

Cutting Off the Respirator: Aspiring Autocrats and Subnational Autonomy

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has argued that when countries face democratic erosion at the hands of aspiring autocrats, one of the most important bulwarks against backsliding is local government. However, the degree to which resilience can manifest at the subnational level depends on the ability of local officials to effectively use fiscal resources, in order to convince voters of their competence and build their power. I argue that aspiring autocrats target local revenue independence, reducing the autonomy of their opponents while increasing the resources at the disposal of their allies. I focus on the case of democratic erosion in Poland (2015-2023), presenting extensive descriptive evidence of horizontal reductions in local autonomy, but also of potential avenues for selective attacks on opposition municipalities. Using a novel dataset of municipal finances and electoral results, I conduct a close elections regression discontinuity design. I find that electing a mayor aligned with the aspiring autocrat governing party has a significant positive effect on municipal fiscal autonomy. This paper contributes to the literature on democratic resilience, but also to the wider literature on fiscal decentralization and local government autonomy, by establishing how aspiring autocrats take advantage of subnational fiscal policy to erode democracy.

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Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to a rapid wave of democratization, with many previously autocratic states developing pluralist institutional structures. This trend has all but reversed. The foundations set by the third wave are rapidly eroding at the hands of antipluralist, aspiring autocratic parties. These are parties that, after being elected in (typically) free and fair contested elections, execute a national strategy of weakening checks and balances, asserting control over oversight mechanisms, and rapidly increasing the power of the executive state (Haggard and Kaufman 2021b; Svoboda et al. 2023; Svoboda 2019). Such parties target the core constitutive elements of democracy, which Haggard and Kaufman (2021a) define as the existence of free and fair elections, the protection of basic political rights and liberties, and enforcement of the rule of law with regards to executive power.

In this context, democracy-supporting opposition parties often find themselves fighting on multiple fronts, attempting to preserve their ability to contest elections while also protecting their constituents from autocratic attacks. This often occurs during times of extreme fragmentation and polarization of the opposition block, making such efforts even harder to coordinate and execute (Merkel and Lüthmann 2021; Haggard and Kaufman 2021b). At the local level, however, circumstances are often more favorable. Through their access to the resources of subnational office, opposition parties can protect their constituents, promote their agenda, mobilize their supporters, and demonstrate their competence in public goods provision (Freeman and Perelló 2022; Farole 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that recent scholarship has been increasingly noting local aspects of democratic erosion and resistance (Jakli and Stenberg 2021; Grumbach 2022; O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022). However, while there have been some attempts to explore the subnational components of aspiring autocrat strategies (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022; Jakli and Stenberg 2021), there has been very little attention given to how such parties respond to local opposition. My paper contributes by analyzing the ways in which aspiring autocrats try to eradicate subnational resilience.

Specifically, I argue that aspiring autocrats selectively reduce subnational fiscal autonomy

in order to maximize their control over fiscal resources, while limiting the capacity of the opposition. In other words, they limit the right and ability of subnational jurisdictions to raise and allocate their own revenues in pursuit of either autonomous projects, or mandated competencies. Aspiring autocrats in government stand to gain from this strategy in two ways. First, control over resources formerly allocated to localities can either be re-allocated in a way favorable to government-aligned local elites and punitive to opposition localities, or be used as part of a broader strategy of buying off national economic interests (Kelemen 2017; Aspinall et al. 2020). Second, reductions in local autonomy remove the ability of subnational opposition officials to use their position as a staging ground for threatening the central government (Freeman and Perelló 2022).

To test my theory, I focus on the case of Poland, which withstood an episode of democratic erosion at the hands of the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość/PiS) government between 2015 and 2023. Poland fulfills three preconditions of my theory: it experienced democratic erosion at the hands of a party with substantial national power, while having a competitive subnational opposition, and fairly typical prior levels of fiscal decentralization for an EU nation. I provide qualitative evidence of how, during their reign, PiS enacted policies that led to a broad reduction of local autonomy across all municipalities. I also provide evidence of an opportunity structure that would allow PiS to selectively target the autonomy of opposition-controlled municipalities.

To provide causal evidence that PiS enacted selective measures limiting local autonomy, I implement a close elections regression discontinuity design (De La Cuesta and Imai 2016; Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019) to investigate the effects of mayoral copartisanship with the central government on selected fiscal measures. I collect a dataset of municipal election results and subnational finances in Poland, 2015-2023. Polish municipal elections are contested by multiple candidates that may or may not be affiliated with any national-level party, and follow a two-round majoritarian system. Overall, I gather a unique dataset with observations on 2478 municipalities (gminy) which includes candidate characteristics,

electoral results, fiscal flows, revenues, and expenditures of each individual gmina. I operationalize local autonomy in two ways. First, I measure the total amount of autonomous taxation they are able to collect on an annual basis. Second, I measure the total amount of central government transfers over total revenues and expenditures (Trzeciakowski, Ciżkowicz, and Rzońca 2023; Mookherjee 2015). I implement the close elections design separately for municipalities where, between the two candidates with the largest vote share, exactly one candidate comes from the governing party, PiS, and municipalities where exactly one candidate comes from the primary opposition block.¹

My findings indicate a significant effect of electing a PiS mayor on local fiscal autonomy. More specifically, municipalities with PiS mayors, near the RD cutoff, see an increase in autonomous revenues. In addition, such municipalities see a reduction in transfer dependency, meaning that the local administration retains control of larger parts of their budget to do with as they please. Taken in conjunction with the qualitative evidence showing an overall decrease of subnational autonomy for all municipalities, the results indicate that PiS municipalities are being selectively protected from a broader national trend of recentralization.

My project contributes to a burgeoning discussion of subnational backsliding and local autocratization (Jakli and Stenberg 2021) by providing novel evidence that subnational fiscal policy can become a tool for national level backsliding. In addition, there is a rich political economy discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of different levels of subnational autonomy. While this literature has occasionally touched upon the impacts of fiscal federalism on democracy, it has mainly focused on this link through the prism of modernization or of full autocracies rather than democratic resilience, backsliding, and transitional regimes such as Hungary, Turkey, or Poland (Mookherjee 2015). I link this literature with the wider discussion on modern democratic erosion, not only by asking whether decentralization is good for the provision of public goods, but whether it can be used as a tool for reducing

¹More specifically, the two implementations are separately comparing municipalities which elect a candidate of the PiS/opposition party, with those that do not, within a non-parametrically estimated bandwidth of electoral margins.

contestation by aspiring autocrats. This question has been minimally interrogated in the past (Aalen and Muriaas 2017), and is novel to the study of local politics. In this way, my paper provides the first consolidated theory and empirical test of the subnational strategies of aspiring autocrats.

Antipluralists and Democratic Erosion

Lührmann (2021) identify the actors behind democratic backsliding as “antipluralist” parties. These are political parties which (a) lack commitment to democratic processes and norms, (b) use demonizing and polarizing rhetoric, (c) encourage political violence, and (d) disrespect minority rights. Beyond these characteristics, antipluralists remain motivated by similar incentives as their democratic counterparts, seeking to maximize their time in office and their ability to distribute resources to their allies.

While the term “aspiring autocrat” is more prevalent as a descriptor of such parties, for the remainder of this paper I use the term “antipluralist”. These parties still have a small degree of commitment to democratic institutions, for a variety of reasons including a valence commitment of the public to democracy (Svolik et al. 2023; Svolik 2019; Svolik 2013), a fear of repercussions from the collapse of full autocracy rather than competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010), or international commitment to pro-democracy international organizations and allies (Haggard and Kaufman 2021a). Therefore, the goal of reducing contestation and enacting a form of hybrid regime or competitive autocracy (Levitsky and Way 2010) should be differentiated somewhat from the goal of a full autocracy, which even avowed antipluralists may not aspire to. This means that “antipluralist” serves as a broader term that is more inclusive of the concept under examination.

Once duly elected through what are usually free and fair elections, antipluralists proceed to employ a repertoire of strategies of democratic erosion in service to their continued reign. In the overwhelming majority of cases, this involves some degree of what is called executive

aggrandizement, where power is concentrated in the executive branch of the government (Haggard and Kaufman 2021a; Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012; Pap 2017; Stenberg, Rocco, and Farole 2022). Antipluralist parties target legislatures by breaking lawmaking norms to allow for minimal oversight as was the case in Poland (Haggard and Kaufman 2021a), or radically re-writing electoral maps to ensure super-majority control as was the case in Hungary (Kornai 2015). Broad attacks can also be identified on the judiciary. These have taken place in Hungary, Serbia, and Slovenia (Bugaric and Ginsburg 2016), but are even more stark in Poland (Bugaric and Ginsburg 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2021a; Sadurski 2019). Particular attention has additionally been paid to the role of corruption and patronage as sources of antipluralist power (Auerbach 2022; Foa 2021).

A large part of antipluralist strategies is the concentration of power in the executive state, often called executive aggrandizement. Executive aggrandizement centrally entails amassing control over fiscal resources: the power to direct and allocate state funding with minimal accountability and oversight. This occurs either through taking away the power of other branches of government to make funding decisions, or through minimizing the power of accountability mechanisms. Such funding can then be used in multiple ways by the antipluralist party. First, in the context of what could be seen as typical programmatic politics, they allocate resources from the state budget, such as educational funds, infrastructure grants, healthcare funding, police funding and others, to districts of close allies and elites (Kelemen 2017). As others have contended, even though this falls within the context of typical pork barrel spending, it occurs with increased intensity and lax oversight; this type of strategy allows for anti-pluralist parties to do things such as build networks of clientelism and patronage (Mares and Young 2019) or fund pro-government “civil society” organizations (Mietzner 2012; Bernhard et al. 2020). Second, beyond typical programmatic distribution, executive control of fiscal resources can be used to buy off national economic and media elites, such as in the case of Poland and Hungary mentioned above (Chapman 2017; Wilkin 2016), but also in Greece during the Covid-19 pandemic (The Press Project 2020). In Hungary in particular,

Fidesz has promoted policies that funnel public procurement funds to aligned national economic elites, as well as the Prime Minister's own family members (Kelemen 2017; Scheiring 2021). In combination with decreasing taxes on top income earners, this has garnered Fidesz the loyalty and support of a substantial portion of the country's economic elite.

Local Resilience and Backsliding

While a lot of attention has been paid to the national level, there is a significant gap as to how similar strategies relating to fiscal policy are employed with regards to subnational government. Local governments are the closest service providers to citizens (Ahmad et al. 2005), and more directly accountable to the local populace through elections than the central government. In the context of the European Union, subnational governments control a third of total government expenditures and produce around a fifth of total revenues, excluding any funding they receive from the EU. The funding local governments receive is primarily for them to carry out a set number of allocated competencies which vary by state. These typically include the provision of local transportation and security services, the protection and promotion of local culture, and the maintenance of municipal infrastructure, but can also increase in scope to being the primary purveyor of education, healthcare, environmental protection, and waste management. Local governments also receive non-scheduled grants and subventions, which are at the discretion of the central state, and are often tied to specific projects or goals. Given the importance of fiscal resources to antipluralist parties pursuing aggrandizement, and the critical importance of subnational government both in economic terms and for the well-being of citizens, it is only natural that antipluralists give strategic consideration to the local level.

Local government additionally presents an opportunity for the opposition to rally and threaten antipluralist rule. In countries experiencing democratic erosion, particularly in the European context, opposition parties are politically competitive but highly disempowered and fragmented, particularly at the national level. In this context, opposition parties are

stretched thin across multiple battles, particularly given the multifarious nature of incremental backsliding that targets courts, legislature, police, media, and several other facets of political life and institutions (Haggard and Kaufman 2021b). Oftentimes, there are multiple opposition parties with diverging ideological positions that are competing *with each other* for who gets to set the terms for the restoration of democracy. These parties have to defend the very existence of electoral competition itself, while lacking access to national resources that come with holding office. This is why they often resort to big tent contestation strategies, where multiple parties create a unified but fragile anti-government coalition with representation from multiple ideological positions (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020).

Even if they lack national consolidation and power, however, opposition parties often have substantial control over local jurisdictions, particularly in large urban areas. Opposition sub-national officials are therefore able to control fiscal resources and leverage local autonomy to recruit members, build trust through efficient public goods provision, and mobilize resistance to democratic erosion perpetrated by the central government. In the fractured context described above, these resources are critical to opposition survival (Kjær 2012).

Subnational opposition can lead to successful nationwide contestation. Freeman and Perelló (2022) for instance, examine the case of Honduras where antipluralist leader Orlando Hernandez was democratically replaced by an opposition coalition led by Xiomara Castro. The authors argue that integral to the opposition's success was a "bottom-up" strategy, where opposition leaders repeatedly participated and invested in local contests in order to build a grassroots base of political support and eventually win national control. Farole (2021), through the case of South Africa, provides a mechanism through which this may be the case: local opposition leaders who provide good public services, especially when in contrast with neighboring districts controlled by supporters of the antipluralist ANC government, are rewarded not only in local elections, but in national contests as well. Local opposition can additionally use its resources to mobilize protest and coordinate against antipluralists in power; local officials have an important pulpit in the community, are able to distribute

resources to local business leaders, and often have already-built ties to local interest groups. In this manner, they can act as a mobilizing force for the public, but also for elites that play a critical role in resisting democratic erosion (Bernhard et al. 2020; Boese et al. 2021; Eder and Öz 2017; Buckley et al. 2020). In sum, a flourishing local opposition can be a significant component of democratic resilience, particularly when it comes to preventing reversion into autocracy (Boese et al. 2021; Merkel and Lührmann 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that scholars have noted the importance of the local dimension of antipluralist strategies.²

Aspiring Autocrats and Subnational Finances

I argue that antipluralist governments impose reductions in subnational fiscal autonomy in order to seize control of fiscal resources and their redistribution while minimizing local resistance. Local autonomy, as defined by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe (CLRA), is “the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population.” More specifically, Ahmad et al. (2005) draw focus to fiscal recentralization, the process of reducing subnational fiscal autonomy, which happens through (i) shifting the allocation of expenditure responsibilities from local to central tiers of government, (ii) assigning taxes to central, rather than local governments, (iii) designing a highly restrictive intergovernmental grant system, and (iv) tightly budgeting and monitoring fiscal flows between government tiers. This can be accomplished through a combination of normative and institutional changes; either by using existing mechanisms of governance that were previously subject to forbearance—such as preemption laws signed by U.S. Governors, or the powers of Polish Voivoda)—or by enacting legislation that directly changes the allocation of competencies and fiscal resources.

