

Transforming Environmental Governance at the Subnational level: Decentralization, Participation, and Partisanship in Murcia's Coastal Socio-Ecological Systems

Keywords: Transformative Governance; Socio-ecological systems; Participation; Partisanship; Decentralization

Abstract

Transforming the governance of coastal socio-ecological systems is inherently complex, particularly within the multilevel structures of democratic states. In these contexts, empowered subnational governments are pivotal, as their proximity to local stakeholders enhances the influence of non-state actors. Governance trajectories are further shaped by party politics, with outcomes varying depending on regional party control and its (dis)alignment with higher levels of government. This study investigates these dynamics across six key coastal ecosystems in Spain's Mediterranean Region of Murcia: Salinas y Arenales de San Pedro del Pinatar, Mar Menor, Calblanque-Monte de las Cenizas-Peña del Águila, Bahía de Portman, Sierra de la Muela-Cabo Tiñoso-Roldán, and Cabo Cope-Puntas de Calnegre. Overall, our findings reveal that while decentralization and stakeholder participation open avenues for governance innovation, their transformative potential is repeatedly constrained by administrative inertia, weak coordination, entrenched interests, and partisan politics.

Introduction

On July 27, 2020, the Region of Murcia enacted Law 3/2020 to protecting the Mar Menor lagoon on Spain's Mediterranean coast. This law not only underscores the expanding role of Spanish subnational authorities in coastal socio-ecologic systems (SES) governance but also reflects the decisive influence of social actors, whose participation was institutionalized in the new rule via the Mar Menor Council (Rodríguez-Chaves Mimbrero, 2022). Equally significant is the ambivalent stance of the centre-right People's Party (PP) in the regional government: although it initially approved the law, the PP has since promoted a parliamentary commission to dismantle it, under pressure from the radical-right VOX and powerful agricultural and livestock interests (Vadillo, 2024).

Governance transformation of coastal SES at the subnational level is a complex, multifactorial process (IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate, 2019; Jouffray et al., 2020), further complicated by the institutional design of multilevel democracies (Luján et al., 2025). On one hand, subnational authority over coastal governance provides regions with the potential for a leading role (Kauneckis & Martin, 2020), though this is often constrained by the challenge of coordinating multiple decision points (Ferraro & Failler, 2024). On the other hand, multilevel systems benefit from the contextual knowledge that subnational policymakers gain through their proximity to key stakeholders (De Mulder, 2008), while simultaneously exposing governance change to the risk that powerful local actors lobbying for their own interests (Zafrin et al., 2014). These dynamics are further shaped by party politics. Left-wing parties are generally more likely to advance environmental governance reforms than their right-wing counterparts (Wen et al., 2016), and their proactivity may be conditioned by vertical ideological (in)congruence (Ștefuriuc, 2009).

While some studies have examined transition processes in littoral governance (Cinner & McClanahan, 2015; Gelcich et al., 2010), most research has focused on explaining outcomes rather than investigating the drivers and causal mechanisms of change (Banikoi, 2024). Moreover, these studies often address coastal environments in general, without exploring the specific complexities of concrete SES. Our study addresses this gap and contributes to the broader agenda of transformative environmental governance (Chaffin et al., 2016) by answering the following question: *What factors drive governance transformation of coastal socio-ecological systems at the subnational level in multilevel democracies?*

This article uses a qualitative research approach to assess the impact of decentralization, stakeholder participation, and party politics on six critical coastal ecosystems in Spain's Mediterranean Region of Murcia: Salinas y Arenales de San Pedro del Pinatar; Mar Menor; Calblanque, Monte de las Cenizas y Peña del Águila; Bahía de Portman; Sierra de la Muela, Cabo Tiñoso y Roldán; Cabo Cope y Puntas de Calnegre. Following a presentation of the theoretical framework and methodology, the article discusses the results in relation to the three main explanatory factors and concludes with key insights.

Governance Transformation of Socio-Ecological Systems in Multilevel Democracies

Transformative governance is an approach to environmental governance that requires both a rupture with existing system drivers and the introduction of new drivers, creating space for governance innovation and fostering fundamental, positive changes in SES (Chaffin et al., 2016). Coastal SES are affected by population growth (Neumann et al., 2015), expanding economic activities (Jouffray et al., 2020), and environmental stressors, particularly those linked to climate change (IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate, 2019). These drivers increasingly present critical challenges for coastal SES, which helps explain the slow and partial nature of transitions from conventional regulatory management to more collaborative and adaptive governance models (Schlüter et al., 2020; Vodden, 2015).

