted Adjustment for power differences possible
<i>Deciding with non-state actors and citizens</i>	According to existing procedures Competition between issues	Procedures can be adjusted Limited issue competition
<i>Effectiveness</i>	Solutions are limited to existing jurisdictions Mismatches between jurisdiction and problem spaces	Solutions can be adjusted to problem spaces Match of jurisdictions and problem spaces
<i>Legitimacy</i>	Co-creation in the shadow of negotiation and voting	Co-creation can be fully included in decision-making

4.1 Co-creation and general-purpose jurisdictions (MLG Type 1)

As regards Type 1 jurisdictions, co-creation may allow for the inclusion of non-state actors and citizens, but only within the constraints of existing architectures of jurisdictional design. In practice, this means that, intergovernmental negotiations, for instance, may open up to affected parties, such as different types of interest groups (Varone and Eichenberger 2023), firms, and perhaps even individual citizens. Yet, the underlying power differences in such contexts remain rather inflexible. In other words, the design of policy solutions and the decision-making process are likely to be constrained by existing institutional rules and asymmetries. Taking intergovernmental councils as an example, even though there might be a horizontal opening to include other actors (e.g., in the form of roundtables), decisions will still be taken according to council rules, and the executive officials are likely to retain the final say. Decision-making thus continues to follow established procedures — whether according to existing rules of bargaining and negotiations, for example between governments, or through majority voting (Benz 2013; Scharpf 1997a).

Another important aspect for decision-making is the obvious competition between policy issues (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019). This means that, in practice, the space left for decision-making following brainstorming sessions with non-state actors may be limited, because — taking the case of the intergovernmental councils again — the official decision-makers may also have to take into account other issues beyond the one on which co-creation is practiced. Moreover, even if co-creation were not toothless, solutions would remain limited within the confines of existing jurisdictions, with a risk of reducing their effectiveness, as there might be a mismatch between jurisdictional spaces and problem spaces. In sum, the potential of co-creation in the context of Type 1 jurisdictions may therefore be limited by design, and this is particularly problematic if the problem space cuts across jurisdictional boundaries.

In this context, it is noteworthy that a recent literature review has found that the jurisdiction most often invoked in the co-creation scholarship is the local level (Marjanović et al., 2025). It is the level of governance that, in many cases, naturally comes to mind when reflecting on the pertinent problem space to address practical issues according to a subsidiarity logic. However, when dealing with multi-level governance, one must scrutinize how co-creation “scales up”, an issue that is only tangentially addressed in the literature (Ansell and Torfing 2015). Moreover, even at the local level, co-creation requires the design of platforms and arenas — such as the creation of *ad hoc* committees — that can engage in such activities, raising the important issue of who decides about the format, competences, and membership of such new policy sites (Ansell and Torfing 2021b, Chapter 4). Usually, “meta-governance” remains in the hands of politicians and administrators.

Looking then at the legitimacy of the decisions taken, there is a high risk that the co-creation process will remain marginal or vanish in the shadow of bargaining, negotiations, and eventually voting. Any decision that is put before a parliamentary body will be subject to compromises in many cases, and it will be difficult to realize true co-decision between involved citizens, affected parties, and elites. This problem is well known from research on participatory democracy, where scholars warn that participatory exercises may raise too high expectations amongst citizens regarding their impact, while elites may just consider them as symbolic exercises (Fernández-Martínez, García-Espín, and Jiménez-Sánchez 2020; Flinders and Dommett 2013; Hanson 2018; Loisel and Rio 2024).

4.2 Co-creation and task-specific jurisdictions (MLG Type 2)

In the second part of the analysis, we turn to the integration of co-creation into task-specific jurisdictions. The flexible design of the jurisdiction can be adapted to include non-state actors and citizens more meaningfully into the decision-making process. It is also possible, in principle, to adjust more easily for power differences between participating actors compared to Type I jurisdictions. This does, of course, require the political will to include external actors in the political process. Nevertheless, the flexible design of such jurisdictions creates more possibilities than in the context of general-purpose jurisdictions that are often established by constitutional provisions. Take, for example, collaboration between municipalities for the provision of a specific service: the establishment of such entities that transcend formal jurisdictional boundaries, and the inclusion of citizens and non-state actors in them as well as in the process of designing service collaborations, is easier to achieve than reforming an entire general-purpose jurisdiction, which cannot be modified in the same way. This is visible, for instance, in environmental governance, where intermunicipal bodies such as watershed organisations, water and catchment councils, and river basin boards are often created specifically to coordinate across jurisdictions while ensuring the representation of diverse stakeholders (Medema et al. 2017).