²Recent research has examined the concept of local authoritarianism; either the conditions under which it may arise (Gervasoni 2010), the ways it affects long-term distributional outcomes (Trounstein 2006), or how it can either affect national politics, or act as an avenue for national antipluralists to achieve their policy goals (Grumbach 2022). Others study the manipulations that national antipluralist regimes employ in order to limit local resistance and achieve dominance, with a particular focus on local rule-making and electoral procedure (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022; Jakli and Stenberg 2021).

The most direct benefit that recentralization holds for antipluralist parties comes from the same line of reasoning as executive aggrandizement: more fiscal resources and direct control over them helps solidify antipluralists in power. The central government, having wrestled control over the distribution of resources and whole areas of competency, such as education or healthcare, can then reallocate as they see fit. For instance, as mentioned in the previous section, such funds can be awarded to national or local elites in exchange for supporting the antipluralist party in power (Kelemen 2017; Scheiring 2021). In addition, recentralizing starves local opposition from resources that they could use in pursuit of national contestation. Without fiscal resources, and with fewer competencies, they cannot spend on building a support base, local officials cannot demonstrate their skill by serving the public, and therefore their ability to contribute to national democratic resilience is minimized. To illustrate, consider an opposition mayor with access to independent sources of funding and control over education policy. They can, for instance, institute a school meals program, which in turn may help demonstrate their competence to parents, teachers, and other community members, who may then support the mayor's party. If that same mayor has their control over education policy revoked, and barely has any funds left over after fulfilling basic legally mandated municipal tasks, they cannot implement such a policy, and therefore cannot use this tactic to build their support base.

Oftentimes, however, such institutional changes may be particularly hard to accomplish, requiring legislative supermajorities or constitutional amendments. In Hungary, for instance, recentralization required both rewriting the constitution to exclude key provisions of subnational autonomy, and passing a set of what are called "Cardinal Laws"; both of these actions required a legislative supermajority, which the governing Fidesz party was able to secure in 2010 and retain throughout most of its tenure (Fábián 2017). At the same time, it should also be expected that recentralization has diminishing returns. If a state is substantially centralized to begin with, anti-pluralists should select a strategy of democratic erosion that emphasizes wresting control from other branches of the central government, rather than

gaining from subnational jurisdictions. Therefore, the theorized reductions in local autonomy should only occur if (1) the ruling antipluralist party holds substantial national power, (2) the primary opposition block holds substantial subnational power, and (3) the country in question maintains a high enough degree of subnational fiscal autonomy.

The logic that leads to attacks on subnational opposition municipalities can, of course, similarly apply to the local allies of antipluralist governments, as they too experience an increasing constraint on their fiscal independence. In addition, untargeted measures also run the risk of damaging public goods provision beyond the obvious direct impacts on the finances of local allies. Past work has argued that, when subnational units have highly heterogeneous preferences, it may be more efficient to distribute decision making power to localities and allow them to independently make allocation decisions (Oates 1972; Tiebout 1956; Faguet 2014). Others argue that such independence provides a platform for “yardstick competition”, through which locals can compare public goods provision across jurisdictions and use that relatively straightforward informational cue to hold leaders to account (Farole 2021; Besley and Case 1995). This process can benefit public goods provision, meaning that the reduction of local autonomy across the board could have negative fiscal implications (Seabright 1996; Estache and IBRD 1995).³

Conversely, several scholars note that high levels of local fiscal autonomy, under particular conditions, may lead to substantial elite capture of local officials and service delivery, thus leading to a failure of direct accountability (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006; Fisman and Gatti 2002; Xu 2011). While this may be problematic for governments seeking to maximize local accountability and reduce inefficiencies from elite capture, the same incentives may not apply to antipluralist parties. Given national strategies of paying off elites and reducing

³The exact claim I present here, that decentralization is generally good for growth, is in itself quite contested (Ahmad et al. 2005; Casey 2018). Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) for instance argues that traditional models of efficient decentralization fail to account for imperfect monitoring institutions and lack of information on local governance, as well as resting to the relatively shaky assumption that citizens can easily “vote with their feet” and pick which jurisdiction to live in with minimal cost. Other scholars support an equilibrium of decentralization that does allow some autonomy to local governments, but without allowing them key rights such as independently raising taxes (Bardhan 2002; Mookherjee 2015; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006).

oversight, a logical local continuation would be that antipluralists seek to minimize oversight so that local aligned officials can more easily engage in reducing local contestation through patronage.

In sum, recentralization can be a double edged sword, which aids antipluralists in dissolving local opposition, but also harms the ability of aligned local officials to engage in patronage and provide services to their constituents, and therefore may harm them electorally. The obvious solution to this bind is to engage in *selective* reductions in local fiscal autonomy, therefore reducing the autonomy of opposition-held jurisdictions, while increasing the autonomy of jurisdictions under their control.

By claiming that antipluralists engage in *selective*, in addition to *horizontal* measures that target local fiscal autonomy, I make the assumption that there exists some policy mechanism by which antipluralists can individually target jurisdictions rather than simply passing blanket measures. There are two ways to this could be done: first, there are cases where blanket measures affect opposition jurisdictions more than antipluralist-aligned ones, assuming that they consistently differ on some characteristic beyond just partisanship. For instance, any intervention that may affect mass public transit, or school infrastructure, or local health-care spending, obviously targets jurisdictions with transit, schools, and clinics more than ones without. Since antipluralist support tends to be higher in rural areas (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), such a differentiation may be quite plausible. This specific avenue of selective recentralization is qualitatively examined in the following section, but quantitative identification is left to future research.⁴

Second, antipluralist governments can use their ever increasing control over previously independent oversight mechanisms to selectively restrict the autonomy of districts that differ exclusively on the basis of their partisan affiliation. This can occur through changes in dis-

⁴If such selective recentralization exists, it cannot be detected using a Regression Discontinuity design, since jurisdictions close to the RD cutoff are, by definition, balanced across all relevant covariates. This means that it would not be possible for a central government to accurately distinguish between municipalities marginally above and below the cutoff on anything other than the cutoff itself, and therefore any detected effect cannot be attributed to such policies.

cretionary funding, but can also take more insidious forms. For instance, in the 2012 reform of the Cardinal Law on Local Government, Fidesz-KDNP instituted a procedure by which individual municipalities are forced to refer to the Central Budget Office for approval of their spending; the Hungarian CBO is staffed with Fidesz political appointees, and qualitative interviews with opposition mayors executed by the CLRA indicate significant push-back against any suggested funding changes that they propose (Cools and Liuville 2021; Fábíán 2017). The ways in which this strategy is implemented in Poland are expanded on in the next section, in support of the following hypothesis:

*H: Antipluralist parties engage in **selective** reductions of subnational fiscal autonomy, therefore reducing the autonomy of districts controlled by their opponents and increasing the autonomy of districts controlled by local allies relative to the national baseline.*

Before proceeding, I should note that this paper treats the central government as a monolith, with fairly unrestricted executive discretion over funding choices. This is, of course, quite a strong assumption, particularly in the context of an extensive literature on legislative particularism. I argue that this assumption is merited. First, in the context of contemporary democratic backsliding almost all executives erode the separation of powers through executive aggrandizement. It is therefore much safer of an assumption to treat the executive state as having more discretion over changes to local funding structures. Second, when dealing with local funding, municipalities and subnational governments in general may not always overlap with legislative districts, meaning that legislative particularism may be less important than executive particularism when it comes to local budgets.

A last question concerns whether a similar strategy could be employed by a typical democratic government. It is important to acknowledge that I make no claim that reducing subnational autonomy is an intrinsically *antidemocratic* strategy, but rather that it can be used as one within the scope conditions that I establish. In addition, this could be argued for

multiple other antipluralist strategies: for instance overhauls of the judiciary may be critical when it ceases to function in the public interest, and re-writing the constitution may serve to modernize the state. Lastly, as argued by O'Neill (2003), democratic governments tend to make changes in local autonomy as a response to impending electoral shifts, in order to safeguard their power. Antipluralists, while not always seeking the elimination of elections, take active steps to limit national electoral competition. As such, this incentive is much weaker, since they do not act as much under the presumption of leaving power.

Poland as a Case

Poland is selected since both the cause (antipluralist government) and outcome (fiscal recentralization) theorized above are present, while also fulfilling the necessary assumptions set out in the previous section. I first establish a broad pattern of antipluralist actions by PiS, and then show how these translate to horizontal reductions in subnational autonomy. This section attempts to explain the policy and normative mechanisms leading to the outcome of selective loss of local autonomy (Beach and Pedersen 2013). To my knowledge, this presents the first compiled list of the fiscal strategies that antipluralists use to curb local resilience.

Selection

During the examined time period, Poland meets the preconditions of having a powerful antipluralist government implementing democratic backsliding, a nationally fragmented but locally strong opposition,⁵ and a relatively decentralized prior state. Taking these conditions in turn, PiS scores in the top quartile of antipluralism among all parties measured by VDem during the time period between their first election in 2015 and present (Lührmann 2021). However, the opposition maintained and even gained control of major Polish cities during the

⁵At the local level and throughout this backsliding episode, major Polish cities remained under opposition control at the mayoral level. This included former PO Presidential candidate Rafał Trzaskowski in Warsaw, Jacek Majchrowski in Krakow, Hanna Zdanowska in Lodz, and Jacek Sutryk in Wrocław.

reign of PiS, and held approximately half of sixteen Voivodeships (regions). Poland, prior to PiS taking office, was above the EU average for state fiscal resources handled by local governments, with around a third of total state spending happening subnationally. This means that PiS had ample opportunity to manipulate fiscal control to their advantage (Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim 2015). This process could only happen to a point, given that Poland has a fairly robust legal code around distribution of tax revenues to local governments, and the right of local self-government and autonomy are enshrined in the constitution (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019).

The executive and legislative branch of the Polish government hold a lot of sway over local funding decisions. The majority of local funding comes from a combination of discretionary funds and shares of national taxes. While the existence of such funding structures is enshrined in law, the *rates* of fund distribution are not, and are subject to legislative and executive changes. An example of this was the 2022 Personal Income Tax (PIT) reform executed by the PiS government, which significantly reduced the share of the tax going to local jurisdictions (Trzeciakowski, Ciżkowicz, and Rzońca 2023). Additionally, the assumption of executive capture of the legislature holds reasonably well in the case of Poland's backsliding episode: PiS held majorities in the Sejm throughout their rule, and repeatedly abused proceedings to implement their agenda, thus circumventing any legislative independent oversight.

With regards to the specific hypothesis I outline, it is very hard to think of one singular piece of legislation, one set of funding decisions, or one selective reduction in oversight that would directly translate to selective reductions in local autonomy. This is, in part, due to the complexities of local funding decisions, and the variance between municipalities that make any conclusions from a single bill quite hard to parse. This may also, however, be by design; contemporary democratic backsliding is incrementalist (Haggard and Kaufman 2021b), meaning that it happens slowly, deliberately, and often in a way that obfuscates the results under a guise of fiscal efficiency, security, or sovereignty. While I argue that the individual pieces of evidence in this section are broadly favorable for my hypotheses, there

is no “smoking gun” evidence. However, there are enough indications to motivate a closer study of aggregate municipal funding outcomes, which is the main purpose of this paper.

National Level Backsliding

In 2015, the governing party of Poland, centrist Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska/PO), is defeated in national elections. This leads to Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość/PiS) gaining full control of the lower house (Sejm), Senate, and Presidency of Poland, effectively dominating all branches of government. In order to win, PiS employed a strategy of economic populism, Euroscepticism, and religious extremism on social issues. In the legislature, PiS proceeded to use rarely implemented procedures for individual members to propose bills in order to fast track them through committees and allow for multiple last minute changes with minimal time for the opposition or public to provide feedback (Grzymala-Busse 2019). In 2018 PiS amended the electoral code to allow for political control of all electoral oversight boards by parliament-appointed officials, thus stymieing independent investigations on political party finances and the procedure of counting and announcing results (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019; Markowski 2019).⁶

The strategy of disarming or co-opting oversight and accountability mechanisms also expanded to the Polish media. After accusations of foreign influence, PiS issued a call to “Re-Polonize” public broadcasters, and seized control of the appointment process to the National Broadcasting Board and Council of National Media, which proceeded to issue hefty fines against opposition-aligned broadcasters and has funded extreme instances of pro-government propaganda content (Chapman 2017). Subsequently, minimal oversight

⁶In the field of local elections, PiS instituted sweeping new provisions prior to local contests in 2018. A two-term limit was put in place for all mayors, and all municipalities with a population over 20,000 became subject to multi-member proportional elections for their city council; a move which was widely seen as a result of PiS under-performing under the previous FPTP system (Wienen 2019). PiS also changed the appointment system for members of the National Electoral Commission, and had already replaced multiple local judges that would be adjudicating electoral disputes with party loyalists—a move they could accomplish after giving the Minister of Justice sweeping powers to appoint and replace members of the judiciary (Wienen 2019; Sadurski 2019). Despite these actions, CLRA monitors concluded that the 2018 local elections conducted under PiS were likely unaffected and fair (Wienen 2019).

has existed for the government's extensive use of surveillance against activists, and extreme force against protesters, especially when it comes to those resisting anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-abortion legislation (Chapman 2017; Haggard and Kaufman 2021a; Sadurski 2019).

