

Structure, agency and local climate governance: how do individual actors exploit local contexts to shape policymaking in smaller cities and towns?

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Overview

- Introduction
- Structure and agency in local climate governance
- Research puzzle and method
- Findings
- Hypotheses of structure-agency interactions
- Questions and discussion

Some structural conditions support progressive local climate policy...

- High internal capacities for action (Sharp et al. 2011; Homsy 2018; Kern 2019; Haupt et al. 2020)
- Support from higher tiers of government (Eckersley 2018; Haupt et al. 2021)
- Favourable socio-demographic, socio-economic, and political conditions, e.g.
 - a growing, young and above-average educated and skilled population (Zahran et al. 2008; Bedsworth & Hanak 2013; Kern 2020)
 - favourable economic conditions such as high salaries (Zahran et al. 2008; Bedsworth & Hanak 2013; Kern 2020)
 - political influence of green or alternative parties (Mann et al. 2014; Homsy 2018)
 - a strong civil society (Hoppe et al. 2016; Homsy 2018; Kern 2019), particularly environmental groups (Zahran et al. 2008; Sharp et al. 2011)



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How do local factors shape transformation pathways towards climate-neutral and resilient cities?

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...but we shouldn't discount agency

- Some 'unusual suspects' and 'ordinary cities' are still quite ambitious pioneers (Homsy 2018; Wurzel et al 2019; Haupt and Kern 2021; Haupt et al 2021)
- This is often due to active politicians and/or senior local government officers (Corcaci and Kemmerzell, 2023; Fenton, 2016; Hörter et al. 2018)
- The broader literature emphasises the role of individual policy entrepreneurs and powerful actors in effecting change
- Agency as “having the resources, capacity and ability to pursue an autonomous path” (Ortner 2006)
- Following Giddens (1979; 1983), the actions of these individuals will be influenced – but not determined – by their wider contexts. They could contribute towards more progressive or more regressive policy
- How they seek to negotiate or exploit their local conditions could prove insightful for the policymaking literature
- We might expect individuals to be particularly influential in smaller organisations (Cairney 2018; Eckersley and Lakoma 2022), which are also under-researched in climate policy

Research puzzle and methods

- How do different local conditions influence how municipal climate managers negotiate climate policymaking processes?
- How might these individuals seek to exploit these conditions to pursue more progressive policy?
- Qualitative study of 11 towns in Germany with varying local conditions
- 19 interviews with climate managers and civil society representatives, complemented by document analysis
- Each town has fewer than 100,000 inhabitants (ranging from 49,500 in Emden to 91.000 in Gera).



	Socioeconomic factors			Demographics			Political factors	
Town	Primary income (2019)	Employed in the service sector (2019)	Unemployment (2021)	Population trend (1992-2019)	Average age (2020)	Share of students (2022)	Share of green parties (last election)	Share of right-wing populist parties (last election)
<i>Konstanz</i>	32.370 € ⁴	85,5%	4,5%	14%	42	19%	31,8%	not represented in council
<i>Kempten</i>	28.378 €	82,3%	3,8%	11%	44,2	8%	30,0%	6,8%
<i>Elmshorn</i>	32.071 € ⁴	72,5% ⁴	6,3%	5%	43,4	5%	18,3%	not represented in council
<i>Worms</i>	26.265 €	75,5%	8,2%	7%	43,6	4%	16,0%	10,8%
<i>Arnsberg</i>	30.009 € ⁴	63,1%	6,4%	-3%	45,4	0%	14,2%	4,2%
<i>Emden</i>	22.884 €	65,4%	8,5%	-3%	43,9	8%	14,2%	not represented in council
<i>Neumünster</i>	22.176 €	80,9%	8,7%	-2%	44,8	0%	16,4%	3,9%
<i>Stralsund</i>	20.595 € ⁴	no data	11,0%	-18%	47,2	4%	15,0%	13,9%
<i>Neubrandenburg</i>	20.605 € ⁴	83,3%	8,7%	-27%	47,4	3%	11,2%	16,8%
<i>Görlitz</i>	18.603 € ⁴	74,7%	11,6%	-19%	47,8	3%	7,6%	30,8%
<i>Gera</i>	19.628 €	66,6%	7,9%	-28%	49,2	2%	6,7%	28,8%
<i>National average</i>	29.176 €	74,6%	5,7%	3%	44,6	3%	15,0%	10,4%
	52.782 €		14,8%	41%	65,3		33,4%	28,1%
	18.326 €		1,9%	-38%	27,9		5,1%	5,3%

