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Policy Innovation in Barcelona and Utrecht: The Role of Advocacy Coalitions in Multilevel Contexts

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Correspondence: Bruno Miguel Oliveira (bruno_miguel_silva_oliveira@iscte-iul.pt)**Received:** 8 April 2025 | **Revised:** 20 December 2025 | **Accepted:** 21 January 2026**Keywords:** advocacy coalition framework | basic income-inspired policy | local social policy | multilevel governance | policy innovation**关键词:** 倡导联盟框架 | 受基本收入启发的政策 | 地方社会政策 | 多层治理 | 政策创新**Palabras Clave:** marco de coalición para la promoción | política inspirada en la renta básica | política social local | gobernanza multinivel | innovación política

ABSTRACT

This article explores how policy innovation in local social policies emerges within a multilevel governance context. Drawing on the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), it examines how beliefs, coalitions, and institutional arrangements interact across different political arenas—European, national/regional, and local—to foster innovative social policy solutions. Empirically, the study compares two cases of policy innovation (inspired by basic income principles)—Barcelona and Utrecht. Methodologically, the analysis relies on 19 semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in the policy process, complemented by documentary analysis. Findings show that policy innovation results from the interplay between local agency and multilevel structural opportunities. The ACF proves to be a valuable theoretical lens for explaining how ideas and coalitions gain traction across governance levels. Moreover, it concludes that local innovation depends not only on the role of policy entrepreneurs but also on the enabling conditions created by multilevel governance structures.

Related Articles:

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Hodgett, S. 2006. "Multilevel Governance: Policy and Interpretive Approaches in One European Region." *Politics & Policy* 34, no. 4: 726–746. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2006.00038.x>.

Bance, P., and A. Chassy. 2017. "The Rollout of the Multilevel Governance System: A Source of Reworking the Contingent Valuation Method?" *Politics & Policy* 45, no. 6: 1080–1107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12236>.

摘要

本文探讨了地方社会政策创新如何在多层次治理背景下出现。本文运用倡导联盟框架(ACF)，分析了信念、联盟和制度安排如何在不同的政治层面—欧洲、国家/地区和地方层面—相互作用，从而促进创新性社会政策解决方案的产生。实证研究比较了巴塞罗那和乌得勒支两个受基本收入原则启发的政策创新案例。方法论方面，分析基于对参与政策过程的关键人物进行的19次半结构化访谈，并辅以文献分析。研究结果表明，政策创新源于地方行动力与多层次结构性机遇之间的相互作用。倡导联盟框架被证明是解释理念和联盟如何在不同治理层级获得支持的有效理论框架。此外，文章还得出结论：地方创新不仅取决于政策倡导者的作用，也取决于多层次治理结构所创造的有利条件。

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RESUMEN

Este artículo explora cómo surge la innovación política en las políticas sociales locales en un contexto de gobernanza multinivel. Basándose en el Marco de Coaliciones de Incidencia (MCA), examina cómo las creencias, las coaliciones y los acuerdos institucionales interactúan en diferentes ámbitos políticos —europeo, nacional/regional y local— para impulsar soluciones innovadoras en política social. Empíricamente, el estudio compara dos casos de innovación política (inspirados en los principios de la renta básica): Barcelona y Utrecht. Metodológicamente, el análisis se basa en 19 entrevistas semiestructuradas con actores clave involucrados en el proceso político, complementadas con análisis documental. Los hallazgos muestran que la innovación política resulta de la interacción entre la agencia local y las oportunidades estructurales multinivel. El MCA resulta ser una valiosa herramienta teórica para explicar cómo las ideas y las coaliciones cobran fuerza en los distintos niveles de gobernanza. Además, concluye que la innovación local depende no solo del rol de los emprendedores políticos, sino también de las condiciones propicias creadas por las estructuras de gobernanza multinivel.

1 | Introduction

Understanding why some local governments adopt innovative social policies while others do not is a central question in public policy research. In 2017, two European cities—Barcelona and Utrecht—implemented basic-income inspired policies (BIIPs), characterized by their unconditionality and (un)limitation. This raises a puzzle: why do cities with different institutional settings, welfare traditions, and historical trajectories converge in adopting similar social policy innovation? Addressing this question requires examining both local agency and the structural opportunities enabled by multilevel governance structures.

Previous research has identified several determinants of policy innovation, including the role of policy entrepreneurs (Guldbransson and Fossum 2009; Jordan and Huitema 2014a; Audretsch et al. 2021), the role of epistemic communities (Nelkin 1979; Haas 1990; Weible 2008), the progressive alliance of left-wing parties (Fernandes 2017), and participation in transnational municipal networks (Bulkeley 2004; Kern and Bulkeley 2009). The European Union (n.d.) also provides legislative instruments and funding mechanisms that local authorities can leverage for social innovation (e.g., Art. 8, Regulation 1303/2013; Delegated Regulation 522/2014; UIA). While these studies identify important determinants, few systematically examine how multilevel governance interactions shape local policy innovation across cities.

This study uses a public policy theory—the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF, Sabatier 1988)—to analyze the role of coalitions, beliefs, and resources in driving innovation in local social policy. While the ACF has traditionally been applied to national-level processes, this study demonstrates its usefulness in explaining how local actors navigate and exploit multilevel opportunity structures to promote social policy experimentation. The cases of Barcelona and Utrecht offer a compelling comparative setting. Barcelona operates within an autonomous regional configuration and is governed by a radical left municipalist coalition and is historically active in transnational municipal networks (TMNs). Utrecht, by contrast, functions within the Dutch decentralized welfare regime, where policy experimentation requires national-level

authorization, and innovation often arises through national policy networks rather than transnational ones.

Given these contrasting institutional and political environments, one might expect different pathways of policy innovation. Yet both cities converged in adopting a similar policy innovation—basic-income inspired policy (BIIP)—making them ideal cases to explore how multilevel dynamics can yield similar outcomes under differing conditions. This contrast allows the study to examine how different political and institutional environments interact with multilevel governance to produce similar policy outcomes. Methodologically, the study follows a most-different cases design, comparing two municipalities embedded in distinct governance and welfare traditions—Spain and the Netherlands—that nonetheless pursued a similar policy experiment inspired by basic income principles. Empirically, the analysis draws on 19 semi-structured interviews, one focus group, and documentary analysis of institutional and policy documents. Data were coded and analyzed using MAXQDA software.