Potentially the most major assault on Polish democracy was with regards to the rule of law. PiS systematically attacked and dismantled most checks and balances that were supposed to keep the judiciary impartial by, for instance, allowing the Minister of Justice to hire and fire all district, regional, and appellate court judges, and allowing the Sejm to appoint high level judicial officials, instead of an impartial body or a seniority process (Bugaric and Ginsburg 2016). Apparently learning from their previous terms in power where they were restricted by Constitutional Court rulings, PiS also directly targeted the Constitutional Tribunal by applying the same strategy as Viktor Orban in Hungary, packing the court with five additional hand-picked appointees, canceling all ongoing appointment procedures, and requiring a two-thirds majority for all decisions (Sadurski 2019; Bugaric and Ginsburg 2016).

Local Level Opposition

At the local level, opposition mayors from multiple parties—primarily PO and PSL—repeatedly used their power to resist the agenda of the national government. For instance, opposition local officials used their platform to promote, facilitate, and actively participate in anti-government protests in support of LGBT rights (Tilles 2021a) and abortion access (Tilles 2020), the latter of which resulted in largest protests to occur in Poland since the fall of communism.

There are also numerous instances of local officials using their autonomous municipal funds to resist the government's antipluralist agenda. In contrast to PiS, which broadly promoted extreme Catholicism and demonization of immigrants, local officials used funds to support a wide range of religious communities by renovating Mosques (Bretan 2020a), and financing the first Hindu temple in Poland (Koschalka 2022). Local officials additionally

resisted far-right religious doctrine by, for instance, funding safe houses for homeless LGBT youth (Gmiterek-Zabłocka 2022), and providing legal, psychological, and material assistance to residents required to give birth due to restricted abortion access (Koschalka n.d.).

Local opposition figures also took tangible action to help immigrants. Wrocław and Świdnica used municipal funds to aid fired immigrant workers get through the Covid-19 pandemic (Bretan 2020c). Multiple townships and villages used municipal funds to support Afghan refugees (Tilles 2021b) and major cities took action to help Ukrainian refugees by partnering with global NGOs often vilified by PiS (Marczewski, Forbici, and Blaščák 2025), or providing municipally funded housing (Tilles 2022).

Beyond acts of resistance against the government's agenda, municipal governments also took action to demonstrate their competence in areas where central services were lacking. This involved extremely popular measures such as supporting seniors and local businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic, setting up local help lines for seniors that de facto replaced the overburdened central help service (Bretan 2020b), or taking measures to improve quality of living by tackling air pollution (Koschalka 2021), water shortages (Ptak 2022), and threats to national forests (Marczewski, Forbici, and Blaščák 2025).

The above demonstrate that local opposition government in Poland constituted a threat to the antipluralist agenda of the PiS central government. Local officials repeatedly took action, oftentimes by dipping into their autonomous revenues, to support their constituents, serve their relatively liberal agenda, and demonstrate to the public their capacity to tackle complex problems and provide public services.

Local Finances During Antipluralist Governance⁷

While in power, PiS implemented three strategies that directly affected subnational fiscal autonomy. First, they forced municipalities to spend a larger proportion of their budget on mandated expenses, therefore limiting their ability to exercise autonomy over expenditures. Second, they distributed discretionary grants to their local allies in order to limit the impact of mandated spending increases. Third, they set up an oversight structure that had the capacity to target subnational opposition municipalities solely based on their partisan affiliation.

In order to trace the implementation of these strategies, I first expand on how subnational finances function in Poland. The lion's share of subnational revenue comes from direct transfers from the central government; approximately half comes from either earmarked grants or what is called the "general grant," which primarily funds education. The rest is covered either by a proportional share of national taxes (CIT/PIT) or own revenues. In terms of historic macro-level patterns, Poland saw a steady increase in local fiscal autonomy during the PO government of 2006-2015. This trend sharply reversed after the election of PiS, and local fiscal autonomy has only declined ever since (Ciżkowicz, Rzonca, and Trzeciakowski 2024).

While local governments maintain the ability to provide case-by-case tax relief, the central government completely controls the rates of all local taxes except the property tax. Even for the property tax, the government has full discretion over a minimum and maximum allowable rate. (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 232). The central government also determines the tax base, administers the tax, and can potentially decide the whole-cloth elimination of a subnational tax, assuming constitutionality (Trzeciakowski, Ciżkowicz, and Rzońca 2023).

The lack of flexibility in terms of revenue raising became critical during PiS's term in

⁷This section relies heavily on the 2019, 2018, and 2015 monitoring reports on the state of local and regional democracy in Poland, mandated for all signatories of the European Charter of Local Self-Government of 1985. These reports are compiled by a team of multinational experts on local governance, and rely on extensive interviews with local and national leaders and administrators. The CLRG website provides extensive information on their resources and mission.

power, because it allowed the government to deprive local jurisdictions of the ability to compensate for any national-level changes in policy that increased local expenditures. Cost increases due to required upgrades in the quality of local services and local salaries were nationally implemented by PiS, but required local governments to foot the bill; at the same time, regional and local revenues did not keep up with this demand, and sharply fell during the first PiS term (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019; Swianiewicz and Łukomska 2016, p. 228).

This issue was most stark in the field of education, where national salary negotiations resulted in a pay raise that had to be implemented by municipal and regional authorities. Over the first PiS administration, however, the educational general grant only increased enough to provide around one fifth of the necessary additional funds (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 226). This move was widely seen as targeting large, urban municipalities more, given that they contain the majority of Polish primary and secondary-school aged children (Marczewski 2020; Wądołowska 2021). Unsurprisingly, these municipalities are substantially more likely to be controlled by the opposition.

Beyond education, the PiS government also pushed through changes in subnational finances by the whole-cloth recentralization of several competencies previously allocated to municipalities. These included distribution of environmental protection funds, water resource management, sports installations, veterans affairs, and family and parental benefits (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 125). Notably, while the government seized control of the ability to set spending levels for these competencies, the onus of executing any related payments still fell on local government (Lackowska et al. 2023). The central government also seized the authority to set user fees for several local services, such as for water supply, which increased their control over subnational autonomous revenue even further (Lackowska et al. 2023). While the government claims that these changes are made in order to maximize fiscal efficiency of municipalities (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 166), these claims are suspect. Research conducted specifically in the Polish context, and prior to the latest PiS period, show a clear negative correlation between subnational autonomy over tax rates and

user fees, and subnational debt (Bukowska and Siwińska-Gorzelak 2019). This means that, for Polish municipalities, recentralization harmed rather than helped their ability to provide efficient services in a fiscally responsible manner.

The above strategy is equivalent to loss of subnational autonomy (Sześciło 2019). Assuming that central government transfers cannot cover mounting expenses, localities must dip into their own autonomous funds in order to compensate. This leaves local officials with scant resources at their discretion, and therefore disempowers them with respect to the central government.⁸ This strategy can also force local authorities to take on debt, which hurts fiscal discipline and, in the long term, gives the central government more of an excuse to intervene in their finances (Bukowska and Siwińska-Gorzelak 2019). I interpret this as weak evidence for my hypothesis, given the selective nature of the education-related expenditure increases.

One way the central government could be able to compensate for required funding increases would be through discretionary grants, which could provide case-by-case relief to municipalities. Mounting evidence shows that such funds were being funneled overwhelmingly into the coffers of PiS controlled subnational governments (Siwińska-Gorzelak and Bukowska 2023). Flis and Swianiewicz (2021) examine the 2020 Fund for Local Investments (CFLGI), which distributed \$3.2 billion to counties and municipalities. Half these funds were accountable only to the Prime Minister’s discretion. The authors identify that nearly *all* PiS controlled municipalities received the funds they requested, and were overall 1.5 times more likely to receive funding than their PO controlled peers. Municipalities with PiS affiliated mayors also received ten times more funding per capita than mayors of any other party (Flis and Swianiewicz 2021; Ciżkowicz, Rzonca, and Trzeciakowski 2024). While these results do not control for municipality-level covariates, they should still be taken as evidence of targeted relief from the effects of recentralizing strategies, and as such evidence for my second

⁸To illustrate this point, I quote directly from Baro Riba and Mangin (2019, p. 166): “During the monitoring visit, the delegation heard many complaints of local authorities, which claimed to have been left without any discretion in the exercise of those competences. They pointed out that they are becoming only paying agencies for the central government.”

hypothesis.

A final and potentially more insidious strategy that PiS implemented is the capture of local oversight and rule-making. Local level decisions that impact local revenues and expenditures, including those that impact tax relief and the definition of the tax base for local jurisdictions, are subject to administrative supervision by the Regional and State Audit Offices (RIO/NIK) (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 93). In addition, these decisions are subject to annulment by the Voivoda, the top political official of the Voivodeship/prefecture in which a municipality is located (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 95). Voivode decisions can then be challenged at the regional court level. On the flip-side, localities have a voice in national politics through the Joint Committee on Intra-Governmental Relations; any bill passing through the legislature that relates to local government must also pass through the committee for consultation (Lackowska et al. 2023).

All the above mechanisms of oversight were either captured or circumvented by PiS. In Voivodeships controlled by PO, almost half of all Voivode decisions were annulled by the courts throughout the tenure of the PiS government (Lackowska et al. 2023). This is unsurprising, given the aforementioned control that PiS asserted over regional judiciary that is tasked with monitoring such decisions (Lackowska et al. 2023). The use of the Voivode veto also increased in most Voivodeships (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 213). Beyond that, PiS has asserted political control over the national and regional audit offices, with direct oversight responsibilities over all municipal budgetary decisions. This follows in the footsteps of their national policy of making political appointments to supposedly independent watchdogs (Haggard and Kaufman 2021a). Lastly, the legislative strategy of introducing “private bills” from individual PiS parliamentarians has the added benefit that such bills do *not* require consultation with local government representatives (Lackowska et al. 2023). Accounts given to CLRA monitors from local officials state that the central government has widely used anti-corruption charges and probes against opposition-aligned figures as an intimidation tactic in budget negotiation (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 34). At the

same time, the central government handed a pay cut to all subnational council members, continuing the trend of disempowerment (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 201).

These changes paint a particularly pernicious picture. The combination of weakening local officials' negotiating power alongside political appointments to courts and monitoring boards allowed PiS to potentially make selective fiscal decisions that directly targeted their opponents or advantaged their allies, in addition to any horizontal measures that decrease local autonomy. This is noted by Baro Riba and Mangin (2019), who recognize that most attacks on local autonomy came not from legislation, but from the "conduct" of central government officials and the judiciary. In short, the structure of oversight and negotiation that was created under PiS offered them the *opportunity* to engage in the hypothesized selective behavior. At the same time, weakening the negotiating power of local officials in national politics is by definition a reduction in their autonomy, and as such is evidence for my overall theory.

Admittedly, the opportunity to implement partisan oversight decisions is not equivalent to the implementation of selective changes in local autonomy. However, there should be observable manifestations from the implementation of such a strategy (Beach and Pedersen 2013), namely some evidence of either selective weakening of opposition fiscal autonomy, or shielding copartisans from the impacts of horizontal recentralization. In order to more extensively support my argument, I move on to the quantitative section of this paper where I test for the manifestations of the strategies outlined above.

Operationalization and Methods

Data

Poland is divided into three levels of subnational government: 2478 gminas (municipalities), 314 powiats (counties), and 16 voivodeships (regions). To test my hypotheses I use fiscal data at the gmina/municipality level from Trzeciakowski, Ciżkowicz, and Rzońca (2023)

(2004-2019), and augment this with information taken directly from the central statistical authority of Poland, Główny Urząd Statystyczny (2020-2023).⁹ I select the municipality level as most consistent with the overall theory, but also due to sample size, and because the vast majority of Polish local revenues and expenditures occur at the municipal, rather than county or regional level (Ciżkowicz, Rzonca, and Trzeciakowski 2024). Municipalities are also the only subnational government level which is mandated in the Polish Constitution (Baro Riba and Mangin 2019, p. 42).

I combine this dataset with electoral data on Polish mayors, collected from the National Electoral Commission of Poland (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza).¹⁰ Mayors are elected to four year terms¹¹ using a two-round majority system. Candidates for municipalities are not required to list any affiliation with a nationally competitive party, and may choose to run solely on a local or regional electoral committee, or form a committee themselves. Typically, local contests are very competitive between multiple partisan-aligned and non-partisan candidates, and are not dominated by one or two national parties.

The resulting combined dataset includes observations from 2015 to 2023 over 2478 gminy at the year-municipality level, and includes a wide range of fiscal variables, alongside data on municipal electoral races such as vote margins, candidate demographics (age, education, gender, incumbency, domicile), type of municipality (rural, rural/urban, or urban), and party affiliation. I additionally include several municipal level variables sourced from Statistics Poland; these are: one year lagged percentage of rural over total dwellings, total square mileage of protected environmental area, number of municipal councilors with a college education, number of municipal councilors with managerial experience, total number of municipal councilors, and lagged internal migration inflows.¹²

⁹For the years where the Trzeciakowski, Ciżkowicz, and Rzońca (2023) and Statistics Poland data overlap, they are an *exact* match. This is unsurprising, since Statistics Poland was the initial source for the Trzeciakowski, Ciżkowicz, and Rzońca (2023) project. Therefore I do not consider the difference in data sources to be relevant in the context of this study.

¹⁰The exact name of the head of a municipality differs depending on the size of the population of their jurisdiction. For the sake of brevity, I refer to burmistrz, wojt, and prezydent miasta as mayors.

¹¹Terms were extended to five years after a 2018 PiS initiated reform.

