

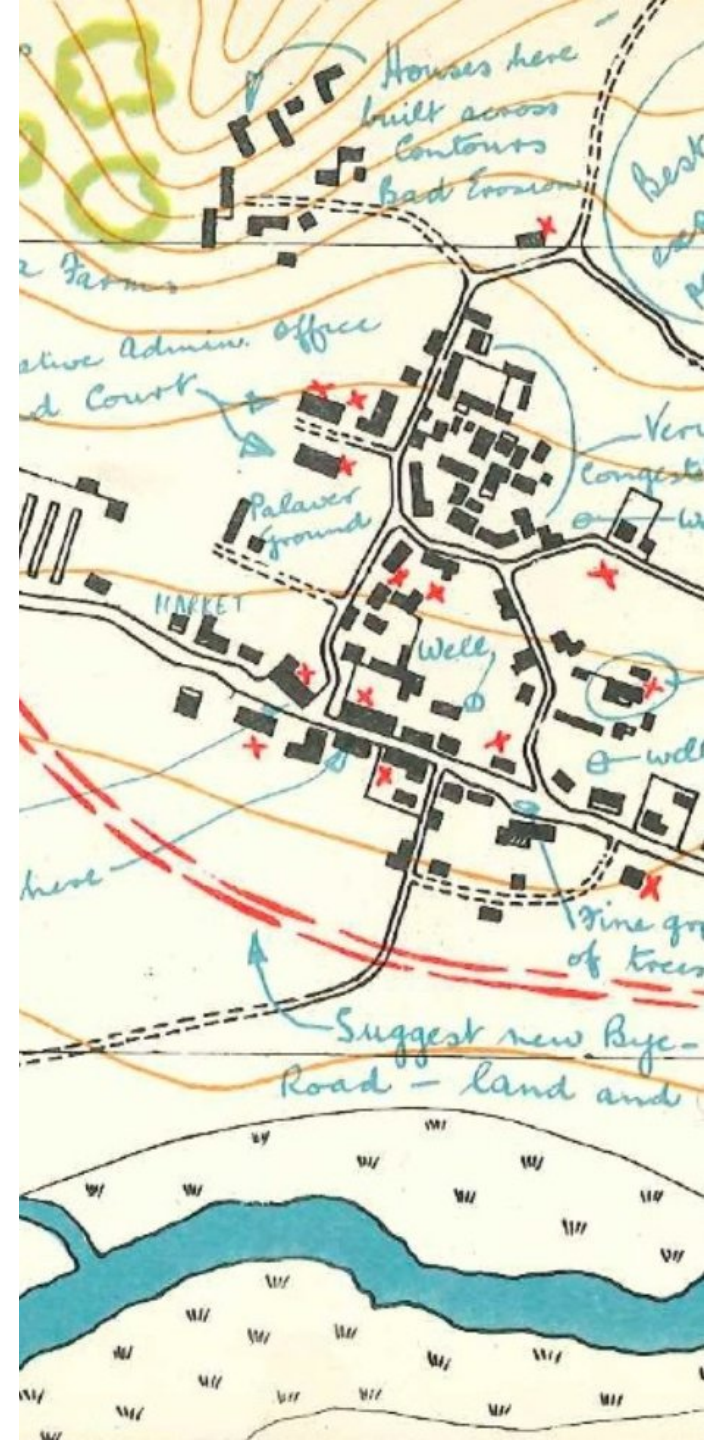
Experiencing citizenship and local democracy amid the centralisation of public services in peripheral Finland in the 2020s

Johanna Vuorelma, associate professor, university lecturer, Tampere university

Mattias Lehtinen, postdoctoral researcher, Tampere university

Background

- Public service centralization is the norm in many parts of peripheral and rural Finland.
- Austerity, pressure to reduce public spending, centralizations of regional administration (=municipal mergers, institution of wellbeing services counties).
- Top politicians calling for new social contract: "rethinking" (=letting go of?) the welfare state.
- Our interest: how does welfare state retrenchment as public service centralization impact lived citizenship and experiences of local democracy and ultimately state legitimacy in non-metropolitan contexts?



Research question

How is citizenship and local democracy experienced amid the centralization of public services in peripheral Finland?

Argument

Public service centralization produces:

- a widening perceived distance between citizens and the (welfare) state.
- weakening lived legitimacy of local democracy.
- concomitant tensions between citizens and local decision-makers that further erode lived legitimacy.

