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Understanding Collective Agency in the Long-Term Perspective: A Historical Comparative Case Study of Local Government Associations in Germany and the United States

*Nathalie Behnke, Jonas Bernhard & Till Jürgens**

Abstract: »Wie man durch die Langfristperspektive ein Verständnis kollektiver Handlungsfähigkeit gewinnt: Eine historisch vergleichende Fallstudie kommunaler Spitzenverbände in Deutschland und den Vereinigten Staaten«. Although local governments play a crucial role in policy implementation in modern democracies, they have no formal rights of participation in higher level politics. To bridge this gap, local government associations (LGAs) have been established in many countries in order to represent local interests and to lobby higher level policy-making. Analysing LGAs as collective actors, we focus analytically on typical collective action problems they must solve. These are, first, attracting and keeping a broad membership and, second, arriving at joint decisions in spite of potential conflict of interest. Investigating the *core question how LGAs gain collective agency*, we argue that they need to solve those two types of collective action problems, but furthermore, country specific context factors shape the way in which they emerge and evolve. Empirically, we combine a historical reconstruction with a structured focused comparison. We analyse six LGAs in Germany and the US, going back roughly 100 years in history to reconstruct their foundational moments as well as shaping events in their development until today, structuring the narratives along the relevant categories developed in the analytic framework. The analysis reveals that indeed the collective action problems triggered largely the same mechanisms for their solution, thereby impacting in similar ways the establishment and development of LGAs in Germany and the US. Yet, persistent differences can be traced to country specific context factors, most notably the federal culture and architecture as well as specific historical events.

Keywords: Local government associations, interest representation, collective action, historical comparison, Germany, USA.

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1. Introduction¹

Local governments massively shape the social, physical, and political environment of our everyday lives. In spite of their relevance, however, they are given only a subordinate role in the political architecture of modern states. Their rights of autonomy as well as their resources are limited, while they have to fulfil tasks that have been passed onto them by higher level governments. In order to bridge the gap between a broad (and ever broadening) array of tasks and their limited political and fiscal autonomy, local governments in many democratic states have formed local government associations (LGAs).²

LGAs as voluntary collective bodies (Coleman 1979; Vanberg 1982) increase local governments' capacity to formulate joint interests and to insert and defend those interests in the national policy process. Furthermore, they foster mutual learning by horizontal information and exchange, and by providing examples of best practices. It is, however, far from obvious that LGAs be formed at all, and, if they are formed, that they be able to act successfully in defence of local interests. Rather, in forming a collective body and aiming to reach collective decisions, local governments face collective action problems (CAPs) (Hardin 1982; Olson 1965) of two types: First, as individual local governments cannot be excluded from the collective benefits of the associations' lobbying activities, they have an incentive to free-ride and to avoid membership costs, thereby putting at risk the very establishment of an LGA as well as its agency (Collective Action Problem Type I or CAP I). Second, collective decision-making in the LGA is potentially hampered by conflicts between individual members' interests and the collective aims LGAs pursue. Local governments as members of LGAs need to endorse the collective aims and accept that potentially their individual interests are overridden. Then, however, they may be tempted to act individually aside the collective actor and thereby weaken its agency (Collective Action Problem Type II or CAP II). It is thus important for LGAs to mobilize and maintain their membership, but "[a]t the same time, they are divided by cleavages such as rural/urban divide, big city/towns, institutional status (e.g., county versus district) and declining/growing areas" (Widt and Laffin 2018, 1587).

¹ We wish to thank the members of the Research Group "RUECA" for helpful comments that contributed to improving the manuscript, especially Johannes Marx and Thomas Gehring, as well as two anonymous reviewers. Research relevant to this publication was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), project no. 443226306. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support that made this research possible.

² The term "local government associations" is used here to embrace all kinds of organizations representing local governments in intergovernmental relations or lobbying (Widt and Laffin 2018; Callanan 2012). In the US, they are sometimes termed "public interest groups," which is, however, too narrow (Cigler 2012).

This investigation is motivated by the question *how LGAs gain collective agency*. We understand agency as *a collective actor's capacity to act according to its preferences*. Essentially, collective actors need to overcome the two types of collective action problems sketched above. Hence, empirically, we investigate, first, *under which conditions LGAs were established in the first place and how they gained and kept membership*. When observing present day LGAs, it is hard to discover those conditions or processes, because LGAs are institutions with a long history, embodying past experiences, decisions, or developments. It is therefore necessary to go back in history and to empirically reconstruct their foundational moments. Second, we investigate *how LGAs managed over time to continuously attract membership (CAP I) and how they prevented conflicts between individual and collective interests in decision-making, which might result in schisms or free-riding behaviour (CAP II)*. We therefore trace the development of LGAs over time in a loose long-term narrative, zooming in on relevant shaping events, organizational reforms, or noticeable moves away from the developmental path.

The analytic lens of collective action theory highlights structural problems inherent in a decision situation and thereby suggests typical institutional or procedural “solutions” that are likely to occur in a similar manner in all situations of this type. Comparative historical analysis, on the other hand, teaches us that specific solutions that are developed in distinct instances of time and space always depend on the institutional, cultural, or historical context (Thelen and Mahoney 2015; Lieberman 2001). Specifically, the “external” position of collective actors in their country is likely to have repercussions on the way in which they are able to deal with collective action problems in kind and in degree. Acknowledging this insight, it is important to systematically compare the establishment and evolution of LGAs across political systems in order to understand which of their features are reactions to the structural pressure exerted by the collective action problems and which are responses to their country-specific context.

We thus combine a historical reconstruction of the foundation and evolution of LGAs with a systematic comparison across countries. We focus on LGAs in federal states, as they have far more developed systems of intergovernmental relations between federal, regional, and local governments than unitary states.³ Comparative federalism research suggests that intergovernmental relations are shaped by the type of federalism (Bednar 2009). Thus, we compare LGAs in Germany as an ideal-type of integrated federalism and LGAs in the United States as an ideal-type of divided federalism (Hueglin and

³ To give just a few examples, in the Netherlands, although they have LGAs, the relationship with the central government is not adversarial (Widt and Laffin 2018, 1590). Callanan (2012) describes LGAs in Ireland and Denmark as weak, yet in the UK as well established and quite powerful. This comparative evidence supports our assumption, as since devolution, the UK has increasingly evolved into a federated system (Keating 2012).

Fenna 2015, 38; Kincaid 1996). In a system of integrated federalism, territorial governments are linked in cooperative networks of joint decision-making, whereas in systems of divided federalism, territorial governments tend to compete for funds or policy-success. This institutional-cultural context is likely to shape also the way in which LGAs develop and interact with other territorial and governmental actors.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section (section 2), we develop the analytic framework for investigating LGAs as collective actors. First, we elaborate the two types of collective action problems (CAP I and CAP II) and derive assumptions from the theoretical literature how those problems can systematically be solved. Then, we briefly discuss the country specific context of local governments in the two cases and outline those contextual variables that are likely to shape the LGAs' responses to CAPs. In section 3, we provide a more thorough foundation for our case selection and briefly explain our methodological approach and data access. In sections 4 and 5, we present the historical analysis in two steps, thereby elaborating the two cases – Germany and the US – in separate narratives. Section 4 discusses the founding moments, section 5 elaborates the development of LGAs over time along relevant historical events. Section 6 discusses the empirical findings related to the research questions, analysing which factors and mechanisms were used to solve the CAPs. Persisting differences can be traced to the various political, institutional, and cultural context in two antipodes of federalism. Our concluding reflections point out how our empirical results contribute analytically to collective action theory and to comparative federalism research.

2. Local Government Associations as Collective Actors – A Conceptual Framework

Local government associations have been the object of various strands of research on both sides of the Atlantic. In Germany, scholars of constitutional or administrative law described primarily their formal-legal institutional position or their historical development (Borchmann, Breithaupt, and Kaiser 2006; Jaedicke and Wollmann 1999; Riederle 1995), and insightful accounts are provided by practitioners reflecting their own institution (Henneke 2012, 2007; Articus 2007; Landsberg 2007). LGAs are rarely the subject of interest group research in Germany (Reutter 2001, 2002) or at EU level (Münch 2006; Callanan and Tatham 2014). In the extensive literature on lobbying success in the EU (see, e.g., Klüver 2013; Dür, Bernhagen, and Marshall 2015; Mahoney 2007), they are not mentioned explicitly. The connection between their external position and their lobbying success has remained largely unexplored (but see for an exception Widt and Laffin 2018). In the US, investigations of LGAs

and their role in intergovernmental lobbying date back to the 1970s (Haider 1974; Farkas 1971; Cammisa 1995; Jensen 2016; Payson 2022), providing solid empirical knowledge on LGAs' internal structures and lobbying strategies, e.g., that the kind of resources LGAs deploy are an important predictor for the choice of their lobbying strategies (Haider 1974, 227).