Based on this comparative puzzle, the study tests three propositions: Agency: (a) The existence of local advocacy coalitions—linking knowledge-based experts and policy entrepreneurs, basic income advocates around Policy Core Beliefs developed an advocacy coalition that enhances the capacity for innovative policy design and implementation; Context: (b) Policy innovation in municipal social policy is more likely to occur when European and national frameworks create enabling opportunity structures that local advocate coalition can strategically foster innovation at higher-level government units; Policy-learning: (c) Policy-oriented learning within and between governance levels (local, national/subnational and EU-level) facilitates the adaptation and institutionalization of innovative practices, contributing to sustained policy change.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on policy innovation and presents the ACF as an analytical lens for multilevel contexts. Section 3 outlines the research design and methodology. Section 4 presents empirical findings, followed by the discussion and conclusion, which highlight the study's theoretical and empirical contributions—particularly the emergent role of multilevel reinforcing dynamics (MRD) in explaining municipal social policy innovation.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Policy Innovation in Multilevel Contexts and the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)

In 2017, several European cities experimented with basic income inspired policies (BIIPs). While these initiatives were not full universal basic income (UBI¹), they shared key features such as unconditionality and ilimitation, aiming to enhance existing social assistance frameworks. Policy innovation can be defined as “the process and/or product of seeking to develop new and/or widely adopted, and/or impactful policies, when existing ones are perceived to be under-performing.” (Jordan and Huitema 2014a, 915).

The literature highlights that innovation is deeply dependent on the actors involved, particularly their capacity to explore, experiment, and mobilize resources. Policy entrepreneurs play a pivotal role by leveraging bargaining power, building coalitions, and mobilizing knowledge and resources (Westley et al. 2013). They are someone who “‘politicize’ the issue” (Hysing 2009, 256). Their leadership is equally central within advocacy coalitions, as they often act as catalysts for influencing policy outcomes (Weible 2008; Baumgartner 2013; Weible and Ingold 2018).

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) provides a useful lens for analyzing how coalitions of actors—drawn from government, civil society, and research—coordinate around shared beliefs and objectives to achieve policy goals (Sabatier 1988; Henry 2011; Carboni 2012; Weible et al. 2021; Gabehart et al. 2022). These *shared beliefs* function as the “glue” that sustains the cohesion and strategic direction of the coalition (Sabatier 1988, 141). ACF places special emphasis on *policy-oriented learning*, that is, how actors adapt their strategies and beliefs over time based on new experiences and evidence (Sabatier 1998, 117). This mechanism highlights that policy change results not only from institutional or resource dynamics, but also from processes of collective learning and belief adaptation within and between coalitions.

Given the experimental nature of social policy innovation, ACF’s focus on learning and knowledge exchange is particularly relevant. Literature shows that such innovations are often tied to scientific expertise and empirical evaluation, as seen in previous social experiments like the Rural Income Maintenance Experiment (Bawden and Harrar 1977), the New Jersey Income Maintenance Experiment, and the Mincome project in Manitoba (Kehrer 1977). In these processes, “epistemic communities” (Haas 1990, 3) played a vital role by providing specialized knowledge and evidence to inform policymaking, forming what Nelkin called the “knowledge elite” (Nelkin 1979, 107) within coalitions.

A central ACF concept is the *policy subsystem*—the arena where advocacy coalitions interact, issues are debated, and policies are formulated, implemented, and revised (Sabatier 1998, 111; Weible and Ingold 2018, 329–330). In contemporary governance, these subsystems increasingly transcend administrative boundaries, involving actors across multiple levels of government, international organizations, and transnational municipal networks (TMNs). Formal and informal networks such as Eurocities or United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) exemplify these subsystems. They provide cities with

opportunities to shape agendas, exchange experiences, and apply jointly for EU project funding (Kern and Bulkeley 2009, 321). Through these networks, local governments engage in policy learning, benchmarking, and coordinated experimentation, enhancing their capacity to innovate while influencing broader governance structures. Barcelona illustrates this dynamic vividly: historically embedded in transnational municipal networks, it was a founding member of Eurocities and remains an active player in UCLG, positioning cities as relevant actors in EU and global governance (Blanco 2014; Hakelberg 2014).

The ACF underscores that policy change is driven not only by institutional structures or resources but by shared *policy core beliefs* that guide actor coordination. In this study, the ideology of new municipalism—rooted in principles of local empowerment and the right to the city (Blanco et al. 2018), “going beyond the state governance” (Thompson 2021)—serves as such a belief. New municipalism is closely tied to left-wing and left-green movements seeking to democratize governance, empower communities, and reclaim essential goods—such as housing, water, and energy—as social rights. This vision, informed by the libertarian municipalism of Bookchin (1991) and others, promotes decentralization, participatory democracy, and solidarity (Sepczyńska 2016). Historically, across Europe, progressive municipal coalitions have emerged, uniting local governments, neighborhood associations, unions, and civic organizations to advance social innovation (Fernandes 2017, 36). In France, the ideals of autonomy and self-management from May 68 were absorbed by leftist coalitions within the central state. In Portugal, they took root primarily at the municipal level, among alliances of Marxist-Leninists, social democrats, and progressive Catholics (MDP/CDE). In Spain, transition to democracy was shaped by regional movements, notably in Catalonia and the Basque Country (Magalhães 2017). Following the 2008 crisis, new municipalism re-emerged as a response to austerity, positioning cities as rebel institutions (Russell 2020, 99) reclaiming social rights and redefining local welfare (Angel 2020; Blanco et al. 2018).

Applying ACF in a multilevel European context reveals how structural opportunities created by EU policies interact with local advocacy dynamics. The European Union promotes innovation through both hard law—binding regulations on fair work and inclusion—and soft law, which leaves discretion to Member States. While the EU’s direct competence in social protection remains limited, several funding mechanisms empower local authorities to experiment with social policy. Regulation 1303/2013 and Delegated Regulation 522/2014 are key examples. The latter enables urban authorities (population $\geq 50,000$) to propose innovative projects under the Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) initiative,² assessed by criteria such as novelty, quality, partnership relevance, outcomes, and transferability. Each project may run for up to 4 years (Art. 3/6). These mechanisms, grounded in Article 8 of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF, 2014), extend earlier initiatives such as Article 10 (1989), progressively enhancing the policy-making capacity of local governments.

Such frameworks reflect the EU’s enduring commitment to policy innovation, tracing back to the Lisbon Strategy (2000) (Parés

et al. 2017, 34). They strengthen local autonomy and reshape power relations between governance levels, allowing municipalities to become significant laboratories of social experimentation (Thompson 2021).