¹²These variables are all included in the models presented in the main body of this paper. RD results

A non-negligible task specific to the Polish case is identifying partisan affiliation. Of the 30982 candidate/year pairs identified in the data, 51% declare a party identity. The exact format of the party data varies by election year, and is often directly inputted by the candidate themselves, meaning that the spelling for individual parties may vary quite substantially.¹³ There are 4753 unique party identifiers in the dataset. In order to identify party affiliation, these were translated to English using DeepMind and hand coded to correspond to national parties included in the PartyFacts database. In total, 33% of all candidate-year observations were assigned a party affiliation through this process.¹⁴ The same process is repeated to encode education levels for each candidate.¹⁵ I assume that the outgoing rather than the incoming municipal government is relevant during each election year, given the timing of the election: all local contests occur in mid to late November, meaning that the year's budget will likely only have been influenced by the partisanship of the outgoing mayor.

It should be noted that the resulting dataset is an empirical contribution in and of itself. I have coded multiple opposition parties which may be interesting to study in the context of party type (populist, far-right, green, etc.), particularistic politics, mayoral competency, and a wide range of other subjects. In addition, I augment the Trzeciakowski, Ciżkowicz, and Rzońca (2023) dataset with additional resources on municipal politics (2002-2023), and expand the temporal scope with regards to key fiscal variables (2002-2004 and 2020-2023).

I present results based on three different fiscal dependent variables. I first consider autonomous revenue. Based on the definitions provided by the Polish Ministry of Finance, this includes a wide range of smaller taxes, such as the property tax, local inheritance tax,

with no covariates appear in Appendix A. Municipal-level variables are lagged because spending levels are plausibly affected by spending decisions made using data from *previous* years, rather than contemporaneously.

¹³For instance, individuals associated with Prawo i Sprawiedliwość may have stated the full name of their party, or “PiS”, or “PIS”, or any other entry including misspellings.

¹⁴The majority of the remaining 28% that declare affiliation but are not assigned a party typically declare affiliation to a niche party that is not within the Partyfacts database, declare affiliation to a non-party group, or declare affiliation to a municipal-level coalition that is supporting one or two candidates with no nationwide presence.

¹⁵The same issues with party identification declarations also apply to education. There is, for instance, variation in how college graduates declare their education. An individual with a Bachelor's Degree in history may declare their education as “Wyższe Historia”, or simply “Wyższe”, or any variation of these in capitalization and spelling.

civil transaction tax, transportation tax, or stamp duty, and own revenue from sources such as property or investments. I expect that autonomous revenue will increase (decrease) when a PiS (opposition) mayor is elected in a subnational jurisdiction. This follows from my third argument in the previous section. While horizontal measures should not be detectable by an RD design, the cumulative impact of case-by-case partisan decision making should have an effect at the RD cutoff.

Second, I include two canonical measurements of fiscal centralization: transfer dependency and vertical fiscal gap (VFG) (Eaton, Kaiser, and Smoke 2011; Trzeciakowski, Ciżkowicz, and Rzońca 2023; Mookherjee 2015; Oates 1972). These measure the proportion of all central government transfers over total local revenues (transfer dependency) or total local expenditures (VFG) respectively.¹⁶ The reasoning behind the transfer dependency measure is that the degree to which transfers cover the total expenses or revenues of a local government determine how much autonomy that municipality has in making spending decisions. If most revenues come from transfers, the central government has more leverage over the type and nature of spending that is allowed. Similarly for VFG, if most of the money a local government spends annually is delivered by the central state, they are dependent on continuing government cash flows and are therefore more likely to capitulate to pressure. Assuming my theory is correct, antipluralist governance should lead to a selective reduction in autonomy for opposition-held municipalities, and either no change or an *increase* in the autonomy of copartisan jurisdictions; this should translate to an *increase* for PO municipalities and a *decrease* for PiS municipalities in the antipluralist time period in the centralization measures.¹⁷

All dependent variables are Winsorized¹⁸, and total autonomous revenues are logged, in

¹⁶Expenses are total expenses, not current expenses.

¹⁷Note that an RD effect for these variables should not be interpreted as evidence for or against national-level recentralization.

¹⁸Winsorization is a statistical transformation used to treat data with extreme outliers. I use 95% Winsorization, which sets the bottom 2.5% and top 2.5% of each variable to be equal to the minimum and maximum value of the middle 95% of the data respectively. While the significance level does drop to 95%, the results from using the non-Winsorized data are similar in magnitude and significance level to those presented in the paper. These are omitted for brevity.

order to deal with large outliers and long right tails in their distributions, which is common practice when dealing with local fiscal measures. All fiscal variables are measured at an annual, rather than quarterly level, since budgetary expenditures in the Polish context tend to be concentrated during the end of the fiscal year (Trzeciakowski, Ciżkowicz, and Rzońca 2023).

Aggregate measures of local autonomy suggest that PiS, on aggregate, increased the dependence of municipalities on the central state. Figure 1 shows how the national averages of transfer dependency and VFG developed through the terms of the PO and PiS governments respectively. While dependency is decreasing throughout the first period, there is a sharp increase at the start of the PiS term, which indicates a drop in subnational autonomy.

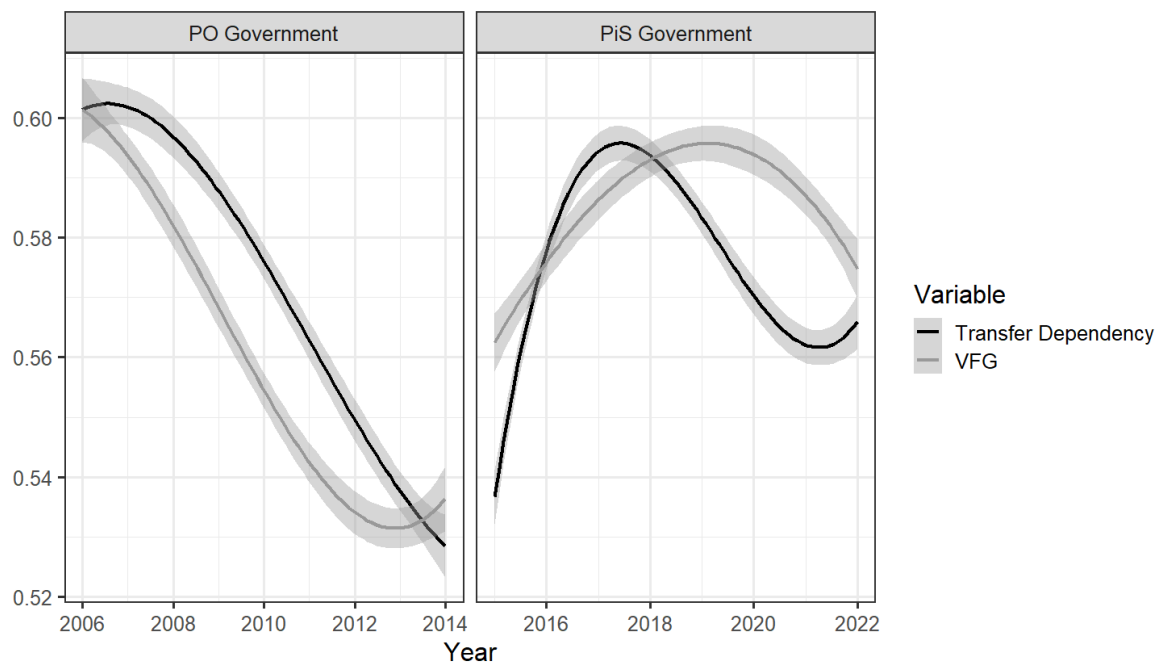


Figure 1: Third degree polynomial fits for measures of subnational dependency on the central state, measured separately for the PO and PiS governing periods.

Close Elections Regression Discontinuity Design

Identification of effects based on municipal partisanship is a complicated task. This is the case because there are no guarantees that municipalities under PiS control do not systematically

differ from all other municipalities, meaning that any detected effect may be very heavily impacted by omitted variable bias. I employ a regression discontinuity design, based on the assumption that municipalities where elections were decided on a close margin are as-good-as randomly allocated between candidates. This means that, at a certain cut-off, municipalities where a PiS candidate barely won should be comparable to those in which they barely lost (De La Cuesta and Imai 2016; Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019).

The data are split into two. I select the subset of municipal elections $E_{p,\tau}$ where there is exactly one candidate from party p in the top two candidates in terms of vote share. Since I am examining hypotheses that relate both to PiS and their opposition this exercise is undertaken twice, with $p = \text{PiS}$ and $p \in \{\text{PO}, \text{MN}, \text{PSL}\}$. I select the opposition parties on the following criteria: (1) they were never in coalition with the PiS government during the examined period, (2) they ran at least thirty candidates across all municipal elections, and (3) they maintained a parliamentary presence throughout the examined period.¹⁹

For each subset, let M_i be the margin of the candidate from party p versus the extraneous candidate.²⁰ Then, let $C_i = \mathbb{1}_{M_i > 0}$ which serves as an indicator that the candidate from party p won the election. The local average treatment effect (LATE) can then be written as $\zeta = \lim_{\epsilon \downarrow 0} E[Y_i | M_i = \epsilon] - \lim_{\epsilon \uparrow 0} E[Y_i | M_i = -\epsilon]$ for outcome of interest Y_i .

For each iteration of τ and p , ζ represents the LATE of electing a candidate from party p in time period τ . This means that any characteristic of the population of candidates from party p versus other candidates may still be a compound part of the detected effect (Marshall 2024). As Marshall (2024) notes, it is highly implausible to claim that no candidate-level characteristics apart from copartisanship with the central government are part of the estimated compound treatment effect; therefore the detected LATE should still be interpreted as the effect of the bundle of correlated characteristics of a typical candidate of party p on

¹⁹The party names, and the number of candidates from each party that are included in the opposition dataset are as follows: Platforma Obywatelska/PO (1221), Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe/PSL (2275), Mniejszość Niemiecka/MN (31)

²⁰Assume here that we are operating within a specific subset, which means that the full specification of the margin variable is $M_{i p \tau}$. The shorter M_i is used for parsimony.

measures of local autonomy.²¹ In order to try and parse out the effect of candidate-level characteristics, I conduct balance tests following typical methodological recommendations (Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019), which can be found in Appendix D.

Under the assumption of continuity of the running variable M_i at the cutoff for each sub-dataset, I employ local non-parametric polynomial methods for recovering point estimates and inference. Using a triangular kernel function, I calculate weights based on the distance of each unit from the cutoff, and use these to fit weighted least squares models within a bandwidth of size h , where h is determined by the MSE-minimizing automated bandwidth estimator created by Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014). For the purposes of inference, I use the robust bias-corrected p-values and confidence intervals as recommended by Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik (2019).²²

The resulting regression design, implemented for all values of τ, p is as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \beta C_{it} + bM_{iT} + \gamma C_{it} \times M_{iT} + \delta X_{it} + \eta_t + \theta_T + \kappa_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

Subscript t indicates year (2015-2023), subscript T local election year, and subscript i is a municipality/gmina. The coefficient-adjusted RDD estimand is β . As previously mentioned, M_{iT} is the margin for party p and C_{it} a binary cutoff indicator. I include a set of covariates X_{it} to boost the efficiency of the estimation, as is common practice for RD designs (Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019). These covariates include measurements at the municipal/year level (logged population, square mileage, percentage of rural dwellings, protected areas, internal migration) and at the candidate/election level (education, whether the election went to the second round, incumbency, percentage of college educated municipal councilors, percentage of municipal councilors with managerial experience, total number of

²¹This interpretation presents a potential threat to external validity, since the detected LATE applies only to cases which share the “bundle of characteristics” of candidates from party p . I address such generalizability issues in a later section of this paper.

²²Because of the variance and bias correction implemented by this process, point estimates are not guaranteed to be at the center of the confidence interval. For a more extensive explanation of why inference and estimation are procedurally different for RDDs, see Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik (2019).

municipal councilors, election type). I include year and Voivodeship (prefecture) fixed effects, and cluster standard errors at the municipality level.

Since the response variable is at the municipality/year level, the estimator β for the first dataset reflects the average annual effect of electing a mayor that is a copartisan of PiS over an alternative candidate. The alternative candidates in these races mostly do not declare any partisan affiliation (68%) or are aligned with the opposition parties PO, PSL, or MN (29%). For the second dataset, the estimator reflects the average annual effect of electing a mayor that is in opposition to the PiS government over an alternative candidate. The alternative candidate in these races overwhelmingly does not declare partisan affiliation (73%) or is affiliated to PiS (16%). This means that the RD result should be interpreted as the extent to which PiS specifically punishes candidates from their main competitors, rather than the extent to which opposition candidates are disfavored in comparison to PiS candidates.²³ This test is consistent with the theory, even if it does not explicitly compare PiS with opposition candidates. If an effect is detected, it still indicates that electing a PiS/opposition candidate leads to shifts in subnational autonomy in comparison to electing their opponents, which means that partisan affiliation with the central government does play a role in annual changes in subnational autonomy. In addition, there may be bias introduced by candidates that are aligned with PiS or the opposition, but strategically choose to not declare affiliation. However, given that comparisons are primarily made against non-partisans, and that some of them may in fact be aligned with PiS or the opposition, this should bias results *against* detecting any significant effects. As such, the design is valid despite the difficult setting of non-partisan Polish municipal elections.

²³Running the same RD design while limiting the data to races where both candidates in the top two have a declared partisan affiliation does not change the direction of the effect. The detected effects also remain significant, albeit at the 95% level. This means that the results seem to not be driven by whether the opposing candidate declared no partisanship, or had a declared partisan affiliation. The regression results are omitted for brevity.

