

VIEWPOINT

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Who Governs Growth? Abundance, Preemption, and Local Democracy Under Pressure

Nufar Avni^a , Harel Nachmany^a  and Jeremy Németh^b

^aDepartment of Spatial Science, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel; ^bDepartment of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Colorado, Denver, Denver, CO, USA

ABSTRACT

Cities are increasingly celebrated as engines of democratic renewal, yet municipal autonomy is increasingly reshaped by intensifying pressures from above. In this Viewpoint we argue that local planning authority faces growing challenges from progressive and growth-driven state interventions seeking to accelerate housing, infrastructure, and climate action; this transformation is under-theorized in planning scholarship. We contend neither local autonomy nor state intervention is inherently desirable: Both can advance or undermine democracy and justice depending on the conditions in which they operate, regardless of ideological orientation or stated goals. Drawing on planning scholarship and policy debates, we examine these dynamics and raise urgent questions about recent preemptions' implications to planning practice.

KEYWORDS

Abundance politics; local democracy; municipal autonomy; (re)centralization; state preemption

Cities have been globally celebrated as engines of democratic renewal, problem solving, and policy innovation (Barber, 2013, 2017; Glaeser, 2011), yet their authority is being fundamentally reconfigured by intensifying state and provincial intervention. Although scholars have paid growing attention to how illiberal and autocratizing governments deploy recentralization to discipline oppositional municipalities in countries such as Hungary, Turkey, and Poland (Avni, 2026; Drapalova, 2024; Lackowska & Aksztejn, 2026; Tan & Özer, 2026), less scrutiny has been directed at local autonomy transformations unfolding within historically liberal democracies, particularly across northern America. State governments are expanding preemption powers, housing mandates, accelerated permitting regimes, and centralized infrastructure authorities in the name of addressing affordability and climate change (Lee et al., 2026; Wegmann et al., 2026). Although often framed as technical governance reforms or progressive policy corrections, these interventions may fundamentally reshape municipal planners' authority over land use and community engagement.

In this Viewpoint, we shed light on this phenomenon and grapple with its implications for local

governance and planning practice in an era when both the political right and left seek to centralize power. We contend neither local autonomy nor state intervention is inherently desirable: Local governments can entrench exclusionary practices just as state intervention can weaken democratic accountability, so centralization should be judged by whether it advances or undermines democracy and justice, not by its scale alone. First, we describe the growing centralization efforts by states and provinces, with emphasis on growth-driven pressures in northern America. Second, we explain the potential effects these transformations have on planning governance and the challenges to local autonomy, democracy, and justice. Third, we suggest planners must develop and uphold their own normative frameworks when considering the impacts of centralization. Fourth, we pose questions about what these shifts might portend for the future of planning practice more generally.

The (Re)Centralizing Turn: Dual Pressures From the Political Right and Left

While illiberal and autocratizing national governments in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and

CONTACT Nufar Avni  nufar.avni@mail.huji.ac.il

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Table 1. Comparative overview of preemption and recentralization cases.

Jurisdiction and level of government	Ideological orientation	Local powers curtailed	Stated policy rationale	Planning functions affected	Mechanism of intervention
California, USA (State)	Progressive/liberal	Discretionary local approval authority; local zoning control	Accelerate housing production in jurisdictions missing state targets; advance fair housing	Zoning, site approval, housing elements, ADU permitting, parking standards	Legislation (SB 35, AB 686, SB 9, AB 2097, multiple ADU bills)
Oregon, USA (State)	Progressive/liberal	Local land use controls; restrictive zoning	Increase housing supply; address affordability	Zoning, housing needs assessment, densification, by-right approvals	Legislation (HB 2001, HB 2003, HB 2138)
Texas, USA (State)	Conservative	Home-rule regulatory authority over labor, environment, and business	Regulatory uniformity; economic growth; reduce local regulatory burden	Business regulation, environmental standards, labor standards	Legislation (HB 2127, 202: <i>Death Star</i> law)
British Columbia, Canada (Province)	Centre-left (NDP)	Local official community plans; public hearing rights; discretionary zoning; density controls	Increase housing supply; promote transit-oriented, by-right development	Housing needs assessment; official community plans (OCPs), zoning bylaws, density/height standards, public hearings	Legislation (Housing Supply Act, 2022; Bill 44, 2023; Bill 47, 2023; Bill 18, 2024)
Ontario, Canada (Province)	Conservative (Progressive Conservative Party)	City council composition and ward structure; council veto power; mayoral accountability	Improve governance efficiency; accelerate housing and infrastructure delivery	Municipal governance structure, council decision making, budgeting, zoning approvals	Legislation (Bill 5, 2018; Bill 3: Strong Mayors, Building Homes Act, 2022)