By applying the ACF to a multilevel governance context, this study links ideational and institutional dimensions with the aim of understating the factors that led to the emergence of policy innovation. European, national, and local arenas are conceptualized as interrelated policy subsystems where coalitions mobilize ideas, resources, and alliances to design and implement innovative policy solutions. This approach anticipates what this study later conceptualizes as Multilevel Reinforcing Dynamics (MRD)—the iterative, mutually reinforcing interaction between local policy experimentation and higher-level institutional opportunities. Learning generated at one level (e.g., local pilot programs) can reshape beliefs, strategies, and regulatory approaches at higher levels, thus reinforcing the cycle of innovation and diffusion across governance scales.

As Sabatier (1998, 117) emphasizes, policy change emerges not merely from competition among interests or institutional rules but from *policy-oriented learning* within and between coalitions. In multilevel contexts, such learning can outweigh the influence of fixed beliefs or material resources, allowing ideas developed locally to gain traction and inform systemic policy change. Actors involved in coalitions can help reinforce dynamics by lobbying, conducting research, launching awareness campaigns, engaging in litigation, and forming coalitions (Weible and Ingold 2018).

2.2 | Linking ACF to Multilevel Contexts: Theoretical Argument and Propositions

Our central argument is that the ACF offers a powerful conceptual lens for understanding policy innovation within municipal social policy, especially when embedded in multilevel governance systems.

In such systems, as the EU, local authorities operate within complex institutional environments shaped by European regulations, national legislation, and local political ideologies. The ACF provides a dynamic understanding of how belief systems, learning processes, and inter-coalitional interactions shape the emergence of new policy ideas and instruments. While originally designed to explain policy change within national policy subsystems (Sabatier 1987, 1998; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), the ACF can be extended to capture cross-level policy dynamics in which ideas and resources circulate between European, national, and local arenas (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014; Ingold and Gschwend 2014). In this study, we argue that policy innovation in local social policy emerges when three interdependent processes occur:

Vertical diffusion of opportunity structures—European and national frameworks open political and financial spaces for local experimentation, providing legitimacy and resources for municipalities to design innovative responses to social needs.

Horizontal coalition-building, where local governments, policy entrepreneurs and basic income advocates form advocacy

coalitions that share common beliefs about social rights, innovation and the right to the city.

Policy-oriented learning and translation, in which actors re-interpret and adapt broader policy ideas (e.g., social innovation, community empowerment) to their local context, producing new policy designs that both respond to local needs and influence higher levels of governance through feedback mechanisms.

These processes illustrate how policy change emerges from the interaction between structural opportunity and ideational agency, mediated by advocacy coalitions that operate across multiple governance levels. Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of the conceptual model illustrating how the Advocacy Coalition Framework can be applied to multilevel contexts.

Based on this argument, we propose the following theoretical propositions:

Proposition 1. *Local advocacy coalitions linking policy entrepreneurs, knowledge-based experts, and social policy advocates—anchored in municipalist belief systems—enhance the municipality's capacity for innovative policy design and implementation.*

Proposition 2. *Policy innovation in municipal social policy is more likely to occur when European and national frameworks (e.g., ERDF, Urban Innovative Actions, national or regional policy signals supporting social experimentation) create enabling opportunity structures that local advocacy coalition can strategically leverage.*

Proposition 3. *Policy-oriented learning within and between governance levels (local, national/subnational and EU-level) facilitates the adaptation and institutionalization of innovative practices (e.g., Eurocities, URBACT), contributing to sustained policy change.*

Taken together, these propositions highlight how the ACF, when linked to multilevel governance and the ideological underpinnings of new municipalism, provides a compelling explanation for the emergence of policy innovation in local social policy. The framework captures the relational and ideational nature of innovation, where ideas, resources, and coalitions interact across arenas to shape the direction and substance of social policy in European cities.

2.3 | Methods and Techniques

The core of our empirical strategy relies on semi-structured interviews with key actors directly involved in the policy process. We conducted 19 interviews with experts, politicians, and aldermen in Utrecht, Nijmegen, and Barcelona, including online interviews due to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish.

The choice of semi-structured interviews is methodologically justified. As highlighted in policy process research, interviews provide unique insights into the beliefs, motivations, and strategies of

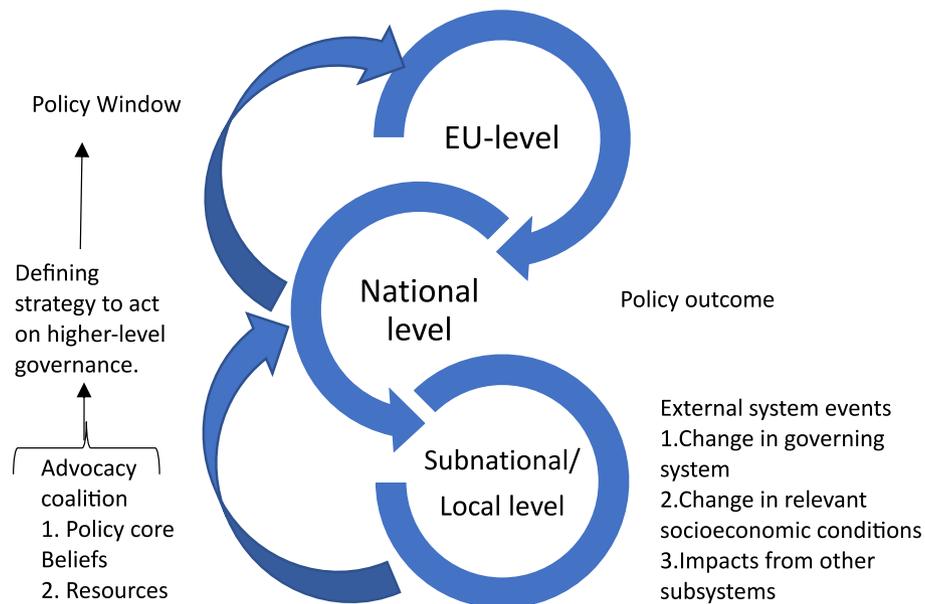


FIGURE 1 | Conceptual model. ACF policymaking applicable to multilevel contexts.

actors, capturing informal dynamics, negotiation processes, and coalition-building practices that are rarely documented in official records (Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Kvale 2011). In particular, this approach enables detailed reconstruction of how policy ideas emerge, are debated, and evolve over time, making it especially suitable for examining innovative municipal social policies. Following the guidelines proposed by Bogner et al. (2009), interviewing key experts and practitioners is considered the best practice for understanding complex policy processes, as these actors often possess tacit knowledge of the process. All interview transcripts were systematically coded and analyzed using MAXQDA software. An overview of the interviews is provided in Table 1.