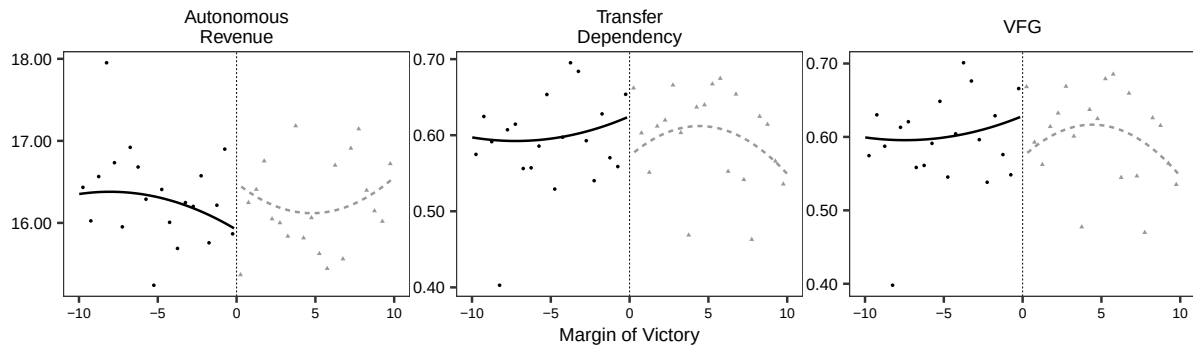


Figure 2: Binned averages of the outcomes in electoral races for the PiS sample close to the cutoff (bin size is 0.5%). The lines are second-order polynomial fits using control (dark line) and treated units (grey line) separately.

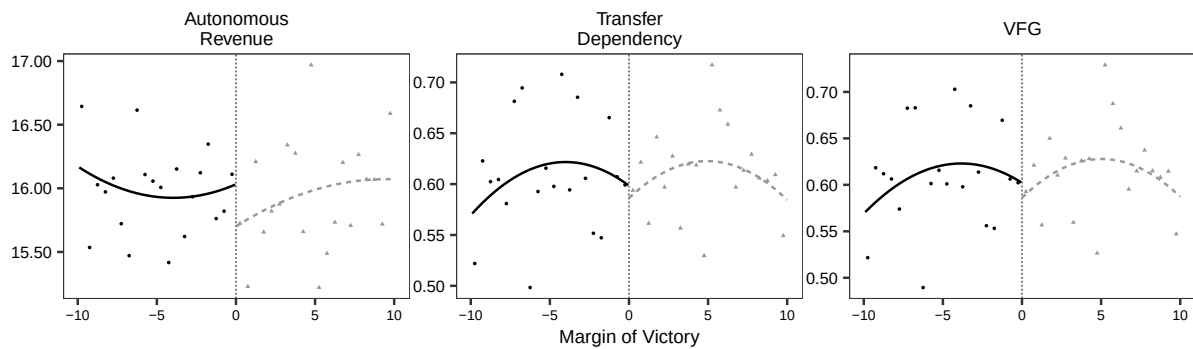


Figure 3: Binned averages of the outcomes in electoral races for the opposition sample close to the cutoff (bin size is 0.5%). The lines are second-order polynomial fits using control (dark line) and treated units (grey line) separately.

Results

The final datasets contain 27779 and 37773 municipality-year pairs for PiS and opposition respectively. For the PiS sample, there are a total of 967 unique municipalities which, at some point, had a top two mayoral candidate with a declared affiliation to PiS; of these, 324 municipalities were won by a PiS candidate during their national rule. The corresponding numbers for the opposition dataset are 1456 unique municipalities of which 913 had an elected opposition-affiliated mayor. These numbers correspond with the expectation that despite their national fragmentation, the opposition was much more competitive locally, winning a larger number and proportion of the races they entered.

Figures 2 and 3 visually show the discontinuities at the cutoff for both samples. These are suggestive of discontinuities for all variables except the recentralization indicators for the opposition sample. The direction of the discontinuities is consistent with theoretical expectations. However, this type of visual representation is only suggestive, pending the bias and variance corrected estimation procedure for the RD bandwidth, coefficient, and confidence interval (Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019).

Regression results using all covariates are reported for PiS in Table 1. The clearest evidence for targeted changes in subnational autonomy comes with regards to local autonomous revenue for PiS, where there is a significant effect equal to approximately one sixth of a standard deviation in terms of autonomous revenue. The sign of the effect corresponds to my theoretical expectations: subnational autonomous income is increasing for PiS municipalities. Note that the RD estimate here is for an average *annual* effect, meaning that if a similar reduction occurs throughout the PiS governing period municipalities would end up gaining three quarters of a standard deviation in autonomous revenue. Given the margins that municipalities operate within, and the fact that this is the only source of revenue over which they have any spending discretion, this result should be considered quite substantial. There is also a detected negative effect on both transfer dependency and VFG for the PiS sample. This means that, on an annual basis, municipalities narrowly won by PiS see a re-

duction of their fiscal dependence on the central state of approximately a fifth of a standard deviation.

Results for the opposition sample are displayed in Table 2. The direction of the coefficient for autonomous revenue corresponds to theoretical expectations, indicating a decrease of around one eighth of a standard deviation in autonomous revenue for municipalities narrowly electing an opposition mayor. However, this only reaches significance at the 0.1 level, meaning that it is suggestive at best, and not conclusive evidence in favor of my theory. Similarly, corresponding with the visual lack of discontinuity in Figure 3, there is no evidence of a significant change in the dependency variables for the opposition sample at the 95% level.

While there is no conclusive quantitative evidence that the primary opposition is being specifically targeted over other parties, some suggestive evidence in favor of the opposition targeting hypothesis is presented in Figure 4. This figure shows confidence intervals and RD point estimates for a range of different bandwidths that are smaller and larger than the one calculated using MSE-optimization in the main analysis. For bandwidths only slightly larger than the MSE-optimal, I detect significant effects (at the 95% level) corresponding exactly with theoretical expectations for all variables: local autonomous revenue appears to be decreasing, while there is an increase in the dependency of opposition-held municipalities on the central government.

Overall, the evidence for my hypothesis is somewhat mixed; while there is evidence of selective recentralization in the qualitative analysis, this only partially seems to be the case judging from the RD results. Overall, I have strong evidence that PiS is implementing a horizontal strategy of reductions in local autonomy from which their copartisans are shielded. In contrast, I have only suggestive evidence that PiS is targeting opposition municipalities with reductions in subnational autonomy.

Table 1: Regression results for the PiS sample. Regression discontinuity estimates were constructed using local polynomial estimators and a triangular kernel, with all covariates. Robust confidence interval and p-values were constructed using bias correction with cluster-robust standard errors at the municipality level; h is the MSE-optimal bandwidth. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

Outcomes	Own Revenue	Dependency	
	Autonomous Revenue	Transfer Dependency	VFG
Estimate	0.150***	-0.023**	-0.025**
Robust SE	0.044	0.010	0.011
h	13.214	15.114	16.252
Obs. Used	642	738	820
DV Mean	16.2913617	0.5895474	0.5959320
DV SD	0.9317541	0.1157103	0.1283699

Table 2: Regression results for the opposition sample. Regression discontinuity estimates were constructed using local polynomial estimators and a triangular kernel, with all covariates. Robust confidence interval and p-values were constructed using bias correction with cluster-robust standard errors at the municipality level; h is the MSE-optimal bandwidth. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

Outcomes	Own Revenue	Dependency	
	Autonomous Revenue	Transfer Dependency	VFG
Estimate	-0.109*	0.015	0.017
Robust SE	0.068	0.013	0.012
h	15.820	18.725	19.076
Obs. Used	1,239	1,460	1,486
DV Mean	16.0800903	0.5938412	0.5980113
DV SD	0.8580852	0.1123081	0.1201909

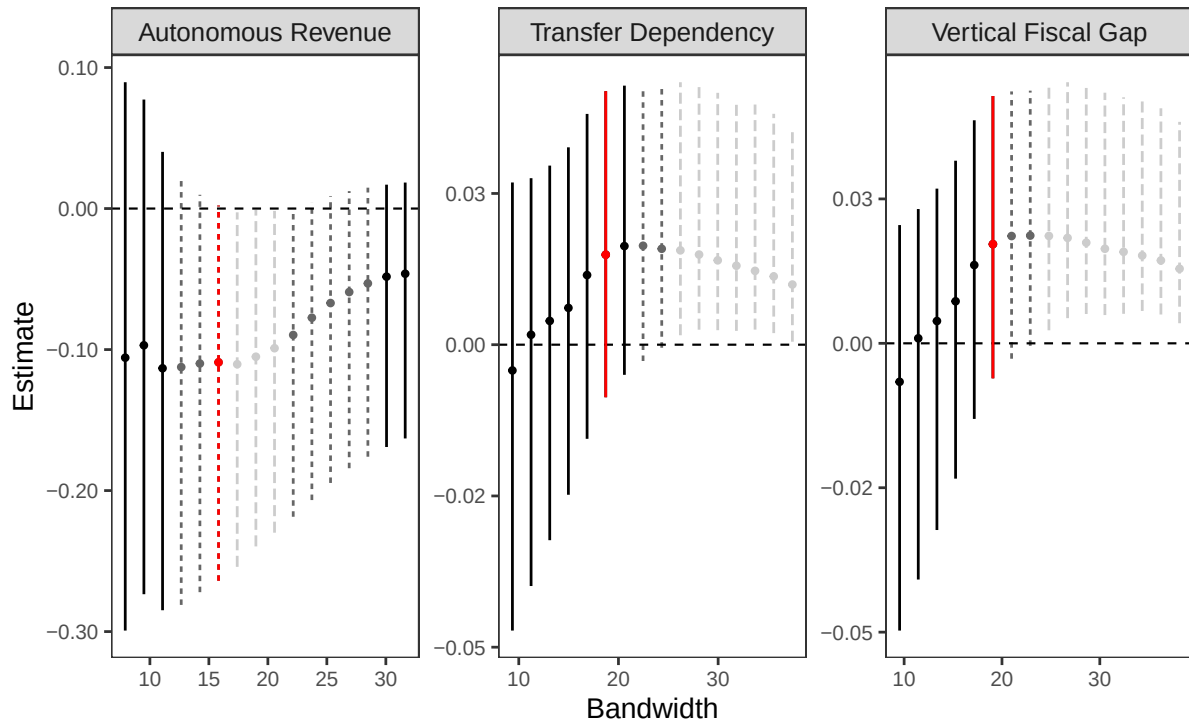


Figure 4: RD estimates with 95% cluster-robust CI of the effect of electing an opposition mayor with alternative bandwidths. Red coefficients from main analysis. Black CIs indicate non-significant results, dark gray indicate significance at the 90% level, light gray indicate significance at the 95% level. Alternative bandwidths selected automatically ranging from half to 2 times the MSE-optimal bandwidth at interval of .5. All other specifications are identical to main regressions.

Validity and Robustness

Appendix B includes density plots of the running variable which, alongside reported density tests, show evidence that the running variable is continuous at the RD cutoff. As De La Cuesta and Imai (2016) argue, this continuity should be evidence enough of the validity of the RDD without any extensive balance tests. However, I also show that control and treatment units near the cutoff are balanced on the vast majority of relevant observable characteristics. In Appendix D I include balance tests for all covariates included in the RD estimation. Of the examined variables, only one shows a statistically significant discontinuity at the 99% level, and only two other covariates show any imbalance at the conventional 95% level. Municipalities within the MSE-optimal bandwidth are comparable in terms of a broad set of candidate, demographic, and geographic characteristics. Covariate balance is a stricter standard than continuity of the running variable in close election designs (De La Cuesta and Imai 2016), which means that there is strong evidence in favor of the validity of the design.

These tests also suggest that the detected effects are a result of central government action relative to local partisans, rather than a result of differences in local competency. It is plausible that PiS mayors differ systematically in a way that makes them more capable at sub-central revenue raising, or at negotiating with the government for local autonomy. There are, however, several reasons to doubt such an interpretation. First, recent research by Bellodi, Morelli, and Vannoni (2024) show that, if anything, antipluralist parties are *worse* at developing and maintaining a local bureaucracy; this means that if my results are exclusively an indication of competence, the expected outcomes for PiS should be exactly reversed from what is observed. Second, the balance tests in Appendix D indicate that at or near the RD cutoff, observations are balanced on several mayoral characteristics which include gender and age, but also education and incumbent status, which are good indicators of competency. In addition, the municipalities are balanced on characteristics that measure the competency of municipal council members (managerial experience and college education).

In Appendix G I report estimates using placebo cutoffs ranging from -15% to +15%.

When performing multiple-testing adjustments on each outcome variable separately, there is no statistically significant discontinuity for 89% of the estimates for PiS and 96% of the estimates for the opposition. In Appendix E I perform my estimation using different bandwidth selection algorithms, with almost identical results. Then, in Appendix F I perform the estimation procedure using predetermined bandwidths ranging from half to twice the size of the MSE-optimal bandwidth. These do not reveal any concerning deviations from the reported results.

In Appendix H I conduct a power analysis for the two samples. The results do show that, for the estimated effect level, both designs are powered slightly below conventional levels. To alleviate concerns, I also run a secondary power analysis with an only slightly larger target effect size, which shows that an increase in the effect magnitude leads to conventional or near-conventional power levels for the RD estimations of all outcome variables where a significant effect is detected.²⁴ In combination with the robustness of the RD to all other tests, and the results holding for the subsample of years close to national elections, I believe I am detecting a true effect and not a false positive.