Theoretical & Historical Background

1. Changing rationalities of territorial control in Finland

- From the decentralized welfare state to the decentralized competition state/metropolitan state (in the Finnish context e.g. Moisio 2012; Moisio & Vasanen 2008)
- Peripheral areas increasingly experience a "retreat of the state" (Strange 1996)

2. "Left behind places"

- Effects of economic decline and territorial neglect have been linked to the question of why certain places become "left-behind" and the discontent felt in such areas (e.g. Sleeth 2025; Rodriguez-Poser 2018; Cramer 2016; Munis 2020 etc.)
- Some recent attention on public service provision relation to LPB and discontent (Stroppe 2023; Del Horno 2026)
- But no attention paid to how lived citizenship and the concomitant legitimacy of the state are experienced in peripheral contexts of public service centralization.

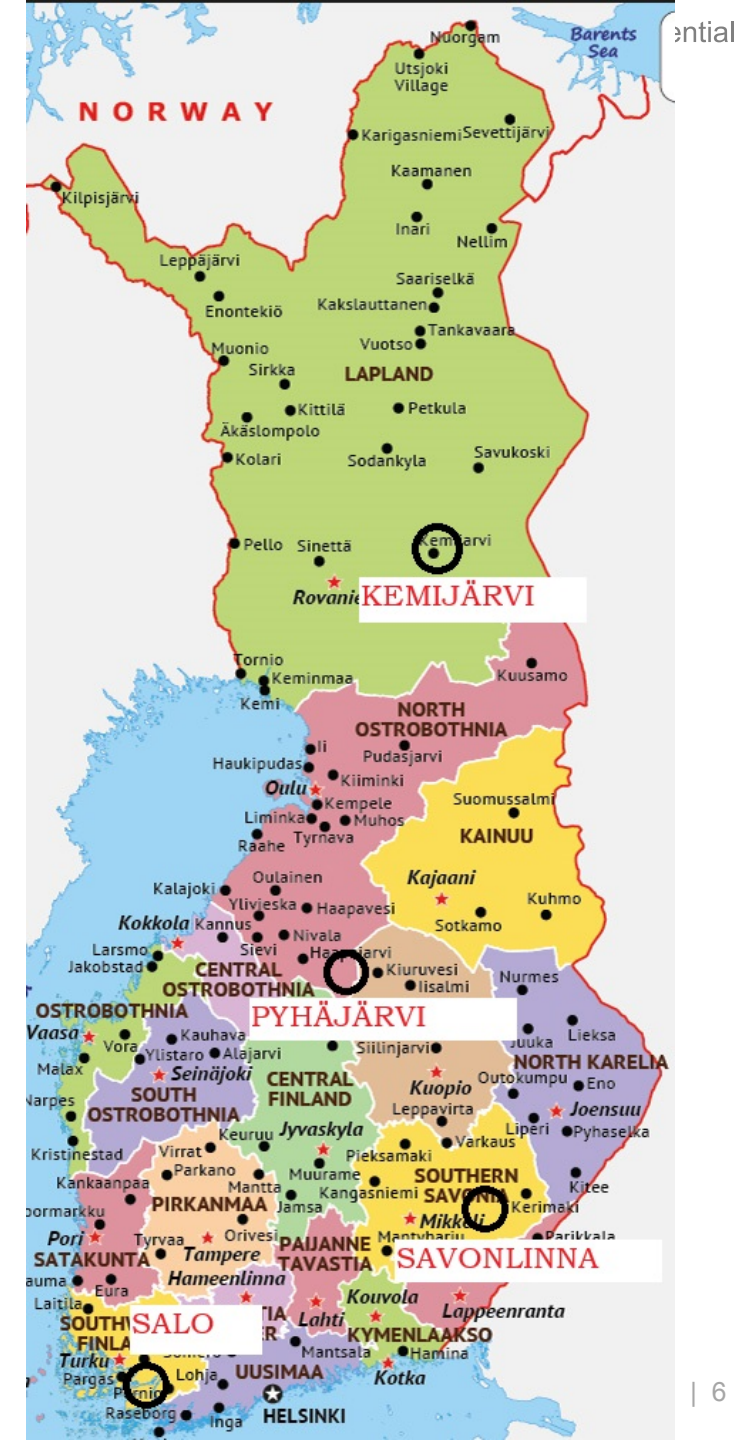
Theoretical & Historical Background

3) Lived (social) citizenship and legitimacy

- Citizenship is also based on the experience of belonging to the state and has a deep experiential or lived dimension (Kallio, Meier & Häkli 2020) encompassing symbolic, felt and shared forms of meaning making.
- Lived social citizenship (Harjula 2024). Service provision important *experiential* link to the state (see also Honig 2017). We see centralization as an important "scene of experience" for LSC.
- But, *legitimacy* should also be seen as a part of experienced citizenship.
- As such legitimacy constitutes the ***lived unity*** between the state and the citizens (partly based on Rainer Forst's critical theory).