In multilevel democracies, these challenges cut across multiple government tiers, each with its own decision-making power and competing actors (Del Carmen Peña-Puch & Rivera-Arriaga, 2025; Rölfer et al., 2022). This institutional complexity produces networks in which the influence of empowered sub-state actors (e.g., regional and local authorities) combined with participation from non-state ones (e.g., businesses, trade unions, voluntary organizations, advocacy networks) are crucial for the evolution of coastal SES governance (Luján et al., 2025). Furthermore, the inherently political nature of social-ecological transformations highlights the role of political party preferences, which shape these complex governance networks (Pichler, 2023).

Subnational government tiers with competencies in coastal management can be a key driver of governance transformation (Ferraro & Failler, 2024; Kim & Yoon, 2018). Decentralization can foster “compensatory federalism”, where regional authorities implement proactive environmental measures when national actors are slow or inactive (Rabe, 2011; Selin & VanDeveer, 2009). Along these lines, evidence from the United States shows that regional governments in littoral communities have adapted to climate change despite national-level inaction (Kauneckis & Martin, 2020). A similar pattern emerges in Mediterranean governance, where subnational regions such as Catalonia have exercised a remarkable leadership (e.g., through direct control of initiatives like Civil Flora) (Soler I Lecha, 2003), increasingly propelled by alliances between environmental/climate and nationalist movements (Enguer & Navarrete, 2025). Accordingly, the first expectation of this study is:

E1. *Decentralization of competencies to subnational governments enhances governance transformation of coastal social-ecological systems.*

However, vertical distribution of power can also pose obstacles. A high number of decision points (“clearance points”; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984) and actors (veto players; Tsebelis, 1995) can impede effective policy delivery in coastal governance (Schlüter et al., 2020). Evidence from regions such as the Canary Islands and Réunion Island indicates that the multiplication of actors in central–regional relations frequently produces ambiguities, inconsistencies, and gaps in institutional roles and competencies for littoral governance (Ferraro & Failler, 2024; Ferraro et al., 2023; Losen et al., 2025). Similar studies have not only underscored the severity of these coordination challenges in decentralized coastal management but also documented institutional responses to them, including the initiation of Indonesia’s Coastal Zone and Small Island Management Act (RUU Perisir) (Siry, 2006). Hence, we expect:

E2. *An increase in the number of decision-makers undermines governance transformation in coastal social-ecological systems.*

Proximity of government tiers to local communities enhances access to contextual knowledge via horizontal participation of key non-state actors (Petersson et al., 2019). Participatory practices occur both formally, through governance bodies representing stakeholders and informally, through volunteer involvement in conservation projects and citizen science programs. Examples include platforms such as the Integrated Management Stakeholders Roundtable of the Eastern Scotian Shelf (Kearney et al., 2007), Governing Boards (*Juntas Rectoras*) for coastal wetlands designated as Natural Parks in the Valencian Community (Luján et al., 2025), or the public–private partnership known as the Monitoring Enterprise in California (Cigliano et al., 2015). These polycentric practices enable governance innovations and the development of adaptation strategies tailored to community needs (Vogel et al., 2020). Therefore:

E3. *Stakeholder participation at the subnational level facilitates governance transformation in coastal social-ecological systems.*

The proximity of subnational government tiers to local communities may also face the influence of competing regional interests and pressures (Knoepfel et al., 2010). While this can allow the inclusion of environmental NGOs’ priorities, other powerful stakeholders may lobby for narrow policy interests, distorting progressive transformation of coastal governance (Bellanger et al., 2020). The influence of these actors can override public preferences on littoral areas, as seen in the impact of lobby groups on key coastal planning strategies in Queensland (Zafrin et al., 2014). Similar dynamics have been observed in Tripoli, where a private operator contracted for local water management exerted sustained pressure on subnational political elites, ultimately reconfiguring the existing clientelist networks (Allès, 2012). This leads to the expectation:

E4. *Close subnational ties undermine governance transformation in coastal social-ecological systems.*