LGAs have, however, rarely been regarded from an analytical perspective scrutinizing systematically their behaviour as collective actors. Feiock and colleagues (Feiock 2013; Kim et al. 2022) demonstrated that the collective actor perspective offers generalizable explanations for the formation, strategies, and success of inter-organizational collaborations such as LGAs. We follow this line of research in systematically linking the agency of LGAs to collective action theory and more precisely to collective action problems. We go beyond existing research also in another aspect, as we compare LGAs across countries. So far, comparative accounts of LGAs are a rare exception (but see Callanan 2012 comparing Denmark, Ireland, and UK), and no comparison has so far been made between Germany and the US. By comparing LGAs in those two countries, the impact of context factors on the development of collective agency can be systematically traced, as there is strong reason to assume that differences in the federal culture and power distribution are consequential for the way in which CAPs can be solved by LGAs.

2.1 Collective Action Problems

Taking a perspective of LGAs as collective actors begs the core question of how they gain collective agency. We understand *collective agency as the ability of a collective actor to internally form preferences about states of the world and to take action oriented at influencing the environment in order to realize those preferred states of the world* (List and Pettit 2011, 32). Collective agency in the sense of forming preferences and taking action rests thus on the ability of LGAs to solve the two kinds of collective action problems sketched above.⁴

The first collective action problem that LGAs need to solve (CAP I) consists actually of two related problems – of *initially establishing the collective actor* and of *attracting and keeping membership* (Olson 1965; Coleman 1979; see also Preisdörfer 2011, 30ff. who calls this type of problems initiation problems). The problem is most acute at the association's foundational stage. For, if nobody is willing to incur the costs needed for establishing it and for joining it, then it will never come into existence. Yet it remains also a persistent challenge over time to attract new members and not to lose existing members. The establishment of a collective actor is thus in itself a collective action problem (Olson 1965, 11). Organizational templates can contribute to lowering

⁴ We focus here entirely on the “internal dimension” of agency, i.e., the solution of collective action problems. The “external dimension,” i.e., the question how successfully LGAs represent their interests in the outer world, is still under empirical investigation.

initiation costs. The remaining costs can be provided either by compulsory co-funding or by a political entrepreneur. Compulsory co-funding can be more easily organized in a small and homogenous group based on reciprocity (Preisendörfer 2011, 30ff.). Political entrepreneurs may have their own reasons for establishing a collective actor, e.g., they seek reputation and recognition, or they expect individual benefits from the existence of the collective actor greater than the initiation costs (Olson 1965, 34f.).

The decision to join an LGA (or not to leave it) essentially depends on a favourable cost-benefit-analysis for potential members, in our case local governments. Basically, they will decide to join an LGA (or not to leave it) if the expected benefits exceed the expected costs. If a collective actor wants to attract (and keep) members, it will thus likely employ strategies to keep entry costs low. Another strategy is the provision of selective benefits for members (Olson 1965, 132ff.), from which non-members can be more effectively excluded than from the collective goods that are the primary purpose of the collective actor. We can thus infer from the theory of collective action that organizational templates, compulsory co-funding, or political entrepreneurship are factors helping to overcome the foundational aspect of CAP I, while strategies for improving the expected net benefit for members such as low entry costs and selective incentives are potential mechanisms for solving the attracting membership aspect of CAP I.

Once the association has been established, it faces another collective action problem of *securing support by its members for the association's goals in spite of potential conflict of interest* (CAP II). Similar to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Stag Hunt" example, where the group of hunters fail to jointly bag the stag because every hunter feels it is more sensible to individually pursue the hare (Skyrms 2001), in LGAs the members may feel that it pays more for them to individually represent their own interests in intergovernmental lobbying activities rather than subordinate their own interests to the collectively defined goal of the association. If, however, the members do not support the association's joint preference and try to pursue instead individual lobbying strategies, they severely weaken the association's collective agency. By joining an LGA, local governments relinquish some part of their autonomy of decision to the collective actor. When it comes to collective decision-making, individual members may re-claim their autonomy by trying to influence the collective outcome in their favour or by outright leaving the collective actors (at least for the issue at stake) and pursuing their own interests individually (Preisendörfer 2011, 33ff.).⁵ This problem will henceforth be addressed as CAP II.

⁵ Technically, two distinct decisions are involved in this problem from the members' point of view – to accept or not that one's own opinion is overridden in a collective decision; and to refrain or not from pursuing one's interests individually. The problem to be solved by the collective actor is, however, the same – to induce a collective orientation among its members.

In order to solve this problem, the collective actor must reach consented autonomy from the individual interests of its members. To this aim, most organizations develop structures of horizontal and vertical division of labour. Professionalization, specialization, and institutional differentiation ease decision processes and improve the quality of decisions. This internal differentiation may result in a hierarchization of the organization, if members agree to delegate decision power to permanent officials, similar to what Robert Michels lucidly described over 100 years ago (1911, 23ff.) in his “iron law on oligarchy.” He showed that sooner or later collective actors (in his treatment: parties) will establish hierarchically superior sub-groups endowed with the power to take collectively binding decisions. Internal differentiation may also be found in “softer” forms, however, by including members in varying degrees in the decision process (e.g., committees exemplify this latter mechanism which profit from expertise and participation of members in the preparation of decisions).

2.2 The Federal Context

As was elaborated in the preceding section, LGAs mainly aim to pool the interests of their member local governments and to represent those interests in lobbying activities or negotiations with higher level governments. While the formation of a local government association appears to be the most straightforward response to fulfilling this general purpose, the focus of LGAs’ activities as well as specific organizational structures and processes are supposedly also influenced by the position that local governments and local government associations have in their country’s political architecture and culture. Germany and the US represent in this respect two opposite cases of power distribution in the universe of federal or multilevel states (Mueller and Fenna 2022). Germany is often regarded as the archetype of administrative or executive federalism, marked by a functional division of tasks between the federal and the regional levels and by multiple forms of institutionalized cooperation, coordination, and co-decision-making (see, e.g., Auel 2014; Behnke 2020). The US, in contrast, has no clear power distribution between the levels of government, resulting in a competitive pattern of intergovernmental relations (Volden 2005; Kenyon and Kincaid 1991) which is nonetheless marked by intense coordination (Kincaid 1996; Stephens and Wikstrom 2007).

It is plausible to assume that those institutional and cultural differences impact also the chances of LGAs to gain agency. Very fundamentally, due to the competitive culture of American federalism where governments at all levels are used to pursuing interests individually and in potential opposition to others, LGAs might have a harder job in inducing cooperative attitudes among their members than in Germany, where a cooperative tradition is deeply ingrained in the federal culture and most policies are negotiated in informal

oversized coalitions across party camps and levels of government. More specifically, the constitutional power distribution also impacts the political and fiscal autonomy of local governments and hence their action capacity and interests (Steytler 2005).

In both countries, local governments are formally subordinated to regional governments – the “Länder” in Germany and the “States” in the US⁶ – and subject to regionally varying state constitutions. In Germany, despite a certain degree of regional variation, local governments are guaranteed a broad autonomy of action in their territory by article 28 of the Basic Law (Ruge and Rittgen 2021). In the US, levels of autonomy and tax defining, levying, or varying powers diverge far more widely between states (Berman 2019, 85; Paganò 2009), depending on the prevalence in a state of either “home rule,” meaning the right of local governments to exercise tasks autonomously, or so-called “Dillon’s Rule,” according to which local governments depend on legislative permission by states for their activities (Richardson 2011). Hence, while local governments in Germany can jointly rely on the constitution to claim their rights of autonomy, the fragmented legal landscape in the US makes it harder for local governments to form a unified position.