To complement the interviews, we collected and analyzed a wide range of institutional documents, including laws, regulations, and minutes from city council assemblies, council motions, official letters, and press materials. Triangulating interview data with documentary evidence allows us to enhance the robustness of our findings.

The selection of Barcelona and Utrecht follows a “most-different cases” comparative strategy, designed to illuminate how similar policy innovations emerge under different institutional, political, and historical conditions. Both cities implemented basic-income inspired policies (BIIPs) featuring unconditional cash transfers, meaning beneficiaries were not required to engage in active job search, vocational training, or other conditional activities. Payments were delivered in cash, with monthly disbursements and automatic renewal, consistent with both basic income principles and conventional minimum income schemes.

Despite these similarities, some slight differences exist. Table 2 provide information about the differences in policy innovation. In Barcelona, the policy amount remains unchanged for the policy’s duration (“unlimited”), regardless of other income sources. In Dutch municipalities, the additional accumulation is capped at €200, and generosity levels differ: Barcelona provides 77% of the national minimum wage, whereas the Dutch municipalities

provide 66%, reflecting distinct approaches to social protection and local welfare priorities. Therefore, we can argue that the Barcelona case went further in the innovation process, which we can call the variation of intensity.

This methodological design allows us to explore not only the presence of policy innovation but also the processes that enable it. By combining interviews with documentary analysis, we capture both the structural and ideational dimensions of policy change, while the cross-city comparison highlights the interaction between local agency, advocacy coalitions, and multilevel governance structures.

3 | Results

3.1 | Institutional Background: The Scene

In the Dutch municipalities, the decentralization process in the social domain presented two sides of the same coin. The Participation Act—PA Act of 2015 allowed municipalities in the Dutch provinces to make decisions regarding child and youth support, long-term care, and income policy. This built upon the previous Work and Social Assistance Act of 2003, which already made municipalities responsible for “welfare-to-work” programs. The 2015 reform expanded this responsibility, providing municipalities with increased administrative and financial autonomy (Vermeulen 2015).

This process enabled more efficient cost management in the provision of social support (Boersma et al. 2013; Vermeulen 2015). However, the PA Act also reinforced stricter workfare orientation, giving municipalities the authority to impose more rigorous controls over benefit recipients. While this activation approach dominated the social assistance policy, municipalities were also granted the possibility to innovate and deviate from national guidelines through Article 83. Yet, such deviations required submission to and approval by the central government, making innovation highly dependent on the ideological orientation of national-level

TABLE 1 | Overview of interviews.

List	Name/role	When	Organization	Case
Interview 1	Laia Ortiz/Alderman for social affairs	September 29, 2021	City council	Barcelona
Interview 2	Lluís Torrens/Director of social innovation	March 5, 2020	City council	Barcelona
Interview 3	Ricard Gomà/University professor/ former alderman of social affairs	December 14, 2021	IGOP/UaB	Barcelona
Interview 4	Oscar Rebollo/Former civil servant	March 8, 2022	City council	Barcelona
Interview 5	Subirrats/Former alderman for culture/university professor	September 29, 2021	IGOP/UaB	Barcelona
Interview 6	Victor Evehardt/Alderman for income and work	February 15, 2021	City council	Utrecht
Interview 7	Mark Sanders/member of the program committee of the political party/university professor	July 5, 2021	D66 party	Utrecht
Interview 8	Hans Zuidema/project manager	March 3, 2022	City council	Wageningen
Interview 9	Janos Betko/policy advisor for social assistance	June 23, 2021	City council	Nijmegen
Interview 10	Dennis Gudman/Alderman of economic affairs and finance	January 21, 2022	City council	Wageningen
Interview 11	Sjir Hoeijmakers/Advisor for municipalities/process broker	June 26, 2021	City council	Utrecht
Interview 12	Focus Group/International relations department of Barcelona's city council	October 27, 2021	City council	Barcelona
Interview 13	José Noguera/University professor/social policy expert/member of civil society	March 4, 2020	UaB	Barcelona
Interview 14	Albert Júlia/Researcher at Iermb (one of the research centers responsible for the evaluation of the program)	March 6, 2020	Iermb/UaB	Barcelona
Interview 15	Alexander De Roo/Former deputy of European parliament	July 15, 2020	Green left party	Utrecht
Interview 16	Loek Groot/researcher at University of Utrecht	February 8, 2022		

Note: $n = 15$ (primary source) and $n = 4$ (secondary source).

TABLE 2 | Differences in policy innovation.

Features of the policy	Municipalities	
	Barcelona	Utrecht
Unconditionality	X	X
Fixed income	----	----
In cash	X	X
Unlimited	X	----
Monthly payment	X	X
Automatic renewal	X	X
Difference in generosity	77% of the minimum wage in Spain	66% of the minimum wage in the Netherlands
Individual	----	----

political parties with veto power. Therefore, it would make no sense for Dutch municipalities to use EU-level resources to lobby for BIIP because it would require national approval.

In Barcelona, the institutional setting offered fewer opportunities to deviate from national or regional norms. The legal framework was more rigid. Reforms following the new Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia (2006)—particularly [Law 13/2006 of July 27³](#) and [the law 12/2007 of 11th October](#), of social services—clarified the regulatory criteria for municipalities to

administer social emergency benefits. The Catalan government set strict parameters: benefits had to address specific, basic, and urgent needs, such as rent subsidies or family supplements, and could not exceed €200 or extend beyond three to four months (Navarro-Varas and Porcel 2017, 27).

Proposition 1 verified: The existence of local advocacy coalitions—linking knowledge-based experts, policy entrepreneurs and basic income advocates around Policy Core Beliefs (e.g., municipalism ideology, “politics of the left” and innovation ideals) enhanced the capacity for innovative policy design and implementation.

In Barcelona, left-wing parties have been a dominant political presence since the transition to democracy. From 1979 to 2011, the city was governed by socialist-led coalitions that included more radical leftist parties. A major political shift occurred in 2015 with the rise of *Barcelona en Comú* (*BComú*)—a political formation rooted in social movements, such as PAH—*Plataforma de Afectats per la Hipoteca*, and inspired by the social movement *Guanyem*.