The evidence I present suggests that PiS implemented a strategy of horizontal and, to a degree, selective strategy of reducing subnational fiscal autonomy. Admittedly, this evidence is suggestive rather than conclusive for whether antipluralism is the cause of the detected effect; it may be the case that this type of strategy is typical for *all* governments in Poland, rather than simply the ones that spearheaded democratic decline. As additional evidence against this argument, Table 3 presents RD results using the same methodology as above and a sample restricted to the PO governance period (2006-2015) and selecting municipalities where exactly one PO candidate was in the top two finishers. This shows null results, suggesting that PO did *not* employ a similar strategy during their rule. However, I recommend that these results be taken with a grain of salt; while there is no evidence of

²⁴I also conduct several power tests using larger bandwidths than the MSE-optimal. Due to the inclusion of more observations, increasing the bandwidth also increases the statistical power of the design. I detect no difference in the significance levels. This means that the tests in Appendix F indicate that the power issue does not result in a false positive for the PiS sample. This analysis is omitted for brevity.

discontinuities in the running variable, there are several imbalances in variables relating to municipal characteristics.²⁵

Table 3: Regression results for the PO sample during their governance (2006-2015). Regression discontinuity estimates were constructed using local polynomial estimators and a triangular kernel, with all covariates. Robust confidence interval and p-values were constructed using bias correction with cluster-robust standard errors at the municipality level; h is the MSE-optimal bandwidth. * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Outcomes	Own Revenue	Dependency	
	Autonomous Revenue	Transfer Dependency	VFG
Estimate	0.058	0.006	0.005
Robust SE	0.054	0.016	0.017
h	14.658	11.459	12.816
Obs. Used	525	415	463
DV Mean	16.3271777	0.4572919	0.4515676
DV SD	0.8832414	0.1335798	0.1360354

A final limitation of RD designs is that the results speak exclusively to municipalities that are within the RD bandwidth, and more specifically the most competitive ones that are near the cutoff. It is therefore plausible that PiS, wanting to increase the likelihood of re-election, simply increased the resources available to their winning candidates. However, this intuition does not contradict my theory. It is not contradictory to expect that some electoral motivation plays a role in why PiS is shielding municipalities won by their copartisans from a wave of recentralization—although it would be more likely that, as Siwińska-Gorzelak and Bukowska (2023) argue, this type of electoral boost comes from direct transfers, rather than variation of subnational independence. This interpretation is also inconsistent with the results in Table 3; if subnational autonomy in Poland is exclusively related to partisan incentives in close municipal elections, rather than antipluralist motives, the results for PO should be significant.

²⁵The relevant robustness checks are omitted for brevity.

Generalizability

In this section I will address the potential generalizability of my results to cases beyond Poland under PiS. Firstly, it be the case that my results are limited in terms of temporal scope. While I do have data across two municipal and two general elections, more variation in terms of municipal office holders would bolster confidence in my results both temporally, and in terms of power. This is unfortunately infeasible for Poland; PiS did have an additional governing period prior to 2006, but they could not at that time be characterized as an antipluralist party according to VDem measurements (Lührmann 2021). One point in favor of temporal generalizability is that the strategies I outline here are consistent with broader examined patterns of democratic backsliding. I have presented evidence of this in previous sections, the crux of which is that changes in local government are consistent with incrementalist autocratization and the increase of executive control of fiscal resources.

What may also alleviate such concerns, as well as concerns of cross-country generalizability, is to look at similar country cases in Europe. Throughout this paper, I have presented examples from Hungary (Cools and Liuville 2021) and Turkey (Knape and Van Staa 2012), both of which have been cited by the CLRA for reductions in subnational autonomy and are ruled by antipluralist governments. In addition, the theoretical expectations I present should not change whenever (1) there is an antipluralist government in power which (2) faces strong subnational opposition (3) in a country that is fairly decentralized, but (4) has the national and constitutional power to limit its subnational opponents. Beyond those that are discussed in this paper, this may also include cases such as Northern Macedonia, Serbia, or Austria (Lührmann 2021). More research is needed to examine strategic attacks on subnational autonomy in other cases of democratic erosion.

Beyond Europe, I make a more tentative case for generalizability. This is true not only due to the regional context, but also the higher incidence of federal regimes, which introduce a much more powerful intermediary between local and central politics. For instance, in Argentina, Gervasoni (2010) argues that transfers to Argentinian states has increased the

likelihood of subnational authoritarianism at the state level. Grumbach (2022), examining the United States, makes a strong argument that US states have become the locus of autocratization, taking the lead in restricting citizen rights, manipulating elections, and increasing their control over civil society. Grumbach (2022) also argues that ceding power to the states, effectively *decentralizing*, empowers them to implement this agenda.

I do not believe that my results compete with this research, but in fact work in tandem. The argument I make is not that decentralization disempowers local antipluralists, or that antipluralists *always* recentralize, but that recentralization in particular empowers nationally dominant antipluralists with respect to a strong subnational opposition. In fact, the extensive use of preemption by US Governors (Blair et al. 2020; Barber and Dynes 2022; Zimmerman 2005) is arguably an example of my theory, with the US state government replacing the national government in unitary systems. I welcome any additional research on strategic and selective targeting of local autonomy that would generalize to regions beyond Europe, or to federal systems.

Conclusion

Antipluralists, when faced with subnational resilience, employ a strategy of horizontal reductions in subnational autonomy while also attempting to dull the effects of this reduction for copartisans. Their final goal is reducing the ability of the opposition to use subnational resources to their advantage, while benefiting the ability of copartisans to reap the rewards of local office with minimal oversight. Qualitative evidence from Poland indicates that this occurs through three strategies: first, a recentralization of competencies and control over local fiscal decisions, accompanied with an increase in the mandated expenses of local jurisdictions; second, a set of discretionary transfers overwhelmingly directed towards copartisans, aiding them in their endeavor to keep up with the increased expenses; third, a hostile takeover of the judiciary and independent monitoring bodies, alongside an exclusion of local government

representatives from national decision-making.

This final strategy allows for government-aligned officials to selectively target the autonomy of municipalities solely based on partisanship, which I examine more closely using an RD close-elections design, revealing partial support for my hypothesis of selective reductions in local autonomy; electing a PiS mayor leads to an increase of autonomous revenue close to the RD cutoff. This means that, relative to the baseline of municipalities in which PiS decides to field a candidate, antipluralist mayors see a significant increase in their spending power. Alongside this result, I also detect a significant effect on standard measurements of decentralization for the PiS sample. Specifically, PiS-aligned mayors close to the RD cutoff see a *relative* annual decrease in levels of centralization. Otherwise stated, more of their funds come from independent sources. There is no similarly strong effect for the opposition; at the 90% confidence level, however, I do detect a negative effect on subnational autonomous revenue, and for only slightly larger RD bandwidths I detect significant effects for all dependent variables, consistent with theoretical expectations. At worst, this finding should be interpreted not as a strategy of selective *decentralization*, but as selective relief from a broader recentralization strategy that targets local autonomy for all municipalities. At best, there are indications of selective attacks on the subnational autonomy of opposition-controlled municipalities.

My research adds to multiple literatures. First, while the study of local politics and democratic erosion has shown how local resilience threatens antipluralists, there is very limited discussion of how they respond to such a threat (Jakli and Stenberg 2021). By addressing this gap I hope to expand our understanding of backsliding, resilience, and local politics. In addition, there is a storied political economy literature on decentralization. This literature is not limited to academic circles, and has had a vast impact on development policies worldwide. While there have been calls to link the concept of decentralization with democratic conditions, this remains an open field, particularly when it comes to the study of transitional or backsliding regimes. I present an argument as to why it is necessary to consider

democracy in the decision making process that guides subnational funding. Crucially, my research opens a broader discussion over whether subnational fiscal policy writ large can be a tool for contemporary democratic erosion; an aspect of backsliding that has been generally under-examined to date.

My research can additionally have tangible policy implications. The European Union, between 2014 and 2020, subnationally distributed 731 billion euros through its regional development and cohesion fund programs. Scholars have examined the impact of these funds in terms of their effect on growth (Becker, Egger, and Ehrlich 2018), their conditional impact based on regional fit, and their effect on social cohesion (Dellmuth and Chalmers 2018). If antipluralist governments were to hijack this funding process, then the European Union would inadvertently undermine opposition contestation at a local level, a notable and alarming adverse effect. More broadly, the scholarly study of decentralization has informed decades of policy interventions in the developing world, especially in the context of institution building and the allocation of foreign aid (Shah and Thompson 2004). This literature does not operate in a vacuum: policy stakeholders are constantly developing new standards to assess central government devolution in order to maximize growth. I raise an additional caution: if, in fact, antipluralist governments are reducing subnational autonomy in order to shore up their rule, we should be extremely suspicious of their claims that recentralization may be motivated by fiscal crises or the need for increased financial oversight.

A final question relates to whether this strategy is ultimately effective in its aims of reducing opposition contestation and solidifying national antipluralist rule. While that is undoubtedly the goal of such attacks on subnational autonomy, this does not guarantee its effectiveness at the subnational level, let alone at keeping antipluralists in national office; Poland, for instance, saw the end of PiS control of the Prime Minister position in 2023.²⁶ Conversely, in Turkey and Hungary, which have witnessed similar strategies with regards to subnational power (Knappe and Van Staa 2012; Fábíán 2017), antipluralist governments

²⁶Although PiS, at time of writing, still controls the President's office.

appear to have consolidated their rule beyond the ability of the opposition to contest national power. It is plausible that, for instance, limiting subnational autonomy and burdening local administration with expenses could lead to a public backlash against the central government itself, which could be damaging *especially* in highly competitive districts. Although this conclusion does not contradict my findings that a strategy of reducing subnational autonomy is being implemented, more research is necessary into how the public attributes blame for shifts in subnational autonomy, as well as into the electoral effects of such changes.

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Supporting Information for: Cutting Off the Respirator: Aspiring Autocrats and Subnational Autonomy

To be published as Online Appendix

Contents

A Results Without Covariates	55
B Continuity of Density Tests	56
C Descriptive Statistics	58
D RD Covariate Balance Checks	60
E Alternative Bandwidth Estimators	62
F Alternative Bandwidth Test	64
G Placebo Cutoffs	65
H Power Analysis	67

A Results Without Covariates

Table S1: Regression results for the PiS sample. Regression discontinuity estimates were constructed using local polynomial estimators and a triangular kernel, without covariates. Robust confidence interval and p-values were constructed using bias correction with cluster-robust standard errors at the municipality level; h is the MSE-optimal bandwidth. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

Outcomes	Own Revenue	Dependency	
	Autonomous Revenue	Transfer Dependency	VFG
Estimate	0.163*	-0.017	-0.018
Robust SE	0.118	0.012	0.013
h	15.283	17.560	17.752
Obs. Used	1,106	1,327	1,345
DV Mean	16.2913617	0.5895474	0.5959320
DV SD	0.9317541	0.1157103	0.1283699

Table S2: Regression results for the opposition sample. Regression discontinuity estimates were constructed using local polynomial estimators and a triangular kernel, without covariates. Robust confidence interval and p-values were constructed using bias correction with cluster-robust standard errors at the municipality level; h is the MSE-optimal bandwidth. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

Outcomes	Own Revenue	Dependency	
	Autonomous Revenue	Transfer Dependency	VFG
Estimate	-0.122	0.004	0.004
Robust SE	0.100	0.014	0.014
h	22.379	20.024	19.437
Obs. Used	2,261	2,080	2,030
DV Mean	16.0800903	0.5938412	0.5980113
DV SD	0.8580852	0.1123081	0.1201909

B Continuity of Density Tests

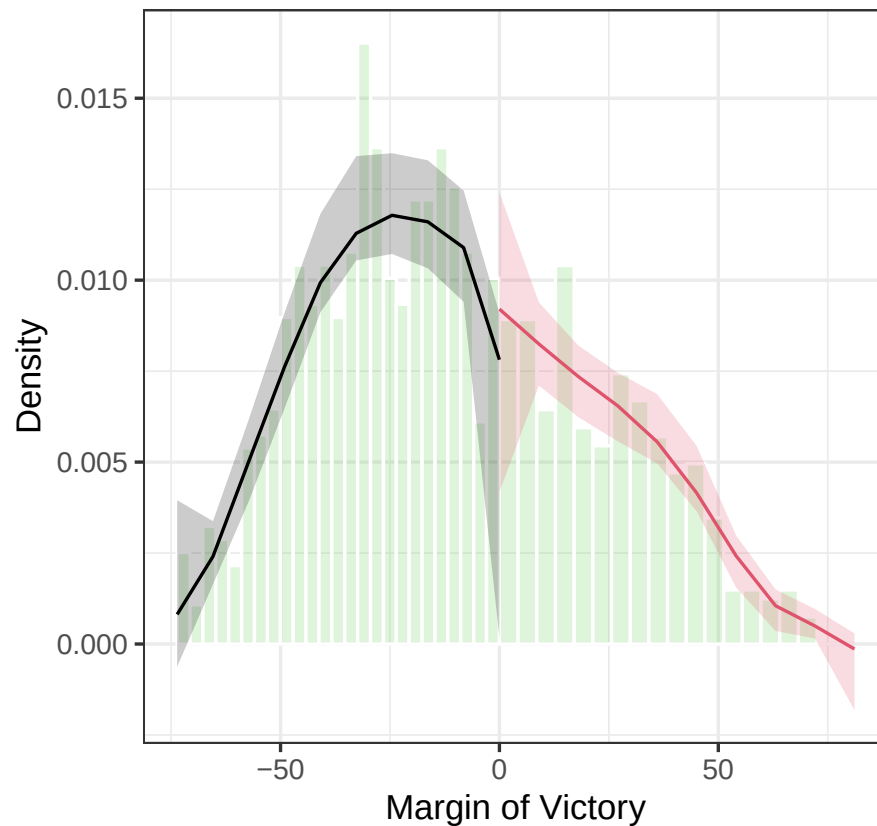


Figure S1: Local polynomial density test for the PiS sample. Local estimate and robust bias corrected confidence intervals (shaded dark and red) computed using the *rddensity* package in R. I cannot reject the null hypothesis of no sorting with $p.value = 0.2432$.