The same applies to the co-decision versus consultation dimension. For Type II jurisdictions, it is, in principle, easier to include non-state actors in decision-making and open the governance process to co-creation and collaboration, all the more so because issue competition is more limited. In these settings, policy actors such as legislative or executive politicians are far less likely to have to decide about policy problems while simultaneously having to balance many competing issues. For example, jurisdictions that only focus on coordinating school services

across municipal borders do not have to contend with unrelated issues such as economic development.

Regarding the effectiveness of co-creation, Type II jurisdictions enable solutions to be tailored to specific problem spaces. Their flexible design allows collaborative arrangements, which include non-state actors and citizens, to bring together a range of jurisdictions necessary to address a given problem. Take flood management as an example: a Type II jurisdiction dealing with both flood prevention and the distribution of costs across borders may be well positioned to produce effective solutions. In this context, co-creation can be more plausibly placed at the core of decision-making rather than focusing solely on consultation, thereby rendering decisions more legitimate.

From this perspective, Type II jurisdictions appear more conducive to implementing co-creation as defined above, since they are problem-driven, allow solutions to be adapted to the problem space, and offer meaningful opportunities for the genuine inclusion of non-state actors and citizens. Their main downside, however, is that they are often less visible to outsiders than the established type I jurisdictions, which may make it more difficult for the public to hold their members accountable for the decisions that they take within such constructs. Moreover, such forms of co-creation are, to some extent, likely to remain in the shadow of other decision-making institutions tied to Type I jurisdictions. For example, collaborations across jurisdictions on specific problems will inevitably require the approval of the governments and parliaments of the participating regions and countries. We develop this point further in the following section.

5. Multilevel governance as polycentric democracy

Against this background, we can now argue how co-creation may contribute to the democratization of MLG. To do so, we build on the notion of polycentric governance, which highlights the importance of having multiple centers of decision-making for addressing complex problems, such as the management of natural resources (Carlisle and Gruby 2019; Ostrom 2010). We extend this insight to the design of democracy and argue that wherever governance incorporates co-creation, it takes the form of what we call polycentric democracy.

Polycentric democracy, as we understand it, has four main qualities. First, it is both problem-oriented and space-oriented as it seeks to align decision-making arrangements with the specific configuration of the issue at hand. Second, it functions as a form of second-order democracy, operating within and in the shadow of representative democracy without replacing it. Third, it is mostly situated at the local or regional level where opportunities for participation, coordination, and problem-solving are often more visible and immediate. Finally, it requires strong boundary-spanning capacities since actors must be able to work across jurisdictions, sectors, and institutional settings.

5.1 Problem- and space-oriented

Regarding the first dimension, problem-orientation means that co-creation is often tied to a specific problem, such as environmental protection or public security. Indeed, many documented examples of co-creation are organized around specific problems rather than general models of governance (Marjanovic et al. 2025). In the context of MLG, this suggests that co-creation may follow a problem-space logic by creating decision-making procedures that

govern issues across Type I jurisdictions in a way that is functionally equivalent to task-specific jurisdictions. Put differently, this form of collaboration should focus on the concrete spatial reach of the problem itself, which may span across different types of jurisdictions and thus require regulation beyond a single territorial unit (Varone et al. 2013). For example, co-creation can be exercised in cross-border regions or across municipalities that are concerned with the design of an airport that affects a wider cross-border area.

We are aware that this argument appears rather prescriptive. As already mentioned, empirical research shows that co-creation currently happens mainly at the local level, where decision-makers are most directly confronted with concrete problems (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2022; Marjanovic et al. 2025). However, from a polycentric democracy perspective that incorporates MLG, co-creation should not remain solely at the local scale but must be considered across jurisdictions wherever possible.