BComú embodies a radical-left, ecological and feminist view on politics. The party brought together actors from *Podemos*, the Catalan Green Initiative, United and Alternative Left, *Procés Constituent*, and *Equo*. Its leader, Ada Colau, emerged as a prominent activist of a social movement (PAH) defending housing rights and opposing evictions, gaining national visibility during the 2008 crisis and its aftermath—particularly following legal

reforms that left indebted homeowners both homeless and still liable for mortgages. One of the parties behind *Bcomú*, *Podemos*, born from the *Indignados* movement in 2011, brought the basic income to the European elections of 2014.⁴ At the time, Spain was going through economic austerity measures imposed by the Troika, coupled with cuts to regional benefits (e.g., reductions to the Catalan minimum income scheme in 2011), sparked civic and political mobilization demanding a paradigm shift. The party's rise (*Bcomú*) took place against the backdrop of the deepest social cuts of the democratic period (Noguera 2019, 289), imposed by the Troika.

BComú's formation was supported by a strong civic base, with over 30,000 signatures collected within a month of the launch of the *Guanyem Barcelona* platform in June 2014. This momentum led to the official constitution of the party and participation in the 2015 municipal elections (Interview 5).

BComú espouses a “new municipalism”, which entails a deliberate rupture from traditional governance frameworks. It promotes social innovation, such as basic income, as part of a broader agenda to universalize access to essential needs (housing, food, water, energy), redefine social rights, and build an urban economy of common well-being (*municipalisme del bé comú*) (Blanco and Gomà 2016; Blanco et al. 2018; Zelinka 2018; Blanco et al. 2020).

Their political program contained slogans like “taking back institutions,” “winning back the city,” and “citizens' municipal platform” (Barcelona en Comú 2021), principles that are part of “libertarian municipalism” (Bookchin 1991; Sepczyńska 2016). A fundamental aspect of “municipalism” is the politics of the left. This ideology extended to the EU level as the “Municipalize Europe!” campaign advocated for a Europe beyond the nation-state, where cities become institutional actors in their own right—capable of developing income policies and shaping European politics. The idea of a “fearless Europe” (Barcelona en Comú 2022) in which municipalities would have the autonomy and responsibility to take an active role in policymaking in many issues such as housing—“Stop evictions; right to housing; against speculation, abusive loans and contracts”; social rights—“Democratic access to water and energy” or networks of municipalism—“Weave networks of collaboration with municipalities from across the continent towards shared goals, a Europe of proximity” (Barcelona en Comú 2022). *BComú's* electoral victory in 2015 allowed the appointment of public officials with sensibility for new ideas. Laia Ortiz, alderman for social affairs, was a politician who came from the young ecologists and the left green of Catalonia, that had a political trajectory much related to the environment and feminism. Themes which many times are linked to arguments in defense of the basic income idea. Feminism and the empowerment it could give to women (Robeyns 2001) and an ecological basic income in defense of a greener and sustainable world (Pinto 2018). One of her first decisions as alderman was to create an Office for Innovation and hire a social policy expert as director of innovation (minutes of the 26th of June 2015 assembly). That social policy expert was an economist by formation. He had a special interest in social innovation and he aimed at ending poverty in Barcelona. He was also an advocate for basic income in Spain's basic income network (*Red Renta Básica*) as a secretary of the Spanish network

for basic income. This individual, described by stakeholders as an “innovator” (focus group), was pivotal in transforming the municipality's social policy approach.

Local politics in Utrecht, during the period under study, were characterized by a progressive coalition name “green, liberal and social” alliance, which were part the green left (GL—*Groenlinks*) the social-liberals (*Democrats66—D66*) and the socialists (*SP*). Coalitions in the Netherlands are very common, on the national and local levels, there has never been a single-party government, only coalitions between two up to six parties (Andeweg and Irwin 2014). Historically, the Netherlands has a long-standing tradition of social protection. The 1965 *Algemene Bijstandswet* replaced the 1854 Poor Management Regulations Act and established one of Europe's most comprehensive minimum income schemes, alongside Denmark (Wang and van Vliet 2016; Crepaldi et al. 2017). Left-wing and centrist parties—particularly *GroenLinks*, *D66*, and *PvdA*—had already discussed basic income in party commissions as early as 1995 (Vanderborght 2004).

GL is more on the more radical left (Andeweg and Irwin 2014, 76; Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy and Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek 2008, 16) and they defended the basic income approach although they made their political program more related to the PA act law—“current policy is paternalistic and distrustful”. *Groenlinks* wants to give municipalities the space and financial means to stimulate participation in their own way. They can experiment with new forms of social security, such as a basic income (GroenLinks 2014). While *D66* had a moderate view. They were kind hesitant to talk about the word “basic income” (Interview 11). Although GL, since their creation, advocated in favor of the UBI, the fact is that after 1998, as the debate waned in the Netherlands, they removed the idea from its electoral program.

By the time of the 2014 municipal elections, several Dutch municipalities were applying the Work and Social Assistance Act (2003) more rigorously, following a strict workfare approach. This law required local municipalities—responsible for implementing social assistance policy—to demand a “compensation/service in return” (*tegenprestatie*) from welfare beneficiaries who did not apply for work. However, municipalities retained the autonomy to define what this “compensation” entailed. In Rotterdam, under the leadership of Marco Florijn (*PvdA*) and a right-leaning city council,⁵ a strict interpretation of the law was adopted. Social assistance recipients were obliged to sign a document once a week (*Binnenlands Bestuur*, 3rd September 2018) or to perform menial tasks such as picking up trash at 7 a.m. while wearing fluorescent vests—similar to those worn by minors sentenced to community service (interviews 7 and 9). This strict implementation persisted until 2014, when the Participation Act (PA) was approved in October and implemented in January 2015. Ironically, the new legislation from the central government called for an even stricter approach to social assistance (interviews 7 and 9).

Prior to the elections, a *D66*-affiliated party expert and a municipal public official began interviewing state officials about the application of the law, uncovering a shared perception that the social assistance system lacked the necessary tools to function effectively (interview 7). After securing electoral support,

parties favoring systemic change—*D66* and *GroenLinks*—submitted motions advocating for basic income-inspired policies, that is, social assistance with fewer conditionalities. These proposals gained support from left and center-left parties in the city council, including *SP* (radical left), *GL*, *CU*, and *PvdA* (center-left).

In Table 3 you can see the framework of the ideology of the parties, in Barcelona and Dutch municipalities (Utrecht, Nijmegen, Wageningen), that were behind the motions in favor of the BIIP.

In Barcelona, in the period under study, the newly elected public official for social affairs leveraged European networks such as Eurocities and UCLG to raise the visibility of social policies and secure funding. The alderman lobbied at the EU level—meeting commissioners, participating in the Eurocities Social Affairs Forum, and using her political acumen to prioritize two issues within the party agenda: the housing emergency and income policies.