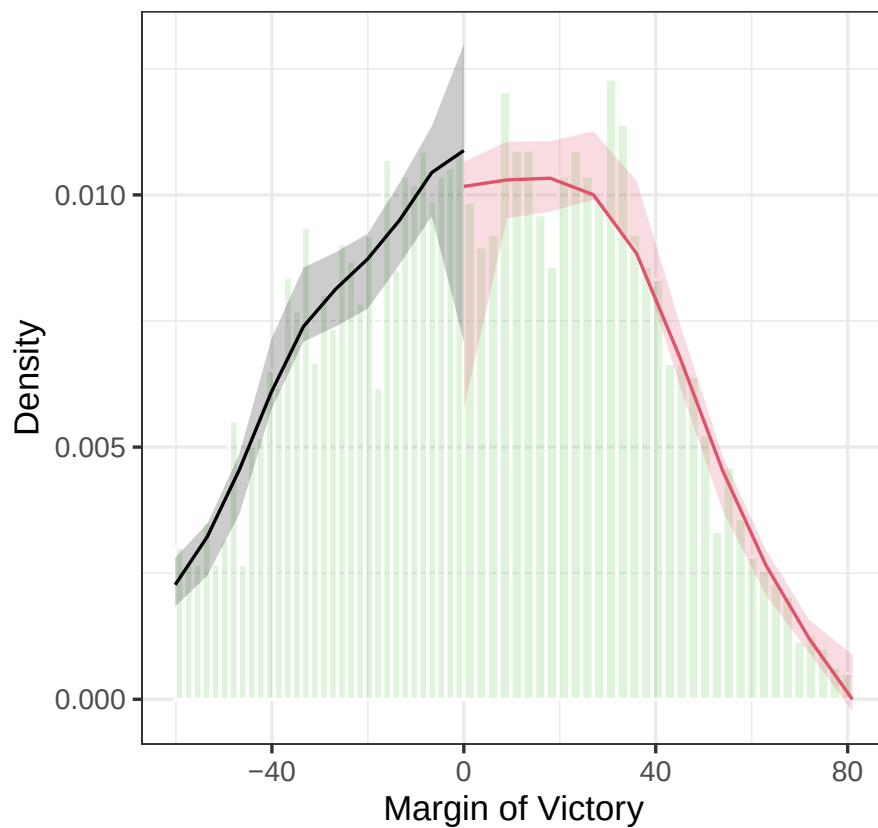


Figure S2: Local polynomial density test for the opposition sample. Local estimate and robust bias corrected confidence intervals (shaded dark and red) computed using the *rddensity* package in R. I cannot reject the null hypothesis of no sorting with $p.value = 0.2151$.

C Descriptive Statistics

Table S3: Summary table of descriptive statistics measured at the municipality-year level. Split into general dataset and then PiS/opposition sub-samples.

Characteristic	General N = 24,114	Opposition N = 5,911	PiS N = 4,159
Discretionary Transfers (missing/not gathered)	16.42 (15.88, 17.00) 452	16.37 (15.84, 16.93) 132	16.68 (16.16, 17.29) 108
Total Own Revenue (missing/not gathered)	15.98 (15.41, 16.68) 814	15.93 (15.38, 16.66) 142	16.14 (15.51, 16.95) 109
Transfer Dependency	0.58 (0.48, 0.67)	0.60 (0.50, 0.68)	0.59 (0.49, 0.68)
VFG	0.59 (0.48, 0.68)	0.60 (0.50, 0.69)	0.60 (0.49, 0.70)
Population (log)	8.91 (8.49, 9.46)	8.90 (8.48, 9.47)	9.09 (8.58, 9.71)
Square Mileage	125 (83, 220)	129 (85, 233)	118 (76, 208)
(missing/not gathered)	325	0	0
% Rural Dwellings	1.00 (0.53, 1.00)	1.00 (0.52, 1.00)	1.00 (0.43, 1.00)
(missing/not gathered)	325	0	0
Protected Areas	3,150 (468, 7,550)	2,923 (426, 7,152)	2,654 (246, 6,599)
(missing/not gathered)	4,421	940	842
Migration Flow	-4 (-21, 19)	-6 (-22, 15)	-6 (-24, 19)
(missing/not gathered)	325	0	0

¹ Median (Q1, Q3)

Table S4: Summary table of descriptive statistics measured at the municipality-election year level. Split into general dataset and then PiS/opposition sub-samples.

Characteristic	General N = 9,208	Opposition N = 1,584	PiS N = 603
Male	0 (NA%)	1,431 (90%)	547 (91%)
(missing/not gathered)	9,208	0	0
Age	51 (42, 57)	51 (44, 57)	51 (43, 56)
(missing/not gathered)	132	0	0
Education			
high school	1,067 (12%)	190 (12%)	59 (9.9%)
some college	11 (0.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
college	7,793 (87%)	1,361 (87%)	524 (88%)
postgraduate	134 (1.5%)	17 (1.1%)	14 (2.3%)
(missing/not gathered)	203	16	6
Incumbency	3,080 (65%)	980 (62%)	369 (61%)
(missing/not gathered)	4,465	0	1
% College in Counc.	0.00 (0.00, 0.10)	0.00 (0.00, 0.10)	0.05 (0.00, 0.13)
(missing/not gathered)	131	1	0
Number of Managers in Counc.	0.00 (0.00, 2.00)	0.00 (0.00, 2.00)	1.00 (0.00, 2.00)
(missing/not gathered)	130	0	0
Number of Councillors	15.00 (15.00, 15.00)	15.00 (15.00, 15.00)	15.00 (15.00, 15.00)
(missing/not gathered)	130	0	0

¹ n (%); Median (Q1, Q3)

D RD Covariate Balance Checks

All variables in the sample are balanced at the 99% level. At the 95% level, there is a detected imbalance in terms of rural dwellings percentage (both for PiS and PO), and the number of civil society organizations (only for PO). Given that there is continuity at the RD cutoff, as shown in Appendix B, the results should be robust regardless of these slight imbalances (De La Cuesta and Imai 2016). The number of detected imbalances is also only slightly above that which would be detected by random chance at the 95% level (1.7).

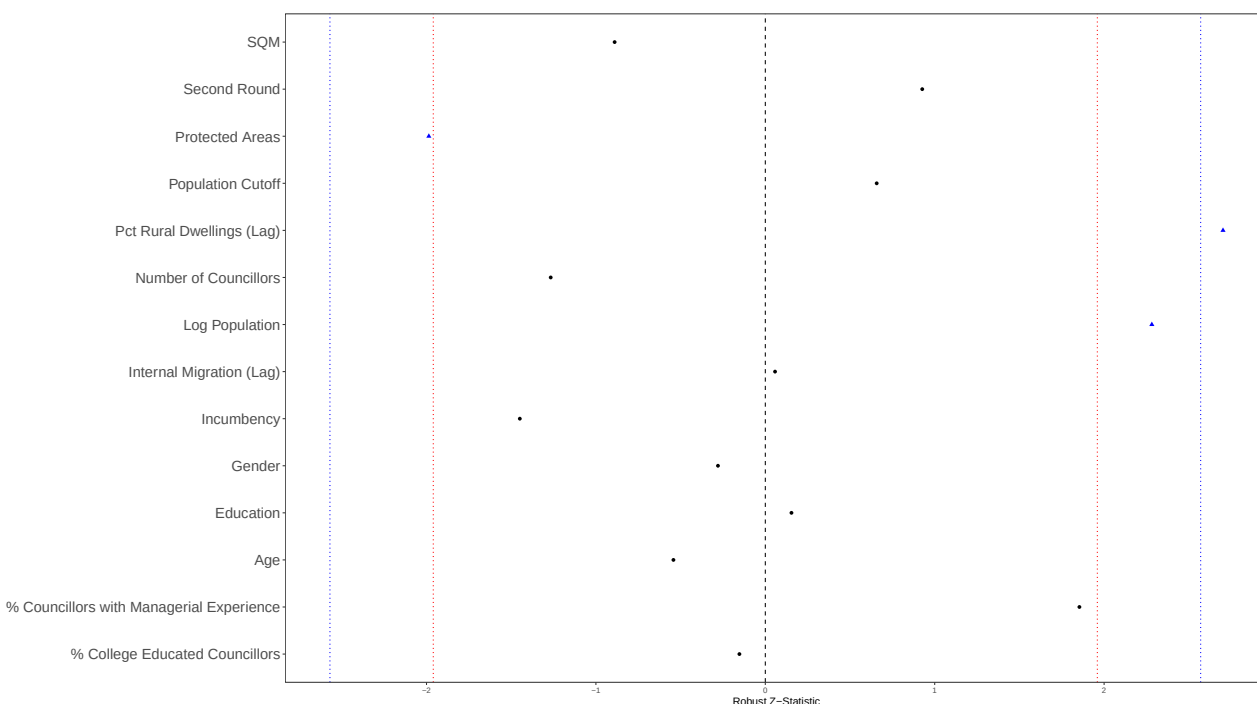


Figure S3: RD Robust Z-statistics of the effect of electing a PiS mayor on pre-treatment covariates. Vertical lines represent 99% (blue) and 95% (red) confidence intervals respectively. Estimates constructed using local polynomial estimators with triangular kernel and CER-optimal bandwidth (Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019). Robust p-values using bias-correction with cluster robust standard errors at municipality level.

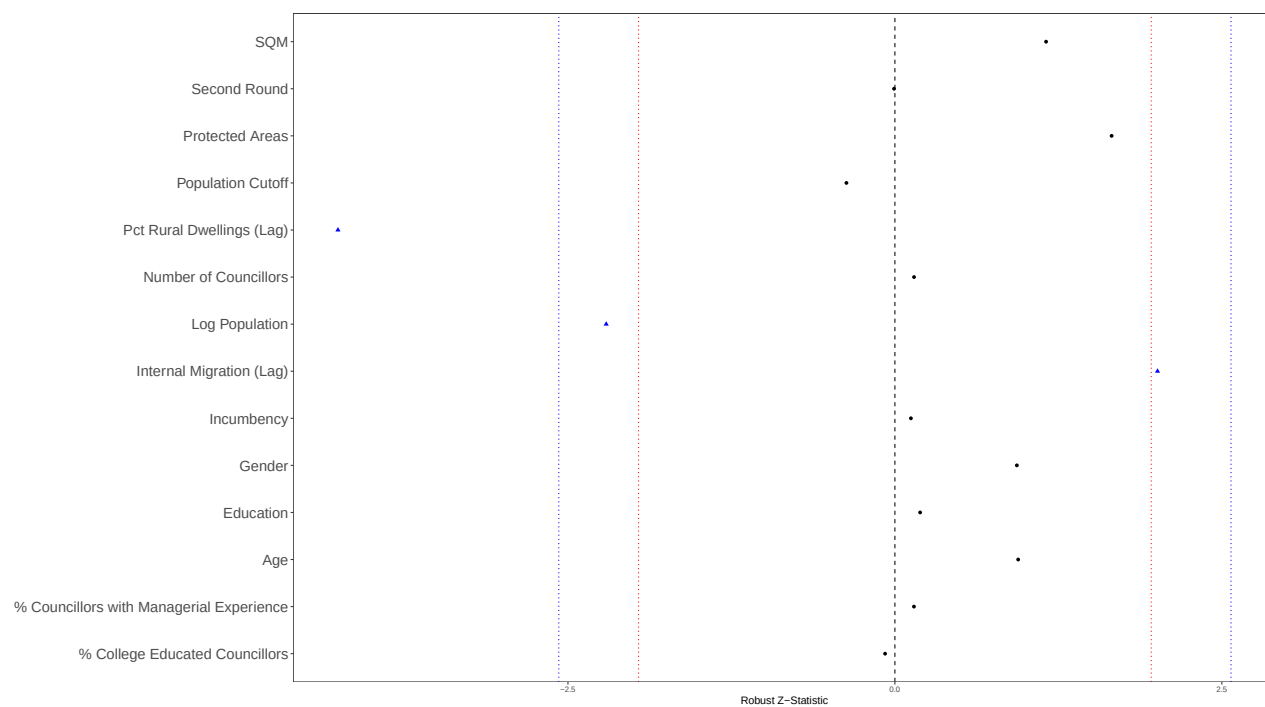


Figure S4: RD Robust Z-statistics of the effect of electing an opposition mayor on pre-treatment covariates. Vertical lines represent 99% (blue) and 95% (red) confidence intervals respectively. Estimates constructed using local polynomial estimators with triangular kernel and CER-optimal bandwidth (Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019). Robust p-values using bias-correction with cluster robust standard errors at municipality level.

E Alternative Bandwidth Estimators

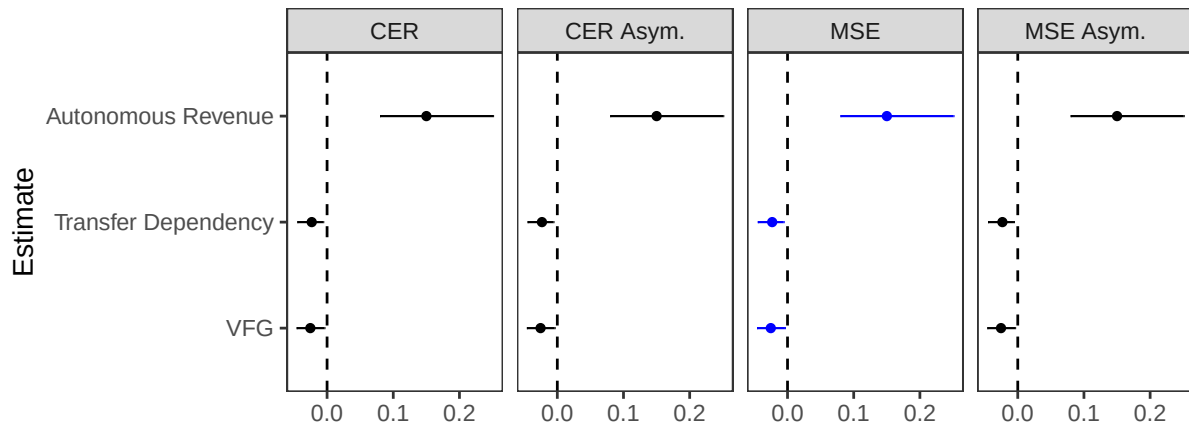


Figure S5: RD estimates with 95% cluster-robust CI of the effect of electing a PiS mayor. The alternative bandwidth estimators are mean-squared-error and coverage-error-rate optimal selectors both symmetric and asymmetric. Blue coefficient for MSE-optimal selector. All other specifications are identical to main regressions. No substantial divergences can be identified.