Findings

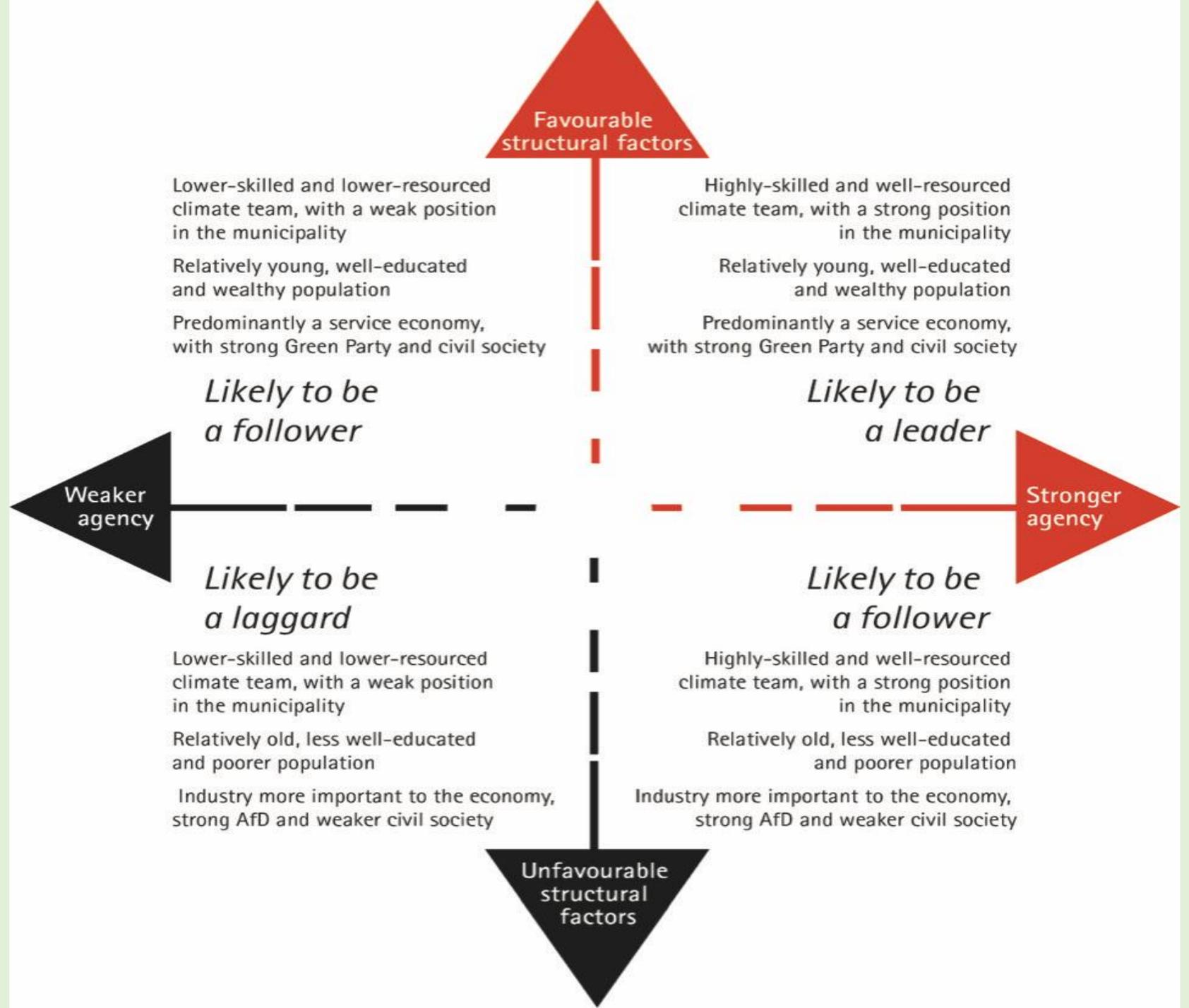
- Socioeconomic factors:
 - Favourable - more funds can be raised locally for climate action, less need for inventive managers
 - Unfavourable - more reliant on responding to conditions of external grants and keener to collaborate with local universities. Climate protection sometimes framed as economic development through low-carbon industries (Emden)
- Demographic factors:
 - Favourable - support from local students and active civil society
 - Unfavourable - more focus on adaptation than mitigation (particularly in places in older populations)
- Political factors:
 - Favourable - Green parties push for more mitigation policies
 - Unfavourable - greater focus on adaptation, though not framed as such (e.g. 'greening' in Stralsund); mitigation announcements sometimes symbolic (Görlitz')
- *Climate risk factors:
 - Higher risk - some climate managers drew on collective memories of severe weather events to push adaptation (Arnsberg, Gera, Elmshorn, Worms)
 - Lower risk - some concern that this might divert resources away from mitigation (Konstanz)

	Structural conditions	Agents' strategies
Konstanz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political consensus on the importance of climate action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with civic actors Try to raise awareness among disadvantaged groups
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political support for climate action Strong, institutionalised ties between administrative, political, and civic actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek to ensure that political objectives and narratives are underpinned with policies and monitoring systems
Worms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly vulnerable to heat and heavy rain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on climate adaptation plans, policies and networks
Elmshorn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly vulnerable to flooding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on flooding to gain political support and funding for climate adaptation staff and policies
Arnsberg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many energy-intensive SMEs with ambitious climate goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build networks with private firms and chamber of commerce to foster collaboration
Emden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on economic development framed as sustainable development (e.g. renewable energy projects) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasise environmental costs of economic development, seek to make projects substantially more sustainable
Stralsund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conservative council and mayor with little political support for climate action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid the term 'climate', focus on 'urban green' instead
Neumünster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political support but little civic engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote administrative action to raise awareness and make their practices visible
Görlitz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing political support, but strong right-wing party 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on energy transition
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Former industrial town with population decline and high unemployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek advice through a quality management and awarding system (eea) for municipalities
Gera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little political support, strong right-wing party 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pursue limited, uncontroversial policies to raise awareness
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unfavourable socioeconomic conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use external funding as an incentive to overcome resistance in other departments
Neubrandenburg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited municipal funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate closely with PhD students to support municipal plans
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private firms are threatening to leave if the share of renewable energy does not increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frame renewable energies as necessary for economic development (e.g. due to reducing dependence on foreign fossil resources).

Conclusions and reflections

- Structure is crucial in local climate policymaking, but how agents seek to negotiate local contexts might be equally important
- Difficult to measure or control for skills and competences of individual agents:
 - Knowledge (technical solutions)
 - Knowledge (policy process/administrative context)
 - Leadership
 - Communication
 - Conflict handling
 - Charisma/persuasion
- This makes calibrating agency and structure tricky!
- Researching struggling places can also be very difficult. There are few (if any) potential interview partners, policy documents, media reports and civil society actors. There is also less to find out, write about and publish!

But we still set out some hypotheses around structure/agency and local climate policy...



Questions