Note. ADU = accessory dwelling unit.

Turkey have pursued systematic recentralization to weaken local autonomy and discipline oppositional municipalities, including in cities such as Budapest and Istanbul (Demirtaş, 2024; Drapalova, 2024; Jakli & Stenberg, 2021), a related but nonetheless distinct dynamic has emerged within liberal, growth-oriented political systems. There, state-level and provincial governments are increasingly prioritizing national-scale growth, infrastructure, and housing supply, often by centralizing planning authority and limiting municipal discretion. The motives differ: Illiberal (re)centralization typically targets local progressive governments as the political *enemy* of central governments (Drapalova, 2024), whereas in northern America preemption tends to cut across partisan lines, occurring in both conservative and progressive states such as Colorado, Maine, Montana, and Texas (Table 1).

To be sure, state intervention in local planning is not unprecedented (Briffault et al., 2017). The literature on federalism and decentralization has long emphasized that the allocation of authority across levels of government involves competing institutional advantages and tradeoffs. Higher levels of government might be better positioned to internalize interjurisdictional spillovers and other externalities, exploit economies of scale, coordinate policies with effects that extend beyond municipal boundaries, and redistribute resources across jurisdictions and populations (Oates, 1999;

Olson, 1969; Peterson, 1981). Although centralization may help overcome parochial local decision making, it could also sacrifice some of the institutional advantages associated with decentralized governance, including responsiveness to heterogeneous local preferences, opportunities for policy experimentation and innovation, the use of local knowledge, and polycentricity that enables competition or cooperation among multiple centers of authority (Ostrom et al., 1961; Tiebout, 1956). In this sense, state preemption represents a manifestation of a longstanding intergovernmental dilemma: how to reconcile the coordinating and redistributive capacities of higher-level government with the democratic and adaptive advantages associated with local authority.

Viewed from a broader historical perspective, the present turn toward state preemption can also be situated within a longer pendulum in U.S. progressivism between confidence in concentrated governmental authority and efforts to disperse and constrain it (Dunkelman, 2025). Throughout the second half of the 20th century, U.S. states periodically intervened to address exclusionary zoning and housing shortages through judicial decisions, state housing allocation requirements, and state legislation, as illustrated by New Jersey's Mount Laurel doctrine, California's Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) system, and Massachusetts's Chapter 40B, respectively (Kazis, 2022). However,

what distinguishes the current wave of recentralization is not the underlying intergovernmental dilemma itself, but its broader scope, its more direct restructuring of local planning authority, and its growing use to advance statewide housing, infrastructure, and climate objectives. These interventions include expanded preemption over zoning, mandatory and densification housing targets, streamlined environmental review, centralized approval processes, and new special-purpose development authorities (Elmendorf & Nall, 2024; Furth & Kahn, 2023; Nguyễn, 2024; Wegmann et al., 2026). Recent state-level reforms are already reshaping local authority, highlighting the need for systematic theorization of these emerging dynamics.