Financial resources of local governments are composed in both countries by a mix of own revenues (taxes, local fees, and others) and grants (conditional or unconditional grants) transferred to them by higher level governments. German local governments’ revenues are stable and largely unconditional as they participate in the distribution of shared taxes (Bury and Feld 2020, 31ff.) and receive relatively large unconditional grants from their Land government by way of the regional fiscal equalization schemes. Direct funding from the federal government to local governments, in contrast, is forbidden by the Basic Law (articles 84 and 85). US local governments lack a comparatively stable stream of revenues. Revenues from own taxes are more susceptible to economic cycles and grants from higher level governments make up the major share of local revenues (Fisher 2023, 13). This institutional structure sets different lobbying incentives in the two countries: In Germany, local governments mainly aim at jointly influencing legislation from which all would profit financially. In the US, lobbying activities are rather aimed at securing grants-in-aid, which may however be directed to them individually rather than to the local level in general (Berman 2019, 22).

⁶ Throughout these contributions, whenever we refer to regional levels in both countries jointly or comparatively, for the sake of simplifying the expressions, we will use the term “states.” When we refer exclusively to the regional level in Germany, this is indicated by using the term “Länder.”

3. Case Selection, Design, and Data

This study combines a historical reconstructive narrative with a systematic comparison of two countries. The rationale for the selection of Germany and the US as two opposite cases of federal culture and power distribution was elaborated in the preceding section. More specifically, we selected a set of LGAs based on the distinction made by German administrative law between three types of local authorities: cities and municipalities which also belong to a county; cities independent of counties in various sizes; and counties. For the sake of comparability, we ignore the variety of other territorial or functional local authorities that American federalism has produced and focus on those three types and their respective representative associations. Those are in Germany

- Deutscher Städtetag (Association of German Cities), in the following abbreviated as **“DST”**;
- Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund (German Union of Cities and Municipalities), in the following abbreviated as **“DStGB”**;
- Deutscher Landkreistag (Association of German Counties), in the following abbreviated as **“DLT.”**

In the US, the respective associations are

- National League of Cities, in the following abbreviated as **“NLC”**;
- US Conference of Mayors, in the following abbreviated as **“USCM”**;
- National Association of Counties, in the following abbreviated as **“NACo.”**

NLC represents the entire urban sphere of government, DST and USCM represent bigger cities, DStGB advocates the interests of smaller cities and municipalities, and DLT and NACo stand for the interests of counties. All six LGAs have in common that they are all-purpose and country-wide associations that lobby for local governments interests at the federal level, and with the exception of USCM all have working associations at the state level. Also, in both countries those LGAs represent the vast majority of their respective group of local governments. Among German LGAs, indirect membership prevails, making the national associations umbrella organizations of their regional divisions. Only DST allows both direct membership of cities and membership of regional associations. In the US, all three LGAs are based on individual membership. Only NLC also counts state leagues among its members and thus has a membership structure similar to that of DST. In both countries, LGAs are tax exempt due to the charitable nature of their organizations. While all LGAs rely on membership dues, US LGAs generate considerable income from donations, sponsorship, and service fees.

The historical reconstructive narrative is organized in a common structure, elaborating the foundation (chapter 4) and development (chapter 5) of the three major LGAs in Germany and the US, respectively. The time line loosely follows the chronological development focusing on relevant trends and events until the present days; more relevant for structuring the narratives is, however, the set of explanatory factors that was developed in the preceding chapter. In this sense, the country studies can best be described as a structured-focused comparison (George and Bennett 2005, 67ff.). Historically, the oldest associations were founded by cities. Consequently, in the historical reconstruction of founding moments we choose different points in time, highlighting the foundation of the DST (beginning in the late 19th century) in Germany and of the NLC (beginning in 1924) in the US. The other associations followed more or less their example. The elaboration of the LGAs' evolution takes all associations into account. The depth of description varies, unfortunately, due to uneven availability of historical information. Paradoxically, the more recent past is less well documented than the LGAs' beginnings until roughly the 1970s.

The narrative reconstructions are based on secondary literature as well as archival material and historical sources retrieved from institutional websites. For the US case studies, we relied primarily on classic texts on urban lobbying (especially Haider 1974; Farkas 1971; Arnold and Plant 1994), on publications and website information of the LGAs, and on findings of a report to the *National Resources Committee* published by Harold D. Smith⁷ (Smith 1939). For the German case studies, we relied on three types of sources: First, since LGAs in Germany have hardly been studied (Widt and Laffin 2018; but see in recent years on the "Länder" level Brüsewitz 2017; Klausch 2020), we draw on several older contributions from a public administration perspective (Jaedicke and Wollmann 1999; Reutter 2001, 2002; Seeger 1988). Second, a number of publications from former LGAs' association officials documenting the emergence and evolution of LGAs offer an insider's perspective (Ziebill 1955; Berkenhoff 1964; Göb 1966; Schnell 1970; Groeben and Heide 1981). Third, we explore a large number of primary sources, such as historical statutes, negotiation records, resolutions, and internal correspondences.⁸

⁷ Harold D. Smith was Director of the Bureau of the Budget in the administration of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1939 and 1946. The report was part of the Supplementary Report of the Urbanism Committee, published in 1939.

⁸ We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Berlin State Archive and the US Library of Congress by granting us access to their extensive and valuable collections of LGAs during the early 20th century.

4. Founding Moments

The reconstruction of founding moments of LGAs follows the relevant factors that were identified in section 2 above as potentially contributing to solving collective action problems of type I. To begin with, we outline which historical circumstances or developments increased the problem pressure so as to make the foundation of LGAs an attractive if not necessary option. This step is necessary if we interpret LGAs as institutional solutions for cooperation problems (Feiock, Krause, and Hawkins 2017). We then go on describing strategies of reducing initiation costs for making the foundation of LGAs possible. In the third subsection, we investigate strategies employed by the newly founded LGAs to improve the cost-benefit calculus of potential or actual members.

4.1 Germany

Triggering Problems and Conflicts

The history of local interest representation in Germany does not begin with the formal foundation of the DST on November 27, 1905, but dates back to the second half of the 19th century (Ziebill 1955, 9). Following the Prussian municipal reform of 1808 (“Steinsche Städteordnung”), local self-government had gained importance, which further increased in parallel to accelerating industrialization and urbanization. The range of tasks of local governments expanded from administrative and regulatory tasks to economic, social, and cultural services, creating a sense of shared local interests which needed to be defended vis-à-vis higher-level governments (Henneke 2012, 87). Since no national authority governing the entire German territory had existed before 1871, local governments directed their efforts of interest representation to their respective “Land” (Engeli 1978, 410). Concomitantly, LGAs were initially founded in the German “Länder” and in Prussia at the provincial level. “Städtetage” (congresses of cities) were first formed in Silesia and Saxony (1863), followed by Hanover (1866) and Thuringia (1869). In Prussia, provincial congresses of cities were established in Brandenburg (1873), Pomerania (1875) and Westphalia (1876). Gradually, a system of regional congresses of cities expanded, which is still an essential basis for local interest representation in Germany today.

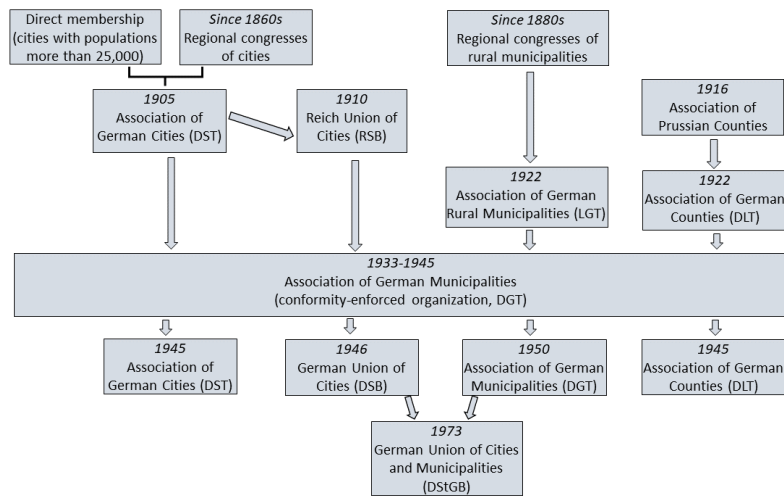
In the mid-19th century, following the revolution of 1848/49, several attempts at forming a nationwide LGA were either stopped by the Prussian government or failed due to lack of support by local authorities (Ziebill 1955, 13f.; 26-9). On the eve of the 20th century, however, the circumstances of local interest representation had changed fundamentally. As a consequence of German state building and the increasing impact of federal legislation on local

politics, the need for horizontal cooperation could no longer be met by the traditional framework of regional LGAs (Reutter 2002, 1577f.). Additionally, there was a growing conflict between urban and agricultural interests (Reutter 2001, 138). Supported by the influential “Bund der Landwirte” (Farmers’ Association), the Reich government pursued a protective trade policy, which had negative effects on urban populations. Eventually, supply problems and increasing meat prices triggered the foundation of the DST in 1905, establishing the first nationwide LGA in Germany (Weinberger 1982a, 475).