Method and material

- Mixed qualitative research design: **focus group interviews** with residents in the case municipalities (n=23) and **elite interviews** with local decision makers (n=15).
- Semi-structured, long-format, interviews. Questions about public service centralization, local democracy and the state.
- Frame analysis building on the concept of lived social citizenship and public service centralization as a scene of experience.
- Frames grouped based on the salient actors in the interviews (citizen, local decision makers and the state)



Citizen frames

CITIZEN (SELF-FRAME)

"Democratically neglected"

- Local democracy is distant, citizens are not taken into account in decisions that bear on them.
- The condition is traced to imitation democracy, a distancing of decision making, its non-transparency and structural reasons related to representation.
- The situation is perceived as unfair, humiliating and debilitating.

LOCAL DECISION-MAKER

"Irrational"

- Local decision-makers are irrational and do not listen to citizens.
- This irrationality is traced to external rationalities (scale and economy), they do not have real power and don't want to involve citizens
- The decision-makers' actions diminish communality, it is disconnected from citizen-realities and irresponsible.

STATE

"Vanishing welfare state"

- The state is understood as a vanishing welfare state, its promise broken.
- It is vanishing because resources and power are concentrated and distant, and because of the domination of economic rationality and centralization.
- The vanishing of the welfare state is perceived to be morally condemnable and unjust.

Local decision-makers' frames

CITIZEN

"Intruding"

- Actively participating citizens are creating hindrances to efficient decision-making; they do not understand the logic of decision-making.
- The reason for this is institutional complexity, citizens' limited perspective, weakened trust, and the fragmentation of the communication environment.
- The situation is perceived as morally ambivalent and disrupts decision-making/governance.

DECISION-MAKER

(SELF-FRAME)

"Pressured"

- Municipal decision-makers see themselves as depoliticized actors operating under pressure from both citizens and the state.
- Understanding the (economic, statistical, institutional) realities of decision-making protects the decision-makers from critique.
- The situation is experienced as frustrating and ambivalent; there is a gap between economic realities and citizens' expectations, and the decision-maker cannot resolve this.

STATE

"Commanding"

- The state is distant, controlling, and powerful.
- Contributing factors include economic steering, dumping responsibilities to municipalities without providing resources, representative and structural asymmetry between the state and regions, and the state's detachment from regional realities.
- This is experienced as unfair, creates insecurity. While there is hope for better communication, also deep pessimism about developing state-relations.

Discussion

- In our cases, centralization of public services affects citizen's lived relations to citizenship and local democracy.
- It reveals a simultaneous perceived weakening of the pillars supporting welfare state legitimacy (services+local democracy).
- Centralization is experienced also as intertwined with reduced local autonomy and growing institutional distance
 - ☾ *Vicious circle?* This leads to weakened experiences of reciprocity and political efficacy, further eroding legitimacy.
- Decision-makers feel pressured from two directions, from the state and from citizens, relations to both are ambivalent.
 - ☾ *Further worsens the vicious circle?* Decision-makers struggle with citizen inclusion and activity.

- Moisio, S., & Vasanen, A. (2008). Alueellistuminen valtiomuutoksen tutkimuskohteena. *Tieteessä Tapahtuu*, 26(3).
- Moisio, S. (2012). *Valtio, alue, politiikka: Suomen tilasuhteiden sääntely toisesta maailmansodasta nykypäivään*. Vastapaino.
- Kallio, K. P., I. Meier, and J. Häkli, J. 2020. "Radical Hope in Asylum Seeking: Political Agency beyond Linear Temporality." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1–17.
- Strange, S. (1996). *The retreat of the state: The diffusion of power in the world economy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018). The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it). *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11(1), 189–209.
- Munis, B.K. (2022) Us Over Here Versus Them Over There...Literally: Measuring Place Resentment in American Politics. *Polit Behav* 44, 1057–1078.
- Cramer, Katherine J. (2016) *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Honig, B. (2017). *Public things: Democracy in disrepair*. Fordham University Press.
- Del Horno, RG. 2026. There is nothing here! Unequal access to services and rural resentment in Spain. *Political Geography* 126.
- Stroppe, AK. 2023. Left behind in a public services wasteland? On the accessibility of public services and political trust. *Political Geography* 105.
- Sleeth, Morgan, Mylène, Riva, Kevin, Manaugh, and Sébastien, Breau. 2025. "Left Behind Places': Examining the Evolution of a Concept". *Growth and Change*: e70055.
- Harjula, M. (2024). Encountering Benefits for Families: Layers of Lived Social Citizenship in Finland in the 1930s and 1940s. In: Annola, J., Lindberg, H., Markkola, P. (eds) *Lived Institutions as History of Experience*. Palgrave Studies in the History of



Kiitos/Tack/Thanks!

Johanna Vuorelma, johanna.vuorelma@tuni.fi
Mattias Lehtinen, mattias.lehtinen@tuni.fi