These centralization efforts are particularly visible in California, itself the world's fourth-largest economy in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). In the past decade, the state-level government has implemented a series of housing policy measures that have significantly curtailed local government discretion. In 2017, to boost housing production in jurisdictions that failed to meet state-mandated targets, California enacted Senate Bill (SB) 35 to effectively replace local discretionary planning authority with a mandatory, ministerial approval process (O'Neill & Wang, 2023). The following year, another state law (Assembly Bill [AB] 686) required municipalities to incorporate Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) principles from the federal level into their general plan's housing element, obligating local authorities to adopt measurable policies and land use strategies affecting zoning, site selection, and programmatic action (Monkkonen et al., 2025). From 2019 to 2022, the state of California accelerated residential densification efforts by deregulating accessory dwelling units (ADUs; multiple bills), facilitating urban lot splitting (SB9), and eliminating minimum parking requirements near public transit (AB 2097; Lee et al., 2026; Wegmann et al., 2026). In the wake of these initiatives, reformers enacted similar housing measures in other Democratic-governed states such as Oregon (Furth et al., 2025). For example, to address housing shortages and affordability, Oregon enacted a series of housing reforms, including HB 2001 (2019), which legalized *middle housing* in formerly single-family zones; HB 2003 (2019), which mandated standardized housing needs assessments and housing production strategies; and HB 2138 (2025), which further expanded middle housing requirements and limited local regulatory barriers to residential densification.

Collectively, these centralization reforms mark a clear shift away from locally controlled land use regulations toward a more state-directed approach to housing production.

Comparable centralization policies have also been introduced in several Canadian provinces. In British Columbia, the New Democratic Party provincial government has mandated, through a series of housing laws (Housing Supply Act, 2022; Bills 44, 47, and 18), that municipalities adopt a provincially prescribed methodology for assessing housing need; update their official community plans (OCPs) and zoning bylaws to enable higher-density, transit-oriented, by-right development; and comply with provincially defined standards such as floor-space ratio (FSR) and building-height limits (Zwick, 2026). Under this framework, the City of Vancouver has been directed to curb project-level public hearings to accelerate housing approvals, thereby reducing discretionary local veto points while further consolidating planning authority at the provincial level (Lewis, 2025).

Such assertive state-level preemption can also be found in conservative-led jurisdictions. In Texas, the 2023 *Death Star* law (HB 2127) broadly restricts home-rule cities' authority by preempting local regulations in areas such as labor standards, environmental protections, and business oversight. Framed as a measure to ensure regulatory uniformity and promote economic growth, the law significantly narrows municipal discretion. Although it emerges from a different ideological orientation than California or British Columbia, the Texas case likewise reflects an expansive redefinition of state versus local authority.

In Ontario (Canada), the 2018 provincial-level Better Local Government Act (Bill 5) restructured Toronto's City Council by reducing the number of councilors and wards from 47 to 25 and realigning municipal ward boundaries with federal and provincial electoral districts, or *ridings* (Zhitomirsky, 2018). Subsequently, Bill 3 (Strong Mayors, Building Homes Act, 2022) introduced the Strong Mayor Powers and Duties Framework, granting designated mayors the authority to override council decisions, veto bylaws, and prepare municipal budgets to advance provincial priorities, particularly in the realms of housing and infrastructure. By concentrating authority in the mayor's office, this model correspondingly diminishes the role of elected councilors and weakens the autonomy of local government as a democratic institution (Taylor et al., 2023). These examples (see Table 1) reflect a dramatic shift in intergovernmental relations that stems from challenges associated with urban growth more generally.

This convergence in trendlines nonetheless starts from very different baselines. Canadian provinces have long held far more extensive authority over municipal affairs than U.S. states, reflected in cabinet-level *municipal affairs* departments, assertive amalgamations such as the 1998 creation of *megacity* Toronto, and land use tribunals like the former Ontario Municipal Board that can override local zoning (Taylor, 2019). Canadian metros are consequently governed by fewer, larger municipalities and are markedly less fragmented than their U.S. counterparts. Read this way, recent moves in Ontario and British Columbia intensify an already well-established pattern of provincial dominance, whereas U.S. state preemption marks a sharper break from a baseline of local autonomy.