5.2 Second-order democracy

Co-creation is often presented as a way to democratize policymaking, make public administration more user-friendly, and complement representative institutions (Ackerman 2004; Turnhout et al. 2020; Ansell and Torfing 2021a). Some studies, for instance, suggest that citizens tend to view mini-publics as supplements to representative democracy rather than substitutes for it (Goldberg et al., 2025). In a similar vein, “collaborative representative democracy” has been theorised as a hybrid in which co-creation arenas and elected representatives mutually reinforce each other (Sørensen and Torfing, 2019).

This broader context is important to take into consideration given that co-creation processes are coupled with the existing institutions of representative democracy. We argue that co-creation is therefore best understood as a form of second-order democracy. In research on electoral behavior, second-order elections — such as European or regional elections — are characterized by the fact that voters behave differently than in first-order elections: they are more likely to vote for protest parties and less strategically, which means that the results differ from first-order elections, such as those held at the national level (Bartels 2023; Reif and Schmitt 1980). By analogy, if co-creation in MLG constitutes a second-order form of democracy within a broader context of polycentric democracy, we then must acknowledge that its democratic basis no longer relies on electoral competition to generate input legitimacy. Instead, it rests on extensive collaboration processes aimed at producing results that generate output legitimacy.

Its coupling with representative democracy manifests itself, however, in the fact that governments usually remain in control of the design of co-creation platforms and arenas, and that these sites often operate under parliamentary oversight (Ansell and Torfing 2021b). To avoid the suffocation of co-creation by the state and to ensure its political impact at the same time, it is necessary to strike a balance between its tight coupling with the mechanisms of representative democracy and a certain degree of autonomy from them. However, although warranted, such a “loose coupling” (Benz, 2019) is often difficult to achieve.

5.3 Situated at the local and regional levels

As polycentric democracy is likely to be anchored at the local and regional levels, it is important to ensure that processes of co-creation are tailored to the scale of specific problems and their corresponding problem spaces. This in turn points to an important role for regional and

representative institutions. For example, a recent book by Ansell et al. (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2022) on implementing co-creation for sustainable transitions suggests that the local level plays an important role in this regard, not least because most documented cases of co-creation are situated at this scale as previously emphasized (Marjanovic et al. 2025).

This argument is further reinforced by the theoretical arguments we have presented above. While it is, in principle, plausible to suggest that co-creation can deepen democracy and multi-level governance by expanding the inclusion of actors horizontally and vertically, such an expansion, in practice, also leads to significant constraints on the ability to identify and jointly decide on shared solutions that make a meaningful difference (Ansell and Torfing 2015; Johnston et al. 2011; Schalk 2017). For this reason, if polycentric democracy through co-creation is to develop across problem spaces, it is likely to rely primarily on horizontal coordination — both between different jurisdictions at the same level (Piattoni 2016), and between public and non-state actors (Piattoni 2010) — while vertical coordination takes a back seat. For this to happen, there should be space for new democratic forms and participatory experiences to emerge within and across existing Type I jurisdictions that are governed by representative bodies and subject to majority rule.

5.4 Boundary-spanning capacity

Finally, an important dimension to consider in polycentric democracy is the need to develop boundary-spanning capacities. Here, it is useful to draw on the literature on policy integration and multilevel policy regimes, which emphasizes that effective coordination requires policy actors, state and non-state, to work together across their areas of jurisdiction and have the ability to span such boundaries (Cejudo and Trein 2023; Jochim and May 2010). The goal is to not

only to ensure that different jurisdictions are coordinated but also to align distinct efforts towards co-creation across problem spaces. Such coordination problems are not new and are well known in the MLG literature (Hooghe and Marks 2003). However, in the case of polycentric democracy, the coordination is not merely about aligning the preferences of organizations, but also involves ensuring more fundamentally that different forms of co-creation do not work at cross purposes or produce contradictory outcomes.