Although previous governments had been present on the executive committee, it was very difficult to find a political representative who would go to Brussels to be part of the meetings...and this changed with the new government (*Bcomú*)...they started to be very active, politically, in Eurocities

(Focus Group).

On the technical side, the social policy expert/director of innovation was pivotal in transforming the municipality's social policy approach. With strong legal and technical knowledge and connections to evaluators of the UIA program, he “moved throughout Europe to connect people” (interview 4). His role was essential in designing and securing EU funding for a new policy model. Seen as an “innovator” (focus group with IRDBCC43, 27th of October 2021) “he completely changed the way the municipality saw the social policy” (focus group). Together they formed an advocacy coalition built on local municipalist ideology with policy innovation.

In Dutch municipalities, progressive coalitions—primarily *GroenLinks*, *D66*, and *SP*—collaborated with party experts and university researchers to support basic income-inspired policies. Public officials negotiated with national authorities to adapt Participation Act guidelines, while experts provided technical knowledge to minimize uncertainty. In Utrecht, motions

for policy experimentation gained support from left and center-left parties in the city council, including *GL*, *D66*, *SP*, *CU*, and *PvdA*.⁶ In Nijmegen, researchers from Radboud University actively participated in policy design and negotiations with national authorities, demonstrating the integration of epistemic communities into the policymaking process.

The advocacy coalition in Utrecht adopted a different strategy than Barcelona. It consisted of a newly elected *D66* alderman—well-known for previous experimental policymaking, such as legalizing medical marijuana—and a *D66* party expert trained in social security innovation and entrepreneurship, and advocate of the idea of a basic income. Frustrated with the central government's increasingly restrictive approach, the Utrecht coalition negotiated with national authorities to minimize regulatory uncertainty and garner support for experimental reforms (interviews 7, 16, 11). During the first mandate, they started to get in touch with the social assistant officials to know how they felt about having to comply with so many measures of the Work and Social Assistance Act (2003). The alderman was “pushing on the political side” and the innovator was “working in the shadow behind him to set a policy in a responsible way” (interview 7).

In both cases, advocacy coalitions—comprising public officials, party experts, and researchers—played central roles in pushing for innovation in the social policy context at higher-level government units. In Barcelona, the coalition leveraged EU-level networks and legal resources, while in Utrecht, they operated primarily within national governance structures. Therefore, the proposition is verified in both cases.

Proposition 2 verified: Policy innovation in municipal social policy is more likely when European and national frameworks create enabling opportunity structures that local advocacy coalitions can strategically leverage.

During the period under study, Barcelona's advocacy coalition effectively leveraged EU-level instruments to support municipal innovation. The UIA program allowed local authorities with at least 50,000 inhabitants to submit proposals for untested solutions addressing urban challenges. This created a strategic alignment between municipalist objectives and EU priorities, particularly in social inclusion and sustainable urban development (Innovative Urban Action 2022). The coincidence between municipalism and the policy agenda of the EU through the “entrusted entity” of the Urban Innovative Action, which promotes

TABLE 3 | Framework of the ideology of the parties—in Barcelona and Dutch municipalities (Utrecht, Nijmegen, Wageningen) that were in the city council at the time of the policy innovation process.

Left	Centre	Right
Socialists (<i>SP</i>)	Green Left (<i>GL</i>)	Social liberals (<i>D66</i>)
<i>Bcomú</i> (Podemos, EQUO, Greens, alternative left, <i>Procès</i> and X movements)	Social Democrats (<i>PvdA</i>)	

Source: Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy and Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek, (2008, 16).

TABLE 4 | The policy innovation subsystems: actors, beliefs, and venues.

	Policy core belief	Accessible venues	Available resources
Barcelona	Wanting to prove that it was possible to have an income policy (on the local level)	EU-level	Advocacy coalitions' resources: lobbying in European networks; Exploit policy windows; acquiring bid for funding ACF coupling agenda on EU-level context
Dutch municipalities	Changing the law	National level	Advocacy coalitions' resources: Putting down a motion in favor of PI; connecting stakeholders, networking and building trust ACF coupling decision on national level

“new, unproven and hence risky ideas” (Commission Delegated Regulation 522/2014) means that the policy could have a greater variety of intensity (which ended up happening, see Table 4) since their goal is to fund and support innovations in the area of urban sustainable development that are relevant for the EU (art 8, 1303/2013 EU). The coalition's expertise, political connections, and ideological commitment enabled it to mobilize resources, secure funding, and implement experimental policies. This was seen as a continuity of the effort the European Commission was doing in pushing for innovation (Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Innovation 2000) as in the European Council of 2000 which took place in Lisbon, innovation was designated as a strategic line of action (Parés et al. 2017, 34). As Börzel and Risse (2003) argue, the EU provides political opportunities and resources for domestic actors. Barcelona's coalition seized these opportunities to secure funding and legitimacy for local experimentation. The municipalist tradition amplified these efforts, reinforcing the city's role in European governance. Their entrepreneurial activities, of social policy experts and public officials—networking, lobbying, legal expertise, and project development—were instrumental in aligning local social policy goals with EU-level innovation agendas.

Lluís Torrens is a key factor in all this (...) is an innovator and has a special vision of how to use technology. The fact that social policy experts is in that social position has completely changed the way of looking at social policy in Barcelona.

(Focus Group)

Laia Ortiz is a person who due to the knowledge, the sensitivity and the support and ideological line she follows, supports this (BIIP). I am sure that today this would not have been possible.

(Interview 14)

In contrast, Utrecht's coalition lacked the same level of EU engagement. The city's advocacy coalition fostered innovation at the national level, but it could not align agendas across governance levels due to institutional constraints. Dutch municipalities, under the Participation Act, were required to seek national government approval for policy innovation. Under this configuration, the public official from Utrecht assumed the position of leading the negotiations, together with another four Dutch

municipalities (including Nijmegen, Wageningen, Groningen and Tilburg) with the central government. During a year of negotiations with the minister, there were five meetings with the municipalities. After this year of negotiations, there was a preliminary text from the secretary of employment establishing a few rules that contradicted the parameters that were in the motions from the municipalities. The PA annex, as it was known (Van der Veen 2019, 6), stipulated the counterpoints of the proposal. In this document, it was said that: (a) people, once they started to benefit from the policy, they would not be able to leave even if they wanted to; (b) there would have to be an increase in the intensification of the conditionality to counterbalance the current minimum income schemes (which, by the PA act law, were already very intensive in their workfare approach). The central government, led by the VVD liberals, did not want to approve this project. However, a second advocacy coalition (in favor of BIIP) emerged at the national level, composed by progressive parties of green left and far-left parties (Socialists), moderate left-wing (Social democrats) and central-right wing parties (D66). Together with party experts and researchers who were part of the negotiation process with the secretary of state of employment and social affairs, they put forward a motion that was approved in the national parliament, by the same parties that were in favor of the policy innovation in the different Dutch municipalities—GL, D66, SP, and PvdA. This motion was a stepping-stone towards the approval of the change in the policy by the national government (Interview 9).