Advocates portray such reforms as necessary correctives to historically exclusionary local politics, bureaucratic delay, and municipal veto power. These shifts also intersect with longer-standing pro-growth currents such as the YIMBY (Yes in My Backyard) movement, which has critiqued local veto structures and framed restrictive zoning, procedural checks, and neighborhood opposition not only as barriers to housing supply, but as obstacles to equity, climate resilience, and national economic performance (Cantelmo, 2025; Nguyễn, 2024). An influential body of literature has highlighted the interests of homeowners as the driver of policy, blocking or delaying projects, a dynamic frequently associated with NIMBYism (Schively, 2007). Fischel's (2002) Homevoter Hypothesis and subsequent studies on zoning and NIMBYism have shown how municipalities often use their regulatory powers to protect property values, privileging homeowners at the expense of affordable housing, mobility, and metropolitan equity (Been, 2018; Been et al., 2014; Manville et al., 2020). This logic has become a cornerstone for wide-ranging research in economics, law, and housing policy linking restrictive local planning to affordability crises and reduced social mobility (Glaeser & Gyourko, 2018; Hilber & Robert-Nicoud, 2013; Shoag, 2019). Other scholars have emphasized the role of locally controlled processes, such as planning and zoning boards, in hindering housing development and promoting the interests of specific residents, particularly affluent, older, White populations (Einstein et al., 2020; Marble & Nall, 2021). This scholarship shows the local scale is not inherently more democratic or just (Purcell, 2006).

In their recent bestseller *Abundance*, Klein and Thompson (2025) similarly argued that in many liberal U.S. cities such as Boulder (CO), Portland (OR), and San Francisco (CA), well-intentioned but overly restrictive regulatory frameworks have hindered critical development since the 1970s, prioritizing *smart growth* over potentially beneficial housing proliferation (Cantelmo, 2025; Manville & Monkkonen, 2024). Although cities' capacities to address *big problems* have been questioned before (Lake, 2002), recent calls of this kind run counter to the dominant paradigm of the past two decades, which has positioned the urban scale at the forefront of efforts to tackle global crises (Barber, 2013, 2017; Glaeser, 2011).

Beyond their policy aims, however, these abundance-driven reforms constitute an important recentralization of planning authority. Progressive state-level interventions aimed at accelerating housing, infrastructure, and climate action are typically framed as technical regulatory corrections or as instruments of policy efficiency, rather than as a reconfiguration of multilevel political authority. Yet by shifting key land use and development decisions from municipalities to higher-level governments, they reconfigure who governs urban development and through what institutional channels, often reducing opportunities for local participation and accountability. Despite their rapid expansion and far-reaching consequences, these transformations have not been sufficiently analyzed as a fundamental renegotiation of municipal autonomy within northern American planning systems and beyond. These developments further suggest contemporary struggles over urban autonomy are driven not only by overtly illiberal recentralization, but also by growth-oriented reforms pursued in the name of objectively laudable aims such as efficiency, equity, and crisis response. Across the political spectrum, governments are invoking similar justifications to centralize authority and promote privately led real estate development. Direct measures of public support for such state-level intervention remain scarce, although the persistence of these measures across ideologically and institutionally varied states and provinces might itself be suggestive of some underlying public endorsement, at least insofar as state and provincial democratic processes remain functional. Indeed, recent research has shown support for housing production tends to be stronger at broader geographic scales than at the scale of one's immediate neighborhood, where vocal opposition

tends to dominate local planning processes (Einstein et al., 2020; Marble & Nall, 2021). These developments raise pressing questions about who governs urban growth, how authority is exercised, and how decision makers remain democratically accountable.