Boundary-spanning capacities can develop in different ways. This brokerage function can be taken on by actors of different nature: public agencies, NGOs, entrepreneurial organizations, or bodies that represent co-creation platforms and arenas across a given jurisdiction, such as an organization that represents a task-specific jurisdiction that brings together different regions around a co-creation process, for example regarding infrastructure planning. These boundary-spanning organizations may be reinforced by digital platforms that provide the connective infrastructure between governance levels and create spaces for interaction. Such platforms can be used to translate between professional and lay vocabularies, tighten feedback loops, allow co-created knowledge and priorities to travel across scales, and link strategic objectives at the top with everyday practices on the ground (Cash et al. 2006; Armitage et al. 2012; Linders 2012; Cvitanovic et al. 2015; Clark et al. 2016; Lee-Geiller and Lee 2019; Kirimtata et al. 2020). However, notwithstanding the technical facilitators that can enhance boundary-spanning capacities, those performing such a brokerage function must themselves be seen as legitimate to do so.

6. Implementing co-creation in MLG: tensions and challenges

In the previous sections we have already pointed out to some difficulties that co-creation may face, such as coordination problems, accountability issues, the trade-off between inclusion and decision-making capacity, the uneasy coupling of co-creation with representative democracy, or challenges that are particular to different types of MLG. In this section, we systematically pass under review the major tensions that can constrain the potential of co-creation when applied to MLG. Indeed, several features of MLG that create demand for co-creation also generate tensions that can make its promises more difficult to realise in practice. In other words, while co-creation may help address some of the democratic and problem-solving weaknesses of MLG, its contribution is neither guaranteed nor uniform across settings and policy fields.

This limitation is reinforced by the fact that co-creation literature often obscures the underlying tensions due to its strongly normative orientation and optimism bias, as well as a tendency to depoliticize governance issues (Voorberg et al. 2015; Vike et al. 2025). Namely, co-creation is often framed as a win-win route to legitimacy, innovation, and efficiency, echoing broader narratives of “good” or “robust” governance (Torfing et al. 2021; Scognamiglio et al. 2023), while underlying structural and political obstacles are downplayed and reframed as matters of facilitation, leadership, or better process design (Voorberg et al. 2015; Vike et al. 2025). Yet, multi-level politics is saturated with distributional conflict, bargaining, and strategic behaviour. Even so, co-creation scholarship has paid limited empirical attention to disagreement, resistance, and bargaining dynamics (Laamanen and Skålen 2015; Williams et al. 2020; Felt et al. 2023), often treating conflict as a design flaw rather than a feature inherent to democratic

politics (Laamanen and Skálén 2015; Ansell and Torfing 2021b). This framing is particularly problematic in MLG because it can obscure how co-creation may reallocate power and voice rather than simply “improve” governance (Nabatchi et al. 2017; Bammer 2019; Trischler and Charles 2019; Turnhout et al. 2020; Cousins 2021; Leino and Puumala 2021; Messiha et al. 2023).

On the MLG side, the core problem is that the institutional structure of MLG often separates sites of participation from sites of authoritative decision-making, resulting in recurring tensions. The first tension is related to the implementation trap. As we have seen, co-creation is most practised at lower tiers of government, while decisive authority over mandates, resources, and legal competences often sits upstream. The result can be a mismatch between where participation happens and where binding decisions are made. Even when local arenas host meaningful democratic experimentation (Hambleton 2019; de Jong et al. 2019; Leino and Puumala 2021; Hofstad et al. 2023), co-creation can remain confined to downstream delivery, with limited influence on agenda-setting and decision-making at higher tiers (Zhelyazkova et al. 2024; Torfing et al. 2025). This tension is heightened in EU-influenced governance contexts where legal and administrative provisions can constrain the room for meaningful citizen input beyond formal consultation (Zhelyazkova et al. 2024). Co-creation may thus create participatory expectations that are not matched by corresponding shifts in authoritative decision-making, especially where higher-level mandates and institutional constraints remain unchanged (Vike et al. 2025).