Mainly for reasons of prestige, the DST stipulated a population of 25,000 inhabitants as a requirement for direct membership (Geißelmann 1975, 17). Nevertheless, smaller cities could join the DST via regional associations. In 1910, 40 formally indirect member cities seceded from the DST to form the “Reich Union of Cities” (*Reichsstädtebund/RSB*), henceforth representing the small and mid-sized cities, as they felt their interests were not appropriately considered (Berkenhoff 1964, 14-8). The secession had been triggered by demands of the smaller cities to establish a nationwide municipal savings bank to finance local projects (Landsberg 2008, 21). They were, however, outvoted by the big cities dominating the DST.

In rural areas, legal bases of rural municipalities and counties varying between the German states delayed the formation of nationwide LGAs until the early 1920s. In contrast to urban spheres, economic structural change had caused a rural exodus and the deterioration of public infrastructures, urging local governments to cooperate for infrastructural improvements (Tiedeken 1982, 485). During World War I, rural municipalities and counties, unlike cities, were excluded from the administrative bodies managing the national war economy because they had no umbrella associations. As a response, in 1916, the Association of Prussian Counties formed, which initiated the Association of German Counties (*Deutscher Landkreistag/DLT*) in 1922 (Groeben and Heide 1981, 30-2, 35-8). Building on rural municipality associations that had existed independently in the eastern and western provinces of Prussia since the late 1880s and 1890s, the Association of German Rural Communities (*Deutscher Landgemeindetag/LGT*) also formed in 1922 (Göb 1966, 7-10).

Figure 1 Genesis of LGAs in Germany



Source: Own depiction based on the DStGB website.⁹

Reducing Initiation Costs

When the nationwide LGAs formed in the first quarter of the 20th century, the German “Länder” and Prussian provinces already had a long tradition of regional LGAs. Providing a role model for the DST, the Association of Prussian Cities was founded in 1896, the first umbrella association that assembled individual cities as well as regional LGAs (Bingham 2008, 38). The DST later adopted a similar structure and incorporated two-thirds of the member base from the Association of Prussian Cities (Meyer and Meyer-Woeller 2005, 21), allowing the association to build upon existing organizational templates and social networks. DLT and LGT also followed regional predecessors, but persisted as pure umbrella associations of regional LGAs. RSB, on the other hand, had only direct members in its early years (Kottenberg 1960, 168), some of which had already gained experience in the DST and in the regional LGAs before.

In addition to predecessor organizations at the regional level providing organizational templates, the commitment of influential mayors of big cities played a crucial role in the DST’s establishment. On the occasion of the upcoming German Cities Exhibition in 1903, Otto Beutler, the mayor of Dresden, sent an invitation to all cities with over 25,000 inhabitants to attend the preliminary meeting of the DST. From September 1 to 3, 1903, around 350 delegates from 146 city administrations all over the German Reich met in the ballroom of Dresden’s urban exhibition palace to discuss “the social tasks of

⁹ <https://www.dstgb.de/ueber-uns/die-geschichte-des-verbands/> (Accessed January 03, 2023).

German cities” (Meyer and Meyer-Woeller 2005, 19f.). In preparing this meeting, Beutler had closely coordinated with his colleague from Frankfurt, Franz Adickes, and with the mayor of Berlin, Martin Kirschner, who was also chairman of the Association of Prussian Cities (Ziebill 1955, 30f.). Acting as political entrepreneurs, the three mayors had to take on significant parts of the DST’s initiation costs but were equally able to shape the association’s establishment in line with their preferences. At the DST’s preliminary meeting, Adickes acted as keynote speaker, Kirschner was appointed the interim chairman (*Vorsitzender*), and Beutler introduced a resolution that commissioned the conference board (*Tagungsvorstand*) to “take the preparations necessary for the Congress of German Cities to become a permanent institution and to convene the next Congress of Cities within the next three years.”¹⁰ On November 27, 1905, the first general meeting of the DST took place, at which 144 cities which had previously declared their membership and accepted the draft statutes. Beutler and Adickes were elected to the executive board (*Vorstand*), Kirschner was appointed as chairman officially, and Berlin was chosen as the home-base of the association.¹¹

Cost-Benefit-Calculus

Local governments that joined LGAs could benefit in many respects. First, adopting resolutions at the general meetings and, from 1914 onward, sending delegates to state advisory boards, they were given the opportunity to have their voice heard by the federal government. Second, they were able to shape the further development of LGAs through collective decision-making. Third, members of LGAs enjoyed special services from LGAs’ central offices (*Hauptgeschäftsstellen*), such as monthly newsletters and technical advice for local administrations. Fourth, LGAs provided valuable platforms for their members for networking and sharing best practices with local authorities across regional borders.

Rights and obligations of LGAs’ members at the time of foundation can be best illustrated with the statutes of the DST from 1905/06. In paragraph 1, the DST declared itself

an association of German cities and associations of cities, which has set the mission to foster the welfare of the communities belonging to it, to protect the collective interests of the cities, and to support knowledge exchange and development of administrative institutions among themselves.¹²

The DST pursued this general purpose by “holding general meetings temporarily, by maintaining its own office, by occasional publications, and by establishing and maintaining a library” (paragraph 6, translation by the

¹⁰ Transcript of the final report of the preliminary DST in Dresden (1903), LAB 142-01 (190), translation by the authors.

¹¹ Negotiation records of the first DST in Berlin (1905), LAB 142-01 (190).

¹² Statutes of the DST (1906), LAB 142-01 (596), translation by the authors.

authors). Members of the DST sent delegates to the general meetings (*Hauptversammlung*), which were scheduled to take place every three years, and elected a twelve-person executive board. Each member city had one vote, and one additional vote per 100,000 inhabitants. The statutes did not mention any qualified majority requirements for collective decision-making. Presumably, most decisions were taken by unanimity, but it is also possible that in contentious decisions, simple majority voting may have been sufficient. In order to cover running expenses, member cities had to pay an annual fee depending on population size (at least 30 Reichsmark per year), which was set by the executive board. Additionally, member cities were obliged to give copies of relevant printed papers to the DST's library. In sum, given the numerous benefits on the one hand and only limited financial costs and obligations on the other, the risk-benefit ratio for potential members was rather favourable.

4.2 United States

Triggering Problems and Conflicts

Beginning in the 1890s, increasing corruption and inefficiency in American cities encouraged urban citizens to establish municipal reform associations “to challenge parties as the leaders of public opinion in city matters” (Liazos 2019, 29). In reaction to the pressure by those citizen associations, urban public officials in Indiana, California, Iowa, Michigan, and Wisconsin created their own organizations – so called state leagues – with individual cities as members (Arnold and Plant 1994, 60). The objectives of state leagues were to increase cooperation between cities, to provide information for local governments, and to strengthen interest representation towards state governments (Smith 1939, 182).

Two decades later, state leagues were not able to sufficiently fulfil their tasks anymore and therefore founded a national umbrella association, the American Municipal Association (AMA) – predecessor of today's National League of Cities (NLC) – in 1924. According to Clifford W. Ham, Executive Director of AMA between 1936 and 1939, demands by state leagues for a “central office which would coordinate the policies and practices of the leagues in various states” (Ham 1937, 1137) were the main reason for the foundation of the AMA. In its early years, the AMA exclusively admitted state leagues as its members. Its central task was to support state leagues, organize an annual conference for nationwide discussion of municipal affairs, and to represent local governments before the US Congress (Smith 1939).

In the early 1930s, another LGA entered federal politics. At this time, US cities were challenged by ongoing economic depression and high unemployment. As a means to cope with those challenges, mayors of big cities founded the United States Conference of Mayors (USCM) in 1932 (Farkas 1971, 37).