Discussion: Growth, Power, and Local Democracy

The recent wave of state intervention in local planning raises a normative question: How should planners evaluate different forms of recentralization? We suggest neither local autonomy nor state intervention should be treated as inherently desirable. Local governments can entrench exclusionary land use practices, privilege organized homeowner interests, and frustrate broader public goals such as housing affordability and climate mitigation. Conversely, state intervention might remove institutional barriers to more equitable and sustainable development while weakening local democratic accountability and reducing opportunities for meaningful public participation. Rather than asking whether centralization is inherently good or bad, planners should ask under what conditions it advances or undermines democracy and justice, and for whom.

Democratic legitimacy concerns whether those affected by planning decisions are meaningfully included in decision making and have genuine opportunities to influence outcomes (Young, 1990). Justice concerns whether the benefits and burdens of recentralization are distributed fairly and whether state intervention advances broader public interests such as housing affordability, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and the reduction of longstanding inequities (Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 1973). Together, these principles shift attention away from the assumption that any scale of governance is inherently more democratic or equitable and toward the institutional arrangements through which democratic and equitable outcomes are pursued.

Although these principles do not provide a definitive checklist for evaluating recentralization, they suggest several questions planners and scholars should ask. Democratically, how are local communities represented when decision making shifts to higher levels of government? Are local residents, and particularly historically marginalized groups, provided meaningful opportunities to shape decisions, or does participation become largely symbolic

or *tokenist* in nature (Arnstein, 1969)? Who remains accountable for planning outcomes when authority is redistributed across levels of government? From a justice perspective, who benefits from recentralization and who bears its costs? Does state intervention address broader public concerns, including housing affordability, climate resilience, and social inclusion? Do the resulting policies expand opportunities for historically excluded populations, or do they merely replace one set of institutional constraints with another? Indeed, planning scholars have demonstrated that tensions often exist between justice, equity, and democracy (Avni, 2019; Connolly & Steil, 2009; Fainstein, 2010). For example, where state-mandated housing development is imposed, residents may experience the override of local zoning authority as a genuine loss of democratic voice, even as the resulting housing gains are widely understood as advancing distributive justice by opening communities to a broader population. We do not attempt to resolve this tension here; rather, we suggest it is precisely such conflicts between democratic legitimacy and distributive justice that will make applying our two-part test nontrivial in practice.

Beyond this justice–democracy tension, recentralization raises a further complication: Even in liberal democracies, growth-oriented state policies can erode local democratic control. A key dynamic emerges when municipalities themselves accept state intervention strategically, welcoming centralization when it advances local goals while resisting it when it conflicts with local priorities. In Colorado, for example, progressive cities like Denver and Boulder have embraced state housing mandates near transit as tools to achieve sustainability goals, whereas conservative towns resist identical mandates as intrusions on local autonomy (Kenney, 2023). In other words, support or resistance tends to hinge less on ideology than on policy alignment with local objectives.

This instrumental approach to autonomy raises another critical question: If municipalities support state intervention for policies they favor, what happens when political power shifts and a new state government imposes policies they oppose? Will the same cities that welcomed centralization suddenly rediscover local autonomy as a virtue? For planners, this creates a precarious governance landscape where the mechanisms enabling progressive state action today could become tools for imposing regressive policies tomorrow. Although this dilemma

is not unique to state preemption and characterizes governance arrangements more generally, state preemption is distinctive in that it deliberately shifts the locus of decision making to higher levels of government, raising important questions about local autonomy and democratic accountability. Although planners have long adapted to evolving regulatory environments, the scope, directness, and speed of recent state preemption suggest a potentially significant shift that warrants further research into how it compares with earlier forms of state oversight.

In conclusion, we call on planners to critically examine how state-led centralization transforms their professional roles and responsibilities. Planning scholarship and practice must develop strategies for navigating these new governance arrangements while maintaining commitments to democracy and justice.

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Notes on Contributors

Nufar Avni nufar.avni@mail.huji.ac.il
Harel Nachmany harel.nachmany@mail.huji.ac.il
Jeremy Németh jeremy.nemeth@ucdenver.edu

ORCID

Nufar Avni  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8317-808X>
 Harel Nachmany  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4522-1766>

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