A second tension concerns power asymmetries and strategic venue dynamics. Open, multi-actor platforms can widen participation, but they also create opportunities for venue shopping, where

well-resourced or strategically skilled actors steer deliberation towards arenas that favour their interests (Ansell and Gash 2008; Ansell et al. 2025). In MLG, this risk is amplified because boundary-spanning actors can play “two-level games”, using cross-tier access to gatekeep participation or dominate agenda-setting. While elites acting as boundary spanners can contribute to multi-level democracy (Benz 2024), that potential is double-edged since political and policy entrepreneurs may also replicate hierarchies and selectively translate participatory inputs into higher-level policy (Herweg et al. 2015; Trein 2022). Relatedly, inequalities in who participates, whose knowledge is considered legitimate and relevant, and who benefits remain persistent (Lennon et al. 2019; Zafra-Calvo et al. 2020; Leino and Puumala, 2021). Participatory arenas often reproduce rather than neutralise asymmetries between political institutions and civil society actors, especially those who are excluded, marginalised, or drawn in on terms set by powerful public actors, particularly in implementation phases (Turnhout et al. 2020; Vike et al. 2025). In multilevel settings, these asymmetries may be further reinforced by uneven institutional capacities, and the fragility of co-creation demands and commitments under political, fiscal, and administrative pressure (Vike et al. 2025).

A third tension concerns the trade-off between standardisation and sensitivity to local context when co-creation is scaled across governance levels. We have noted that co-creation often works because it is place-based and problem-specific, but also that MLG frequently demands coordination, comparability, and transferability across jurisdictions. As co-created pilots diffuse, they may require templates, metrics, and procedural rules that strip away contextual nuance, undermining the very features that made them effective (Nevens et al. 2013; Voytenko et al. 2016; Ansell and Torfing 2018; Cousins 2021). Conversely, without credible vertical pathways, co-created innovations remain isolated local projects that never shape upstream policy decisions.

A fourth tension stems from digitalisation and data governance in cross-level co-creation. Digital platforms may widen participation and enable upward flows of citizen-generated data, but they can also reproduce inequalities, exclude non-digital publics, and recentralise control in platform owners or central agencies (Bonsón et al. 2015; Lee-Geiller and Lee 2019; Pauluzzo et al. 2024). In MLG contexts, these risks become key governance problems. Questions about who controls interfaces, standards, algorithms, and data stewardship, and how these forms of control shape which voices are heard across governance levels, are central to whether platforms support genuinely democratic linkage or reduce participation to data extraction.

Taken together, these tensions suggest that co-creation cannot simply be “scaled up” by adding an MLG layer, nor can it be recommended as a general governance remedy. Rather, the MLG dimension changes the stakes by introducing cross-level mismatches of authority and participation, amplifying strategic behaviour and unequal capacities, and making knowledge diffusion and standard-setting both more necessary and more politically fraught (Ansell and Gash 2008; Voorberg et al. 2015; Zhelyazkova et al. 2024; Benz 2024; Ansell et al. 2025).

7. Conclusion

Despite being a constitutive element of the most recent definitions of MLG, the horizontal dimension thereof has not received sufficient consideration so far. In this paper, we sought to remedy this gap by examining whether *co-creation* can strengthen this aspect of MLG, by making political decisions more effective and legitimate. We first rely on insights for MLG from the literature on policy coordination that emphasize the role of two key dimensions in

actors' interactions: scope and depth. When referring to horizontal coordination among public and private actors, scope denotes the increasingly complex and inclusive decision-making systems. Depth, by contrast, concerns whether coordination of actors' behavior just involves mutual consultation and information sharing, or modes that genuinely approximate shared decision-making. Trade-offs seem unavoidable: while involving more actors can enhance inclusiveness, it often makes it harder to reach effective binding decisions. This can lead to challenges such as increased complexity, reduced policy effectiveness, and accountability issues.

We then proceed to spell out the contribution of the notion of co-creation to the description of the horizontal dimension of MLG. Co-creation has emerged as an important concept in public governance, referring to collaborative processes where public and non-state actors jointly define the problems to be addressed and develop solutions in common. Co-creation is precisely expected to improve governance by enhancing both the input and output legitimacy of authoritative decisions. Therefore, the concept can be used as a benchmark to assess existing interactions and partnerships between public and non-state actors in MLG.