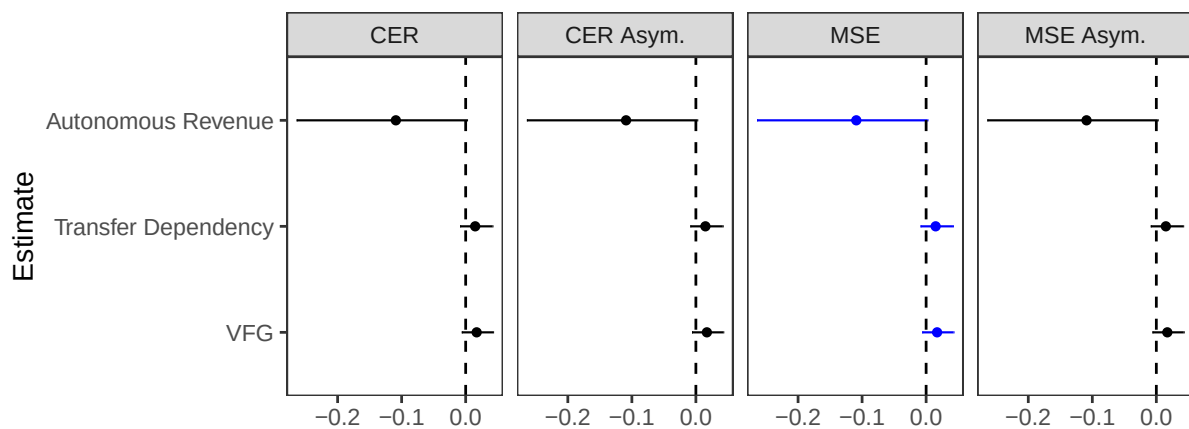


Figure S6: RD estimates with 95% cluster-robust CI of the effect of electing an opposition mayor. The alternative bandwidth estimators are mean-squared-error and coverage-error-rate optimal selectors both symmetric and asymmetric. Blue coefficient for MSE-optimal selector. All other specifications are identical to main regressions. No substantial divergences can be identified.

F Alternative Bandwidth Test

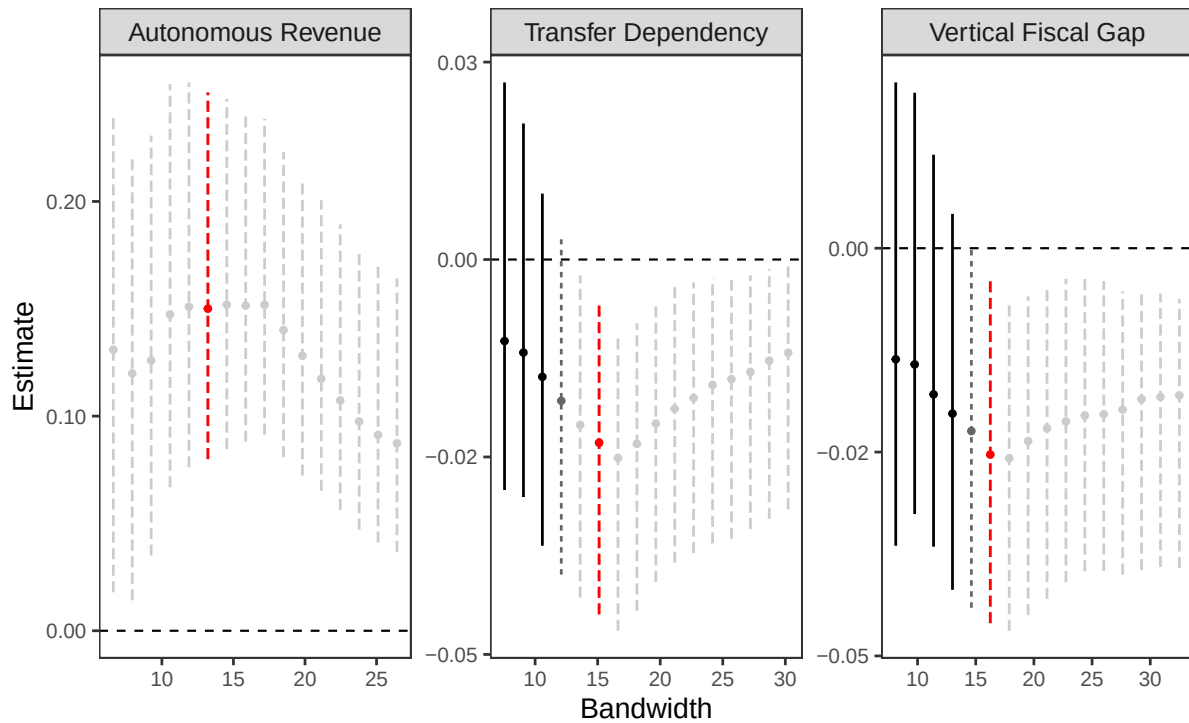


Figure S7: RD estimates with 95% cluster-robust CI of the effect of electing a PiS mayor with alternative bandwidths. Red coefficients from main analysis. Black CIs indicate non-significant results, dark gray indicate significance at the 90% level, light gray indicate significance at the 95% level. Alternative bandwidths selected automatically ranging from half to 2 times the MSE-optimal bandwidth at interval of .5. All other specifications are identical to main regressions.

G Placebo Cutoffs

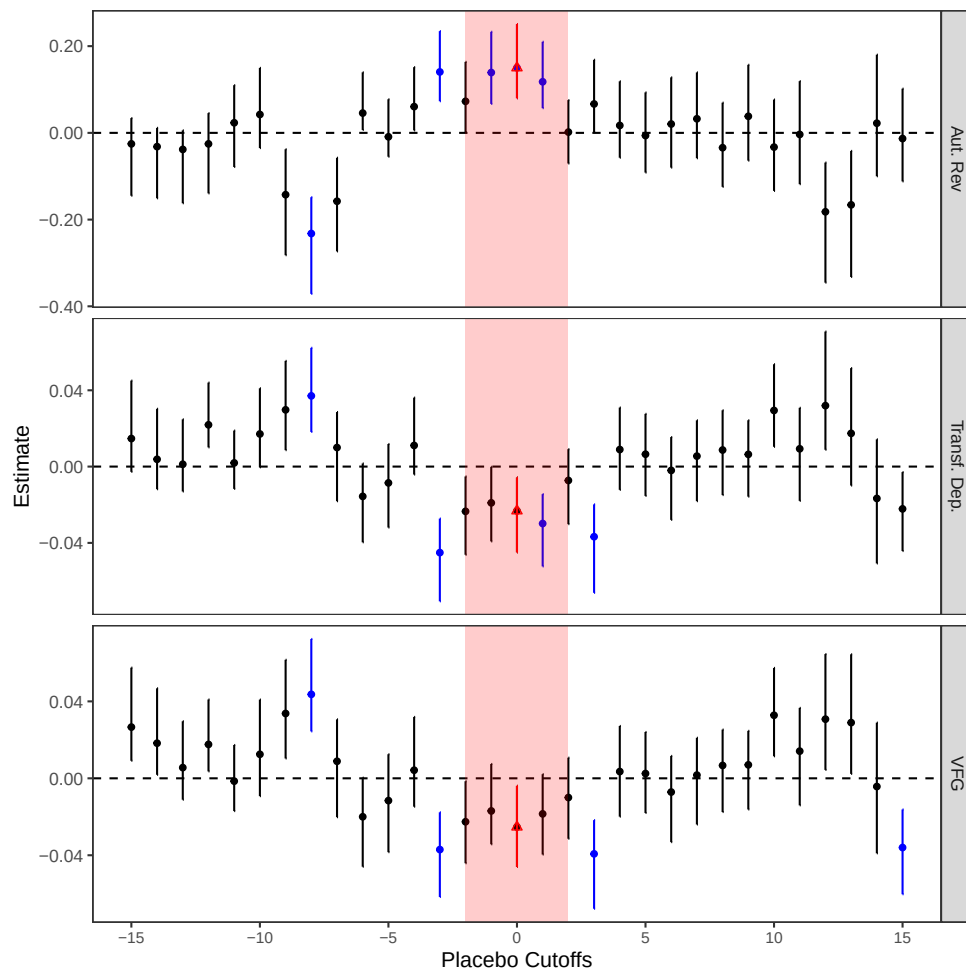


Figure S8: RD estimates with 95% cluster-robust CI of the effect of electing a PiS mayor with placebo cutoffs. Red coefficients at true cutoff (margin of victory = 0). Blue coefficients when p.value after multiple testing adjustment is smaller than 0.05. RD estimates constructed separately on control unit when placebo cutoff less than 0, and on treated unit when placebo cutoff greater than 0, as recommended by Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik (2019). All other specifications are identical to main regressions. There is no statistically significant discontinuity in 89% of the tests.

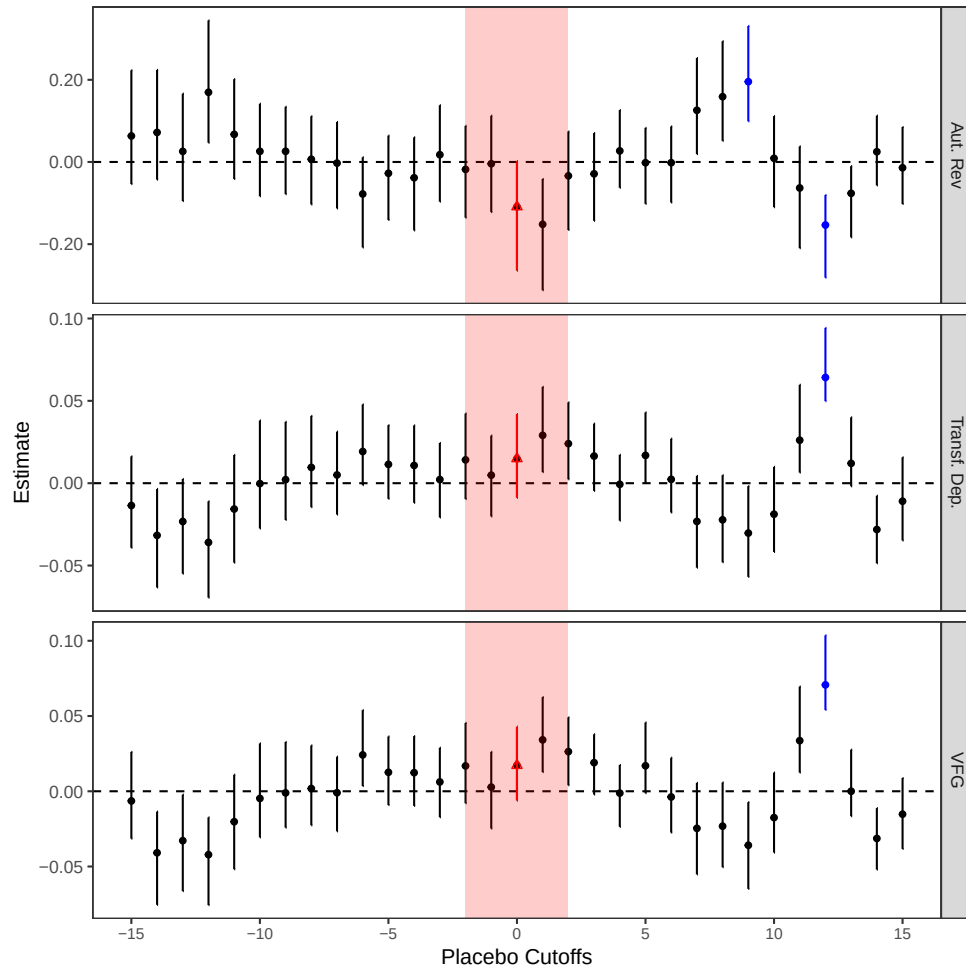


Figure S9: RD estimates with 95% cluster-robust CI of the effect of electing an opposition mayor with placebo cutoffs. Red coefficients at true cutoff (margin of victory = 0). Blue coefficients when p.value after multiple testing adjustment is smaller than 0.05. RD estimates constructed separately on control unit when placebo cutoff less than 0, and on treated unit when placebo cutoff greater than 0, as recommended by Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik (2019). All other specifications are identical to main regressions. There is no statistically significant discontinuity in 96% of the tests.

H Power Analysis

Table S5: Statistical power analysis for the PiS sample using the maximum between the actual effect size or a restrictive baseline. Calculations were performed with the *rdpower* package in R, using the same estimation process as the main results.

Outcome	Target Effect Size	Estimated Coefficient	Power
Autonomous Revenue	0.150	0.150	0.943
Transfer Dependency	0.025	-0.023	0.730
Vertical Fiscal Gap	0.025	-0.025	0.669

Table S6: Statistical power analysis for the opposition sample using the maximum between the actual effect size or a restrictive baseline. Calculations were performed with the *rdpower* package in R, using the same estimation process as the main results.

Outcome	Target Effect Size	Estimated Coefficient	Power
Autonomous Revenue	0.050	-0.109	0.121
Transfer Dependency	0.025	0.015	0.529
Vertical Fiscal Gap	0.025	0.017	0.557

Table S7: Statistical power analysis for the PiS sample using an expanded baseline effect. Calculations were performed with the *rdpower* package in R, using the same estimation process as the main results.

Outcome	Target Effect Size	Estimated Coefficient	Power
Autonomous Revenue	0.20	0.150	0.997
Transfer Dependency	0.05	-0.023	0.999
Vertical Fiscal Gap	0.05	-0.025	0.998

Table S8: Statistical power analysis for the opposition sample using an expanded baseline effect. Calculations were performed with the *rdpower* package in R, using the same estimation process as the main results.

Outcome	Target Effect Size	Estimated Coefficient	Power
Autonomous Revenue	0.20	-0.109	0.871
Transfer Dependency	0.05	0.015	0.982
Vertical Fiscal Gap	0.05	0.017	0.988