They founded a new organization beside the existing AMA because they were unable to participate directly in AMA due to its state league membership model. In contrast, USCM was organized as a direct membership association for cities with at least 50,000 inhabitants (Arnold and Plant 1994, 77). In contrast to AMA, with its main focus on strengthening horizontal municipal cooperation, USCM emphasized lobbying federal politics (Plant 1993, 227). This aim was bolstered by USCM's close relationship with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who even joined meetings of USCM's executive committee on a regular basis (Farkas 1971, 178). Thus, USCM managed to become an important lobbying group in the New Deal era (see Flanagan 1999).

County governments were lacking a comparable nationwide association for a long time. Like their urban counterparts, first county associations at the state level had been founded since the late 19th century. But only in 1936, the National Association of County Officials (NACo) was founded (later it was renamed to National Association of Counties). Annual conferences, jointly assembling state associations, and individual county officials furthered NACo's main aim to increase cooperation and knowledge exchange between counties (Duncombe 1966; Clarke 2007). Beside those conferences, however, during the first 20 years of its existence, NACo remained rather inactive (Haider 1974, 32).

Reducing Initiation Costs

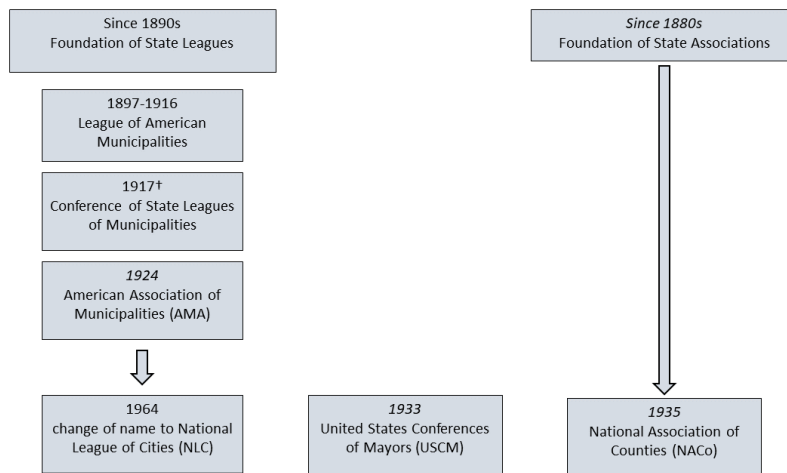
In their early years, all three LGAs could make use of organizational templates and resources of existing organizations. As the initiative for the foundation of the AMA had been taken by John Stutz, Executive Director of the League of Kansas Municipalities, AMA used the headquarters and the staff of the Kansas state league for the first eight years of its existence (Smith 1939, 200f.). Since 1932, AMA supported the newly founded USCM by sharing its new headquarters in Chicago, staff, and even its Executive Director Paul Betters, who fulfilled this position for both LGAs (Haider 1974, 3). However, as Betters spent more and more of his time for USCM affairs, AMA terminated his employment contract (*ibid.*). Betters remained Executive Director of USCM for more than two decades and was an important figure for its further development. In a slightly different manner, NACo also found a way to use external organizational resources in its early years, as it was run as a side business by a law firm (Haider 1974, 32).

All LGAs were thus able to reduce their initiation costs by using resources of existing organizations. While AMA and USCM used these organizational templates to create their own resources and to establish themselves as interest groups, NACo failed to expand its capacities and consequently remained in a shadowy existence at this time.

Cost-Benefit Calculus

To attract members, from the moment of its foundation on, AMA provided a variety of services to them and was able to keep membership fees low. Cities paid their membership fees only to their respective state leagues, who passed five cents for each of its member cities on to AMA (Smith 1939, 201). The state leagues, in turn, offered attractive conditions for their members by charging lower fees per capita with increasing size of cities (Smith 1939, 197; American Municipal Association 1942, 52-61). In contrast to AMA, USCM did not offer a comparable number of own services and had a stronger focus on advocating federal politics, but had established partnerships with other public organizations – including AMA – for offering some of their services to its members (Farkas 1971, 44f.). USCM was also financed by membership fees, which did not repel potential members. Rather, the fact that 85 of 94 cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants were USCM members indicates the cost-benefit ratio it offered was regarded as favourable. NACo was initially not based at all on institutional membership but was only supported by 3,000 individual county officials (Haider 1974, 32). Still, 20 years after the foundation of NACo, its low activities caused dissatisfaction among public officials, as Haider described: “County officials from California, the strongest state member, threatened to pull out of NACo [sic!] unless the organization found a full-time executive director” (Haider 1974, 32). In order to counter this negative reputation and to expand its capabilities and services, its first Executive Director, Bernard Hillenbrand, was appointed in 1957, making an important step towards professionalization (Arnold and Plant 1994, 100).

Figure 2 Genesis of LGAs in the United States



Source: Own depiction.

5. Evolution

In reconstructing the evolution of LGAs over time, we do not follow a strict chronology over a century; rather, we zoom in on those events and periods that marked relevant changes or turning points for LGAs' development of agency. The country studies are structured according to the factors that help solving CAP I and II as identified in section 2 above. At this point, it is necessary to take into account the political context, i.e., the influential historical events, institutional structures, or power relations that formed the conditions in which LGAs evolved. They are thus sketched in the next subsection to provide the broader picture in which the evolutionary processes are embedded. We then analyse the development of membership numbers and structure as well as instances of competition among LGAs. Loss of membership or the emergence of competing LGAs indicate that CAP I has not satisfactorily been solved in the long run, while increasing membership, broadening the membership base, or the joining of LGAs indicate success in solving CAP I. Finally, we point out tendencies of professionalization, specialization, and institutional differentiation as indicators that CAP II is being solved. Jointly, those three aspects provide the empirical basis for assessing similarities and differences in the degree of collective agency that LGAs could reach as well as the mode by which they reached it.

5.1 Germany

Political Context

Among the historical events that significantly shaped the evolution of German LGAs over the past century, three periods stand out in particular: World War I, the National Socialist accession to power in 1933, and the democratic reconstruction of Germany after World War II.

World War I not only intensified local cooperation but also provided LGAs with opportunities to influence federal policy-making. Since local governments fulfilled the basic function of managing the production and distribution of food in times of war, they became "valued partners in national social and economic management" (Bingham 2008, 38) for the Reich government. Representatives of the nationwide associations DST and RSB were appointed to advise several wartime administrative bodies and companies (see Kottenberg 1960, 169; Ziebill 1955, 40f.), resulting in power shifts from the regional to the nationwide associations. Although the LGAs' involvement in federal policy-making declined after the end of the war (Henneke 2007, 985), they were able to secure their positions in advisory boards of the Reich ministries and agencies and successfully intensified personal contacts and informal networks with the ministerial bureaucracy during the Weimar Republic (Schwartzing 2006, 100f.).

Shortly after the National Socialists had come to power in 1933, the four existing LGAs were forcibly merged into the “Association of German Municipalities” (*Deutscher Gemeindetag/DGT*), establishing a public corporation with compulsory membership for all German local governments under the supervision of the Reich Ministry of the Interior (Groeben and Heide 1981, 166-9). Its tasks were limited to providing technical advice to local governments and issuing expert opinions upon request (Matzerath 1970, 167). While NSDAP officials headed the association, most staff were recruited from the former LGAs (Matzerath 1970, 166). In October 1945, the Allied Control Council dissolved the DGT by decree.

After the collapse of the Nazi regime, local governments remained the only functioning administrative units in Germany (Weinberger 1982a, 476). Analogous to World War I, local governments as providers of basic services were all the more indispensable in this transitional situation, which added to their external acceptance. Initially, the Allies prohibited the formation of LGAs; instead, informal meetings of mayors and administrative directors from neighbouring districts were held in the respective occupation zones (Ziebill 1955, 66f.). When LGAs were re-established, they linked back, in a path-dependent manner, to the four organizations that had existed before 1933 (Jaedicke and Wollmann 1999, 308). In August 1945, Konrad Adenauer, then Mayor of Cologne, initiated the re-establishment of the DST (Meyer and Meyer-Woeller 2005, 69f.), which resumed work after approval by the British military government in 1946. Likewise, the LGAs of municipalities and counties reorganized themselves in Western Germany, with the efforts of former association officials and local politicians from the Weimar period playing a decisive role. In Eastern Germany, by contrast, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands/SED*) suppressed all attempts of effective local interest representation during the GDR period. A state-controlled unitary association named Association of German Cities and Municipalities (*Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindetag/DSGT*) existed there from 1955 until 1974. As local governments lacked autonomy in the “democratic socialism” of the GDR (Naumann and Träger 2000, 54), their association was hardly comparable to its West German counterparts.