Contrary to the Barcelona case, Utrecht's coalition relied primarily on national-level negotiation due to the Participation Act's requirement for central government approval. While municipalities had autonomy under Article 83, national ideology limited independent action, constraining the use of EU-level instruments, thus minimizing the level of innovation in the policy (compared to Barcelona's case). Dutch advocacy coalitions thus focused on negotiations and coalition-building within national governance structures to advance policy innovation.

Proposition 3 verified: Policy-oriented learning within and between governance levels (local, national/subnational, EU-level) facilitates the adaptation and institutionalization of innovative practices, contributing to sustained policy change.

Policy-oriented learning played a central role in both contexts, highlighting how actors adapt strategies and beliefs based on experience, evidence, and inter-level interactions. In Barcelona,

long-standing participation in Eurocities and UCLG facilitated knowledge transfer and learning across governance levels. There is a historical presence of Barcelona in international municipal networks (interview 3) and it is not only the fact that it was a founding member of Eurocities or the headquarters of UCLG are sited in Barcelona. Former Barcelona officials held leadership positions in organizations in UCLG and CEMR. Between 1991 and 1997, Pascal Maragall (President of the city council of Barcelona, at the time) was president of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and Ricard Gomà (former alderman of social affairs) was president of the social inclusion commission of UCLG between 2007 and 2011. In 1989, Jordi Borja, Deputy Mayor of Barcelona under Pasqual Maragall's leadership (1983–1995), organized a conference in Barcelona about the role of cities in building a more united Europe, prepared for the single common market of 1986. This was the beginning of the Eurocities, a transnational municipal network which had been created by six European cities: Barcelona, Birmingham, Milan, Rotterdam, Lyon, and Frankfurt (Eurocities 2011). Eurocities and UCLG are, perhaps, “two of the most successful attempts of consolidating the presence of cities in the politics of the European Union” (Blanco et al. 2018). Barcelona is a “paradigmatic example of the increasing influence of network governance in European cities” (Blanco 2014, 7).

The policy innovation under study was adopted during a period when Eurocities was having more relevance in urban politics and that linked very well with the municipalistic view on social policy. The integration of experts in local government provided technical knowledge to interpret EU regulations and implement innovative social policies. The new social position of the alderman of social affairs of Barcelona as president of Eurocities on 18th October 2016, after 1 year as vice-president of the same committee and over a year in office as alderman in the city executive, was essential to put the housing emergency and income policies issues on the agenda. Barcelona became one active member in these issues alongside Ghent and Leipzig (Eurocities Social Affairs Forum, 2017). Calling attention to relevant themes which cities were going through, especially at a time when Eurocities were having more relevance in urban politics. Ortiz was a true policy entrepreneur in the sense that linked the city executive with social policy experts and fought for these matters on international platforms. These actors not only used EU legal instruments to their advantage but also actively shaped the European urban agenda via platforms like Eurocities.

In Utrecht, during the period under study, university researchers and policy experts worked closely with public officials to inform policy design and implementation. These actors helped reduce uncertainty, provided evidence-based recommendations, and supported national-level negotiations to advance basic income-inspired reforms. In Nijmegen, for instance, the collaboration between researchers and municipal officials strengthened advocacy coalitions and ensured the inclusion of scientific knowledge in policy experimentation. They entered the process of convincing the minister of employment and social affairs, Jetta Klijnsma and the liberal government to implement a policy innovation in the social policy context. On one hand they had the knowledge and the public officials had the know-how of calling them to work on this issue. The presence of the epistemic communities gave more confidence to decision-makers and helped

to minimize uncertainty around innovation with the knowledge they implemented in the policy innovation. People from the political parties involved in the municipalities (D66, GL, PvdA, SP) were convinced of the importance for local authorities to pursue this innovation and they presented a motion in the national parliament. After the negotiations with the minister, the PA annex stipulated some constraints to the innovation municipalities wanted but they used the article 83 of the PA act law which states that “An order of the Council may, on an experimental basis, deviate from the provisions or terms of Articles 6(...) If, before an experiment ends, a legislative proposal has been submitted to the States General to convert it into a structural legal regulation”. This “innovation article” (Article 83) became a strategic entry point for city councilors and municipal deputies, who used it to challenge national orientations typified in the PA act law of 2015. On 22nd February 2017, a general administrative order was designed and put forward to give space for the change in the social assistance policy. The Decree of February 22, 2017 established the Law on Participation in Temporary Decree Experiments.

The Figure 2 (below) provides a graphic design of how advocacy coalition works in a multi-level context.

4 | Conclusion and Discussion: How Multilevel Opportunities Shape Local Innovation

The institutional configurations of Spain and the Netherlands represent two distinct models of governance that shape the scope and dynamics of local innovation. In Spain, a decentralized state structure grants significant autonomy to regional and local authorities, allowing municipalities like Barcelona to experiment and position themselves as key players in European policy arenas. By contrast, in the Netherlands, the (de)centralized structure allows municipalities to innovate but it requires that municipal policies align with national frameworks, limiting the potential for policy innovation. These differences are not merely administrative; they influence how local actors navigate multilevel governance, mobilize resources, and form coalitions capable of driving policy innovation.

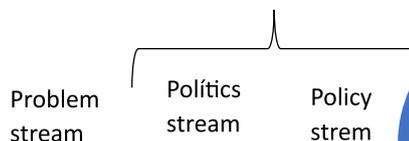
Both cities (Barcelona and Utrecht) implemented comparable policy innovations, yet under contrasting institutional conditions.

In Barcelona, the policy innovation process under study was strongly influenced by an active local advocacy coalition composed of expert-researchers, public officials, and civil society actors who shared a belief system rooted in municipalism, social justice, and innovation. These actors mobilized through multilevel networks—particularly within Eurocities—leveraging institutional opportunities to advance their agenda at higher levels of governance. The city's historical presence in international municipal networks amplified its capacity to influence the European social policy agenda. By holding leadership roles within Eurocities' Social Affairs Committee and engaging directly with EU Commissioners, local policy entrepreneurs were able to couple local priorities—such as housing and income policies—with European debates, transforming advocacy into innovation through strategic use of multilevel resources.