In this context, we claim that the potential and the difficulties of co-creation depend on the type of MLG arrangements, most notably between general-purpose (Type 1) and task-specific (Type 2) jurisdictions. In Type 1 jurisdictions, the impact of co-creation is constrained by existing institutional structures. The design and control of participatory arenas, as well as decision-making authority, usually remain in the hands of traditional actors such as ministers or government leaders. Established rules continue to guide outcomes, and competing policy priorities limit the influence of co-created solutions. As a result, co-creation may raise

expectations among participants without substantially influencing final decisions. In addition, while co-creation is often associated with the local level, scaling it up in multi-level systems remains challenging.

In comparison, type 2 jurisdictions offer more favorable conditions for co-creation thanks to their flexibility and problem-oriented design. They allow for more meaningful inclusion of non-state actors and citizens, as well as greater potential to enable genuine co-decision rather than mere consultation. Because these jurisdictions focus on specific issues, they face less competition between policy priorities, making collaborative decision-making more effective. This also allows solutions to better match the problem space, enhancing both effectiveness and legitimacy. However, Type 2 jurisdictions tend to be less visible and their members less accountable to the public for their participation. Besides, their decisions usually depend on approval from traditional representative institutions, being therefore also constrained by existing governance structures.

As a way forward, we suggest that thinking in terms of what we refer to as “polycentric democracy” is useful for fully realizing the democratizing potential of co-creation in multilevel contexts. In our conceptualization, polycentric democracy represents a hybrid in which co-creation arenas and the formal representative institutions co-exist and interact in forms of “loose coupling.” Although the executive and the bureaucratic apparatus usually control the design of co-creation arenas, and the latter operate under the scrutiny of legislative assemblies, co-creation spaces could still have sufficient room for maneuver. In addition, polycentric democracy also has a problem orientation, so that co-creation — a core element thereof — is tied to specific problems that need to be addressed. It is, likewise, more likely to operate at the

local or regional level, as we have seen from the co-creation scholarship. Moreover, as we learn from the literature on policy integration, polycentric democracy requires the development of boundary-spanning capacities to ensure that different jurisdictions are coordinated and that co-creation processes across problem spaces aligned. While different kinds of brokers can achieve this “bridging” function, they nonetheless must be legitimized to perform such a role.

Finally, we would not like to leave the impression to the reader that we uncritically consider co-creation as a universal remedy whose application would necessarily make MLG more effective and legitimate. Therefore, we spotted four core tensions that tend to be neglected by the literature on co-creation, which is often subject to normative, overly optimistic, and depoliticizing tendencies. The core tensions include deficits in the implementation process, the role of power asymmetries and strategic behavior, trade-offs between sensitivity to local specificities and potentially legitimate quests for the standardized treatment of target-populations of public policies, and increasingly the ambivalent contribution of digitalization.

We would therefore like to conclude by arguing that a research agenda is needed, one that treats co-creation in MLG not as inherently beneficial, but as a contested and structured set of practices whose effects depend on how voice, knowledge, and authority are organized across levels. For lack of space, we cannot elaborate here on the many directions of such a future-oriented agenda, however we can point out some core topics. Firstly, the study of how co-creation takes place (or can unfold) in the different sequences of the policy process, from agenda-setting and problem framing to implementation on the ground and policy feedback. Secondly, the scrutiny of multi-level dynamics through which locally co-produced outputs inform (or not) policy-making at higher decisional levels, and the other way round. Thirdly,

comparative research beyond the “usual suspects” — the local level, urban governance, environmental and planning issues — that meaningfully accounts for differences across countries and policy sectors. Fourth, a focus on the constraints and opportunities that boundary-spanning actors, who play a crucial role in co-creation within MLG settings, face, cope and play with.

These reflections suggest that the key question is not whether co-creation should be added to MLG, but under what institutional and political conditions it can meaningfully reshape its horizontal dimension. Future research should therefore move beyond treating co-creation as a self-evident source of inclusion and legitimacy and instead examine how it is structured across jurisdictions, policy stages, and problem spaces, how its outputs travel between local arenas and higher levels of decision-making, and how far they are able to influence authoritative outcomes once they encounter existing hierarchies, competing priorities, and uneven power relations. Such an agenda would also need to look more closely at the actors and organizations that connect governance levels and mediate between formal institutions and co-creative arenas, since their capacity to translate, align, and legitimize action may be crucial to whether co-creation enhances the effectiveness and legitimacy of MLG or remains largely consultative and symbolic.

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