Despite varying party-political, socio-economic, and constitutional conditions, little has changed in the basic architecture of the local interest representation since the foundation of the Federal Republic in 1949. However, corresponding to the increasing complexity and multi-level interdependencies in the setting of policy formulation and implementation (Scharpf, Reissert, and Schnabel 1976; Benz, Scharpf, and Zintl 1992; Kropp 2010), the LGAs’ formal rights to influence federal policy-making were expanded over the decades (Brüsewitz 2017, 35). Following the recommendations of the Enquête Commission on Constitutional Reform (*Enquête-Kommission Verfassungsreform*) in 1976, rights of the LGAs to be heard were implemented in the

procedural rules of the German Bundestag and of the federal ministries, respectively. Additionally, LGAs were represented in numerous federal committees and advisory councils (Jaedicke and Wollmann 1999, 319; Seeger 1988, 190f.), enabling them to voice common local interests at early stages of the policy process. Although LGAs were thus in a privileged position compared to other business or public interests, given the absence of a formal LGA veto-position, their factual influence on federal policies had to be recurrently negotiated with the federal government (Reutter 2001, 143).

Membership and Competition

The development of membership reflects a higher degree of organization since the LGAs' founding period (see table 1 below). In light of the new opportunities to benefit from horizontal cooperation and the involvement of LGAs in the policy-making process, their member base increased steadily until the end of the Weimar Republic (see, e.g., Ziebill 1955; Berkenhoff 1964). During the post-war period, LGAs were re-established only in Western Germany, where they could build on their pre-1933 size. Immediately after the German Reunification in 1990, five regional associations for cities and municipalities were formed in the new "Länder." Additionally, following an Eastern German district reform in 1993/1994, five regional associations for counties were formed. All of them immediately joined the corresponding nationwide associations. Up to the present day, almost every local government in Germany has joined an LGA.

Table 1 Membership Development of LGAs in Germany

	DST Since 1905	RSB (DSB) 1910-1973	LGT (DGT) 1922-1973	DStGB Since 1973	DLT Since 1922
Early 20th century	144 (I)/7 (R) [status: 1905]	40* [status: 1910]	-	-	-
Post-World War I	187 (I)/11 (R) [status: 1918]	1035* [status: 1920]	-	-	-
Weimar Republic	300 (I)/12 (R) [status: 1928]	1484* [status: 1929]	7 (R) [status: 1922]	-	12 (R) [status: 1924]
Post-World War II	133 (I)/12 (R) [status: 1952]	491* [status: 1956]	9 (R) [status: 1956]	-	7 (R) [status: 1956]
Federal Republic	141 (I)/11 (R) [status: 1971]	535* [status: 1971]	10 (R) [status: 1964]	12 (R) [status: 1975]	8 (R) [status: 1965]
Current status 2022	195 (I)/16 (R)	-	-	17 (R)	13 (R)

Notes: (I) = individual membership, (R) = regional associations. *Total number including indirect members; membership of regional LGAs of RSB (DSB) cannot be reconstructed retrospectively.

Source: Authors' own compilation based on secondary literature and annual reports of LGAs.

The coexistence of separate LGAs mirrors the divergent interests of cities, municipalities, and counties respectively (Borchmann, Breithaupt, and Kaiser 2006, 223), thereby hampering the local governments' ability to speak with one voice. Thus, in order to strengthen the LGAs' negotiation position in the federal power-game, LGAs cooperate as much as possible. From the early 1920s, regular meetings between the LGAs' managing directors were held (Meyer and Meyer-Woeller 2005, 34). In 1953, all LGAs jointly established an umbrella organization named "Federal Union of the Local Government Associations" (*Bundesvereinigung der kommunalen Spitzenverbände/BVkom*). The BVkom has been coordinating LGAs' activities and representing general local interests with greater emphasis than a single LGA could do (Berkenhoff 1975, 83f.; Groeben and Heide 1981, 308; Weinberger 1982b, 504f.). In particular, the BVkom provides statements to federal ministries and parliamentary committees for legislative hearings if the LGAs can agree on a common position.

Given the political and economic weight of the big cities, the DST took on a leadership role among the German LGAs at all times. Since the DST had lowered the population threshold required for direct membership from 25,000 to 10,000 in 1921 and abolished it completely after 1947 (Schnell 1970, 28), DST and RSB (later on DSB) competed for the same group of local governments. In the late 1960s, with regard to an intended takeover of the DSB, the DST established a "committee for mid-sized cities" and granted them a right of representation in the executive board (Geißelmann 1975, 157). However, in 1973, the DSB and DGT¹³ merged into the "German Union of Cities and Municipalities" (*Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund/DStGB*), thereby pooling their resources to promote the specific interests of the smaller cities and municipalities. Since then, DST and DStGB have coexisted without outright competition. Jointly with the DLT representing counties, they were able to gain a strong position for representing local governments.

Internal Structure

In contrast to public corporations under state supervision, the German LGAs were set up as registered associations under private law. Thereby, they emphasized the voluntary nature of their membership, which has remained a characteristic feature until today. The term "-tag" in the associations' names expresses the fact that LGAs were originally based on the idea of an association that met only within the framework of one-day general meetings (Henneke 2012, 69). Over time, however, all LGAs formed permanent institutional structures and decision-making processes more independent from the members' immediate influence. These steps toward professionalization, stabilization, and differentiation were linked to the functional expansion and

¹³ The successor of the LGT, which existed from 1950 until 1973, was named identical to the conformity-enforced Association of German Municipalities (1933–1945).

the increase in public support the LGAs gathered, in particular during World War I and the Weimar Republic (Reutter 2002, 1579).

For the purpose of preparing and deliberating resolutions, the executive board of the DST set up expert committees (*Fachausschüsse*), which became permanent institutions in 1920 (Schnell 1970, 36f.). Composed of members of the executive board and complemented variously by policy experts as advisors, the expert committees played a major role in promoting the exchange of experiences and in addressing the increasing scope and complexity of tasks the association had to deal with (Ziebill 1955, 40, 45f.).¹⁴ Following this model, the DLT also designated expert committees in its statutes of 1927, whereas RSB and LGT presumably did not have expert committees during the Weimar period.¹⁵ While LGAs' daily business was predominantly determined by the executive boards, the expert committees and the central offices, sovereignty over the budget, elections to the executive board, and changes to the statutes remained in the control of the general meetings, which were held every one or two years. After World War II, when German LGAs drafted new statutes, they delegated decision-making powers (e.g., elections to the executive board, deciding on budget plans and membership fees, selection of personnel) to so-called main committees (*Hauptausschüsse*), in which members were represented according to population size (see Ziebill 1956, 589-95). Also, the number of LGAs' expert committees and working groups increased in subsequent periods, dealing with new issues such as housing, energy, transportation, public health, culture, sports, and statistics (see, e.g., Göb 1966, 69; Berkenhoff 1970, 95; Weinberger 1982a, 480; Groeben and Heide 1981, 298f.).

Hand in hand with organizational differentiation, LGAs expanded their administrative capacity over time. The central office, which the DST had maintained in Berlin since 1906, gradually evolved to a full-time agency, with the number of employees increasing from 4 up to 40 in 1921 (Ziebill 1955, 35, 50). Given the poor state of information and communication networks at this time, it can be assumed that local authorities had a strong interest in pooling their informational and organizational resources. Funded by membership fees, all LGAs maintained central offices that collected and archived written documents, provided information on request to member cities, and issued monthly magazines. Except for the RSB, which was mainly located in Prussia, LGAs' offices conducted business jointly with their Prussian regional associations (Schnell 1970, 14; Göb 1966, 11; Groeben and Heide 1981, 37). By closely linking the LGAs' offices to their largest regional associations, it was possible

¹⁴ Statutes of the DST (1926), LAB 142-01 527; Since the 1950s, members of the DST's expert committees have been delegated from the regional LGAs, see Ziebill (1956, 591).