Access points at EU-level (policy windows):

Eurocities, UIA, ED 522/014 (European policy agenda for innovation)

Strategy: exploit policy Windows, acquiring bid for funding



Advocacy coalition:
Party politicians + experts/researchers + advocates of UBI.

(Family subsystem policy)

Policy core belief:
Municipalism, municipal 'basic income' policy, Innovation. Expertise, technology, political sensitivity, the ideological line

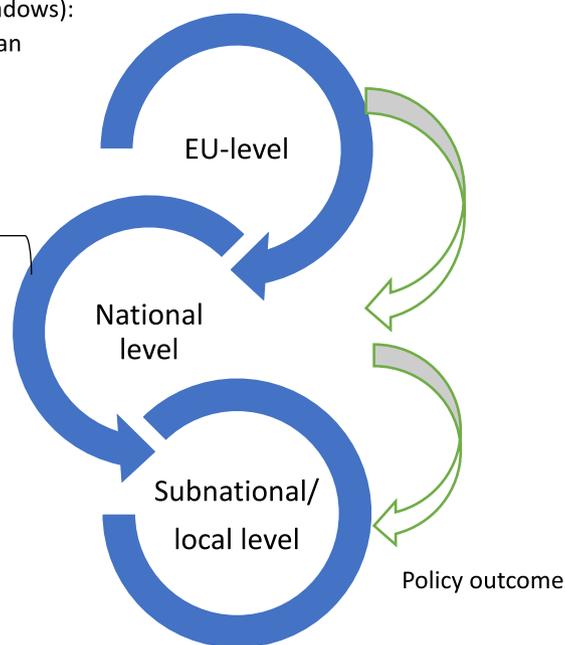


FIGURE 2 | Model of analysis—“Euromunicipalism”.

In Utrecht, however, the dynamics were more constrained by national institutional structures. Although a local advocacy coalition similarly emerged—comprising technical experts, public officials, and advocates—it operated within a system where local governments have limited authority to engage directly at the European level. Policy innovation, therefore, required negotiation and approval from national authorities, with fewer opportunities for direct engagement in transnational policy arenas. The Utrecht case shows how multilevel constraints can restrict the translation of local entrepreneurial activity into innovation, despite comparable coalition structures and belief systems. This highlights a key distinction in multilevel governance: the degree of autonomy and the availability of policy windows at higher levels fundamentally shape the potential for local innovation.

The multilevel context proved crucial as it showed that the emergence of social policy innovation depended not only on the presence of policy entrepreneurs but also on structural opportunities provided by European and national frameworks.

Tables 4 and 5 present a comparative overview of Barcelona and Utrecht, highlighting key differences in institutional, political, and organizational characteristics.

The comparative analysis of these two cities provides broader theoretical insights into the relationship between advocacy coalitions and multilevel contexts. It suggests that the ACF can be fruitfully applied to explain policy innovation in municipal settings, particularly when embedded within multilevel governance arrangements. The concept of Multilevel Reinforcing Dynamics (Rietig 2020) helps illuminate how interactions between local, national, and European levels can mutually strengthen innovation processes. Whereas previous research had emphasized the role of policy entrepreneurs in coupling streams across levels

of governance, this study shows how coalitions—anchored in shared belief systems and operating within nested policy subsystems—can leverage multilevel opportunities to drive innovation upward.

Moreover, this research highlights the central role of expert-researchers and public officials as policy entrepreneurs. Their strategic engagement in advocacy coalitions, lobbying efforts, and knowledge sharing across levels of governance underscores how technical expertise complements political entrepreneurship in producing policy innovation. These findings align with prior work emphasizing the importance of professional actors in shaping innovation outcomes (Hoppe et al. 2015; Jordan and Huitema 2014b) but extend them to a municipal and multilevel context.

Ultimately, the study underscores that cities are not merely implementers of higher-level decisions—they can be active agents of policy innovation within multilevel systems. Yet their capacity to do so depends on the institutional architecture that surrounds them. In decentralized systems like Spain's, autonomous regions enjoy greater political and operational autonomy, enabling municipalities to engage in transnational networks and influence policy agendas beyond the national level. In (de)centralized contexts like the Netherlands, innovation remains contingent upon the discretion of national authorities. These contrasting institutional settings demonstrate that the potential for municipal innovation emerges from the interplay between local agency and multilevel opportunity structures.

While the study offers valuable theoretical and empirical contributions, it also acknowledges its limitations. It is based on two cases and focuses on a single policy domain, limiting external validity. Rather than claiming generalizability, this work should

TABLE 5 | Differences between municipalities.

Features of the municipality		Characteristics and background of the advocacy coalition actors		
Institutional setting	European international networks' presence	Ideology	Profile	Tasks
Barcelona Institutional limitations (within the autonomous region of Catalonia)	Historical participation of the municipality in European municipalism networks	Change in government structure (radical left-wing)—municipalism project	Party politicians (left-wing)/public officials, (innovative) experts/researchers, advocates of UBI	Think of ways to improve income policies, lobbying for the policy, acquiring bid for funding
Utrecht Institutional setting favorable of innovative solutions in the social domain	-----	Change in government structure ("green, liberal and social" alliance)	Party politicians (left center)/public officials, (innovative) experts/researchers, advocates of UBI	Think of ways of "changing the system", lobbying for the policy, negotiation

be seen as an exploratory step that opens new research avenues. Future studies comparing a larger number of cities and countries could refine the analytical value of the MRD approach and further assess how advocacy coalitions, institutional configurations, and political opportunity structures interact to foster policy innovation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹ The idea of Universal basic income (UBI) is conceptualized as “an unconditional cash benefit to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement” (Groot and van der Veen 2000, 1; Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017).

² Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges (UIA website, 2022).

³ Art. 30 of the law 13/2006, of 27th July, of economic social benefits and the law 12/2007 of 11th October. of social services.

⁴ The proposal was approved by 80% of the members of Podemos (Noguera 2019, 292).

⁵ The city board of mayor and aldermen was formed by three parties: Leefbaar Rotterdam (right populist), D66 (social-liberal), and CDA (Christian-democratic).

⁶ PvdA—*Partij van de Arbeid* (social-democrats/labour party); GL—*Groenlinks* (Green Left).

D66—*Democrats 66* (social liberals); SP—*Socialistische Partij* (socialist party); CU—*ChristenUnie* (Christian union).

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