¹⁵ Statutes of the DLT (1922, 1927), LAB 142-04 (778); statutes of the LGT (1922), LAB 142-05 (507); statutes of the RSB (1918, 1927), LAB 142-03 (201); In order to save travel costs and keep membership fees at a low level, the executive board of the RSB did not establish expert committees, although they were designated in the statutes; see correspondence between the central office of the RSB and the member association (Unterverband) Hannover, LAB 142-03 (45).

not only to reduce costs but to provide access to local politics and to strengthen the connection between the umbrella association and the member base. Nonetheless, distinct responsibilities for nationwide LGAs and their regional divisions persisted: While the regional LGAs were mainly concerned with “internal functions” (e.g., facilitating exchange of information, consulting services etc.) and legislation at the “Länder” level, the umbrella associations focused on “external functions,” such as public relations and local government advocacy at the federal level (Seeger 1988, 185). After 1945, LGAs further expanded their administrative capacities. However, compared to the tasks required, their funding and workforce remained modest (Jaedicke and Wollmann 1999, 322). According to Weinberger (1982a), the number of employees at the DST’s central office had increased to about 100 by the early 1980s. Currently, the DST has around 140 employees.¹⁶ All in all, the internal differentiation of tasks, the committee system, and the distinct leadership positions helped the LGAs to form unified policy positions and to represent them in negotiations with higher level governments. The three German LGAs showed no noticeable differences in this respect.

5.2 United States

Political Context

In the US, the two world wars were far less influential to the LGAs’ development than in Germany, even though AMA and USCM cooperated closely with the federal government during World War II. For example, the AMA offered the use of its resources to the federal government for national security efforts (American Municipal Association 1942, 3-5).

After World War II, the ideology and policy agenda of the various presidents and their federal administrations were an important factor shaping LGAs’ opportunities and development. During the Roosevelt administration, mainly the bigger cities profited from privileged access to the president and from generous federal grants. USCM in particular was able to influence the federal government in key policies. With the Eisenhower administration, USCM lost its privileged access to the White House in the 1950s as USCM’s membership consisted mainly of big Democratic cities, making it difficult for USCM to get access to the Republican administration (Haider 1974, 5).

NLC and NACo, in contrast, were able to expand their influence at the federal level from the 1950s on. In this period, political conditions for municipal participation and intergovernmental cooperation in general were favourable, as President Eisenhower was willing to hand several functions back to lower level governments (McDowell 1997, 111). In 1959, the *Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations* (ACIR) was established after “a liberal Republican

¹⁶ Numbers for the other associations are not publicly available. In expert interviews, it was indicated to us that the DStGB currently has around 30 employees and the DLT 27.

convinced President Dwight D. Eisenhower to sign the ACIR bill” (Kincaid 2011, 181). ACIR was a public agency meant to promote an adequate consideration of the perspectives of different levels of government on federal policy-making and staffed by public officials, including members of Congress, governors, mayors, and county officials (McDowell 1997, 112). Another important step for better inclusion of local interests in federal politics was the implementation of Circular A-85 by the *Office of Management and Budget* (OMB) in 1967. OMB Circular A-85 warranted to state and local governments the right to comment on every federal policy affecting them. In implementing this right, ACIR played a key role, conveying the comments from key state and local government organizations, including the three LGAs, to federal decision-makers (White and Singer 1976, 496).

Since the end of 1970s, LGAs lost several privileges. In a reform of intergovernmental relations, OMB Circular A-85 was abolished in 1978 (Murphy 1982, 11). Under the Reagan administration, federal funding for the LGAs was cut severely. During the 1980s, the three LGAs lost between 48.7 and 97.9 percent of their federal funding and needed to reorganize their financial capacities (Menzel 1990). Moreover, ACIR was shut down in 1996 by a Congress dominated by its Republican majority, yet with the support of President Clinton.

Membership and Competition

After World War II, all LGAs changed their membership model from indirect representation by state leagues to direct membership of local governments. Although USCM represents mainly big cities and NLC (the successor of AMA) had a stronger focus on mid-sized and small cities, both LGAs aimed to represent all cities (Farkas 1971, 161). Therefore, both extended admittance thresholds in a competitive effort to attract new members. USCM initially started as an interest group for larger cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants, but lowered its threshold to 30,000 inhabitants. In contrast, NLC raised the threshold in 1955 and admitted cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants (Haider 1974, 6). From the early 1960s until today, both LGAs increased their membership significantly. USCM increased its membership from 405 in 1963 to 698 in 1990. NLC increased its membership from 344 in 1966 to 1400 in 1990 to 2479 in 2020 (numbers from Haider 1974; Menzel 1990; NLC 2020). Because of increasing membership overlap, in 1970 NLC and USCM decided to merge their organizational staffs but remained two independent organizations with their own leadership (Arnold and Plant 1994, 105). However, the merger was dissolved again in 1977.

NACo also changed membership admittance from individual county officials to county governments in 1965. Doing so, NACo was able to increase its membership step-by-step to an all-county coverage of around 62 percent in the early 1990s (Cigler 1994) and over 82 percent today (NACo 2022).

Table 2 Membership Development of LGAs in the United States

	AMA/NLC Since 1924	USCM Since 1932	NACo Since 1936
Foundation Era	29 (s) [status: 1934]	100 (i) [status: 1932]	*
Post-World War II	52 (i) 44(s) [status: 1955]	300 (i) [status:1953]	305 (i) 42 (s) [status: 1963]
Late 20th Century	1400 (i) 49 (s) [status: 1990]	698 (i) [status: 1990]	1914 (i) 53 (s) [status: 1990]
Current Status	2479 (i) 49 (s)	**	2546 (i) 53 (s)

Notes: (i) = individual membership, (s) = state associations. *In its early years, NACo was not a membership organization; ** USCM does not publish current membership data

Sources: American Municipal Association 1942; USCM 1953; Haider 1974; Menzel 1990; NLC 2020.

The relationship between the three LGAs was marked by a mix of competition and cooperation. Despite the rivalry between NLC and USCM, both LGAs often pursued shared goals, for example in strengthening federal-local relations. In contrast, NACo emphasized a different conception of local government relations, sometimes siding with state governments in federal politics (Haider 1974, 31). While on frequent occasions, the three LGAs were able to pool forces and to work together (Cammisa 1995), no steady cooperation emerged. Most notably, although the establishment of ACIR provided an opportunity to strengthen institutionalized cooperation between the LGAs, in the period before ACIR's dissolution in the mid-1990s, the LGAs showed surprisingly little commitment to fight for the continuation of the agency (see McDowell 1997).

Internal Structure

Over time, all LGAs were able to increase their agency by building up a significant pool of resources and by developing specific decision-making procedures enabling them to form common policy positions out of divergent member positions.

All LGAs have early on established a certain degree of hierarchy and specialization by setting up decision-making bodies, such as an executive committee or board of directors entitled to take regular decisions in everyday business, an executive director, and several committees for policy discussion. Haider reports that in the 1970s, NLC and NACo tended "to avoid controversial issues, develop policy through a committee system, and delegate authority over day-to-day activities to a permanent staff" (Haider 1974, 37). Since their foundation, there were only small changes in the internal structure of LGAs in the US. For example, in the early 1950s, the US Conference of Mayors published a handbook about its organization, describing an internal structure almost identical with today's (USCM 1953, 6). Initially, LGAs were strongly dominated by their executive directors. This was especially true for USCM with Paul Better's (Farkas 1971, 138) and for NACo with Bernard F.

Hillebrand (Arnold and Plant 1994, 234f.), who nonetheless persistently emphasized the importance of membership inclusion (*ibid.*, 235).

Basic decisions about policies are taken by all members on LGAs' annual conferences. For example, the NLC established a decision-making process where its Board of Directors identify the organization's priorities and policy committees with member cities' representatives prepare the policy positions for the National Municipal Policy, which is then debated and decided by all NLC members at its annual conference (NLC 1984). USCM established a similar policy-making process through committees. In order to contain conflicts between mayors, those committees were composed not by the mayors themselves but by their personal staff, USCM staff, and representatives of topical interest groups (e.g., housing groups) (Farkas 1971, 172ff.)

While the LGAs had steadily received federal funding since the Roosevelt era, their financial resource endowment suffered a deep cut in the 1980s, when the federal government stopped paying subsidies. Those federal cuts, however, did not weaken them in the long run, as they were able to gain new sources of funding through the expansion of membership fees and contributions. Additionally, they were able to increase their services and resources, like members, staff, and budget, throughout the 1990s. NACo specifically exemplifies this trend. It more than doubled its budget between 1990 and 2014 from \$9.7 million (Menzel 1990, 402) to \$19.9 million (NACo 2015). In particular, the foundation of the NACo Financial Service Corporation (NACo FSC) in 1994 significantly increased NACo's revenues and the number of services it provides.

Generally, specialization and professionalization streamlined the decision-making process. Yet, strong member involvement made it sometimes difficult to form a coherent position. While in earlier decades, USCM was judged to be more successful in forming a coherent position than the other two LGAs (Haider 1974), even USCM had sustained difficulties in reaching agreement on policies (Farkas 1971, 103). What is more, since the 1980s individual cities sent their own representatives – independent from their LGAs – in increasing numbers to Washington for individual lobbying, thereby further weakening the LGAs' agency (Pelissero and England 1987; Payson 2022).

6. Comparative Analysis

Relating the empirical evidence back to the research questions and analytic framework, we can now distil in comparative perspective those strategies that were used by LGAs in Germany and the US to solve their collective action problems. As can be seen, while several mechanisms worked uniformly across the Atlantic, political context factors still shape the specific ways in which the LGAs in both countries emerged and developed over time.

6.1 Solving CAP I

The strategies used for solving CAP I, i.e., for establishing the collective actor in the first place and attracting and keeping members, are mainly similar between the two countries. In both countries, the initiative to found the first LGAs (at state level) can be interpreted as a reaction to an increased task load for local governments accompanying industrialization, urbanization, and the surge of social questions. In Germany, the main initiators were local public officials trying to counter centralizing tendencies by the (still not democratized) Prussian state; in the US, the dynamic was more indirect. Local government officials founded state leagues in reaction to pressure from citizen groups who were increasingly disappointed by corruption and inefficiency of democratic party-politicized policy-making. Also, the founding process in the US at national level was roughly delayed for two decades compared to Germany.

Initiation costs for the foundation of the first national leagues could be lowered by relying on organizational templates and in part also on organizational resources of existing state leagues. In Germany, individual mayors took on the role of political entrepreneurs in pushing the foundation of the DST. In the US, while the first managers also played an important role in shaping the organization, they were not involved in their foundation. Membership could rather easily be gained and enlarged, not least due to two prominent strategies at improving the cost-benefit calculus: membership fees were very low and the newly founded LGAs provided specific membership services from the very beginning. Selective incentives and membership services seem to have been even more important in the US than in Germany. At least today, the membership services sections in US LGAs are far bigger and better resourced than in Germany.

Over time, we observe in both countries patterns of competition for membership, visible in the shift of admittance thresholds of inhabitants to the various LGAs as well as in mergers and splits of LGAs. All in all, both in Germany and the US, the LGAs under investigation established a high and stable membership. Yet, competition seems to be somewhat more acute and membership more precarious in the US than in Germany.

6.2 Solving CAP II

The main strategies for solving CAP II, i.e., for overcoming conflict between individual members' interests and collective interests of the LGA as a whole and for taking joint decisions for collective action, are also similar in both countries. We observe processes of moderate hierarchization, of differentiation, and of professionalization; yet the individual members retain a strong influence on collective decisions. Instances of hierarchization are the establishment of executive committees or boards of directors entitled to take

executive decisions of everyday business. Permanent offices and staff as well as representations in the capitals are indicators of professionalization. While they require more financial resources, they enhance the associations' administrative capacity. Committees, finally, can be interpreted as steps towards differentiation and professionalization, as they bundle issue-specific expertise. Committee members can, based on their expertise, more easily develop shared perspectives on policies and hence overcome conflict of interest. What is more, committees also provide an important link to the membership, as committee members are representatives of local governments and have a direct and meaningful influence on an association's policy orientation.

Effects of Political Context

While collective action problems were solved in similar ways in both countries and the general structure of the LGAs that evolved is highly comparable, our analysis displayed a number of differences in detail. Those differences are more prominent between the two countries than between associations in one country. We have no hard empirical evidence to establish causality in this regard, but the systematic comparison suggests an interpretation that those differences might be related to the institutional, political, and cultural context of the two countries.

The 20 years gap between the founding of first national LGAs is hard to explain. Germany at that time was still a monarchy, yet had a well-established territorial and administrative structure, and local governments disposed of extensive and well-defined spheres of autonomy. The formal-legal and bureaucratic framework in Germany seems to have been relevant also for German LGAs' further development: their privileged role during World War I and beyond; and the acknowledgement of formal rights of being heard in the rules of procedures of federal parliament and ministries they received in the middle of the century. US LGAs, in contrast, attained a similar legal privilege only during a very limited time span – Circular A85 was introduced in 1967 and abolished in 1978. All in all, the legal environment for German LGAs was stable and favourable, while conditions for US LGAs strongly depended (and still depend) on ideological convictions and leadership style of the president of the day and his administration.

Also, the LGAs' membership structure and cooperation behaviour seem to vary in a consequential and systematic manner. While membership is high in both countries, both in absolute and relative numbers, US LGAs are mainly based on direct membership and German LGAs on indirect membership, relying on strong regional associations. German LGAs formed an umbrella organization which gives the local voice a strong weight if LGAs succeed to agree on a common position. US LGAs never reached that level of cooperation. The only nationwide organization to foster intergovernmental relations

– ACIR – was founded by the federal government and abolished later on. Membership service, on the other hand, seems to be far more important in the US than in Germany. And finally, shirking behaviour in the form of individual city lobbying seems to occur in substantive amounts in the US, but not in Germany. This pattern mirrors the differences between a competitive federal culture in the US and a cooperative one in Germany. Local governments in Germany, backed by a uniform and strong constitutional status, form more easily joint interests – within associations and even across them – that they represent in the federal legislative process. Their action is mainly aimed at influencing legislative proposals which, if successful, result in more favourable conditions for all local governments. In the US, in contrast, all federated units display a competitive behaviour and seek to individually further their interests. The highly fragmented legal landscape endows local governments with different rights and resources, making it harder to formulate uniform requests. And the fiscal structure sets incentives that make individual lobbying for grants more promising than collective lobbying for legislation.¹⁷

7. Conclusion

The comparative historical reconstruction of the emergence and development of LGAs in two contrasting federal architectures provided insight in important mechanisms how collective actors are established at all and how they gain agency. The problem of enhancing knowledge, efficiency, and cooperation of local governments in facing new tasks initially triggered the establishment of LGAs. Organizational templates, reliance on external resources, and the commitment of individual actors playing the role of political entrepreneurs contributed to enabling their establishment. While the problem of attracting members never seems to have been acute, competition for members nonetheless shaped LGAs' development over time, inducing new foundations, splits, and mergers of LGAs. Strategies at lowering membership costs and at improving the cost-benefit calculus by offering selective incentives follow the classic description by Olson (1965). Membership costs for individual local governments are quite low. Furthermore, membership offers a number of selective benefits, such as information and exchange in networks, or counselling services, which further improve the cost-benefit calculus of membership.

With regard to CAP II, we found mainly adaptations in the associations' organizational structures aimed at enhancing the efficiency of decisions and administrative capacity. Still, direct influence of individual members in

¹⁷ To be sure, federal legislation is also consequential. Most recently, for example, Medicaid as a federal law established the single biggest cash flow from federal to local government (Fisher 2023, ch. 19).

annual meetings and in expert committees remains strong. Hence the effects of those organizational structures on the associations' autonomy is ambiguous, still leaving room for conflicts of interest. All in all, the core mechanisms for solving problems of collective action that were described in the theoretical literature were thus confirmed in our empirical analysis. While we found clear evidence for strategies solving CAP I, in regard to CAP II we limited our empirical focus to organizational structures, thereby getting a mixed picture. It might well be that psychological mechanisms enhancing collective intentions supplement the institutional framework. This is still to be investigated empirically.

On the other hand, the analysis also confirmed the core assumptions of comparative historical analysis that country specific institutions, cultural patterns, and historical events are influential in shaping differentially the evolution of otherwise similar institutions across countries. The cooperative and bureaucratized federal culture in Germany as opposed to the competitive and politicized federal culture in the US, deeply imprint even processes and institutions of intergovernmental relations at local level. Those findings support an important assumption of federalism theory that institutions and processes of intergovernmental relations are directly influenced by a country's federal architecture (Bednar 2009). Beyond those systematic effects, individual historical events such as the World Wars, the Great Depression, or German Reunification, but even individual persons marked institutional development in specific ways.

In trying to understand the founding and evolution of institutions, it is hence important to take into account both the systematic problems that institutions are meant to solve and the political context in which they emerge. Historical analysis in this sense is a powerful tool to reconstruct the ways in which context shapes institutions.

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