Party politics and ideological divisions further shape these dynamics. Research shows that left-leaning governments adopt more environmental policies than right-leaning ones (Enguer & Schaub, 2024; Wen et al., 2016). Recent studies similarly suggest that left-wing parties provide broader and more transformative coverage of sustainable development goals related to coastal protection, framing sustainability through social equity and systemic change (Brás et al., 2025). By contrast, right-wing parties more often emphasize technical efficiency and resource-based management approaches. These differences are further reflected in policy responses to environmental impacts of climate change on coastal areas. A telling example is the proactive shift in Australian coastal policy following the 2007 election, when the newly elected Labor government under Kevin Rudd moved swiftly to address issues that had seen little action under the previous conservative administration (Wescott, 2009). Overall, this leads to expect that:

E5. *Left-wing subnational governments are more likely to promote transformative governance of coastal social-ecological systems.*

Moreover, since intergovernmental relations also involve interactions between political parties, greater vertical ideological alignment tends to promote stronger cooperation (Ştefuriuc, 2009). Therefore, ambitions for coastal governance transformation at the subnational level are likely influenced by the partisan composition of other government tiers (Rodrigo et al., 2023). For example, partisan disagreements reportedly prompted Spain's central government (centre-right PP) to challenge climate legislation passed by Catalonia's left-wing regional government (Enguer, 2025). Accordingly:

E6. Ideological alignment between regional and central governments facilitates stronger intergovernmental cooperation, supporting governance transformation of coastal SES.

The Case Study: Coastal Socio-Ecological Systems Protection in the Region of Murcia

This case study was conducted in the Spanish Region of Murcia. The choice of this area responds, first, to the high concentration of SES in the region, whose Mediterranean location exposes them to a series of demanding challenges. Specifically, they are subject to both severe environmental (e.g, chronic water scarcity and climate change advancement) and anthropogenic pressures (e.g., the expansion of intensive irrigated agriculture, urban development, and tourism). These SES constitute the units of observation for this study (Table 1): Salinas y Arenales de San Pedro del Pinatar; Mar Menor; Bahía de Portman; Calblanque, Monte de las Cenizas y Peña del Águila; Sierra de la Muela, Cabo Tiñoso y Roldán; Cabo Cope y Puntas de Calnegre.

[Table 1 about here]

Second, the aforementioned SES offer valuable opportunities to examine governance transformation, given the evolution they have undergone in light of the complex multilevel framework for their protection, the significance of stakeholder participation platforms, and the role of different political parties in the regional government. Indeed, these factors have influenced the gradual adoption of regional regulations whose scope of protection covers coastal SES in the Region of Murcia both specifically and more generally (Figure 1; Supplementary File, Appendix A).

[Figure 1 about here]

The Spanish regions enjoy substantial autonomy within Spain's quasi-federal system, which ranks among the most decentralized in Europe (Cocciolo, 2020). In this regard, the ACs hold exclusive authority over a range of competencies related to coastal governance (Table 2). Additionally, the national government's role in managing marine biodiversity, originally defined in Law 42/2007 and amended by Law 33/2015, has been further clarified by Constitutional Court ruling 87/2012 (Sanz Larruga, 2016). This decision recognized the ACs' authority over protected natural areas within the territorial sea, subject to certain conditions. Building on the general scheme presented, many ACs have progressively legislated in key areas related to coastal governance through their regional framework laws (*Estatutos de Autonomía*), and developed relevant regulations and strategies in the same policy field (Cuesta de Loño, 2024).

[Table 2 about here]

In the light of its central role in environmental governance, the regional government of Murcia has progressively engaged with a wide array of social and economic stakeholders across multiple SES. On the one hand, civic actors include both associations that emerged in response to governance conflicts within specific SESs (e.g., *Salvemos Calblanque*, *Pacto por el Mar Menor*, *Plataforma ILP Mar Menor*, *Fundación Sierra Minera*, *Amacope*, *Prolitoral*, *SOS Mar Menor*, and *Liga de Vecinos de Portmán*) and organizations with a wider territorial or thematic remit (e.g., *Asociación de Naturalistas del Sureste*, *Ecologistas en Acción*, *WWF*, *Greenpeace*, and the *Federación de Asociaciones Vecinales de Cartagena y Comarca*). On the other hand, economic sectors mainly include fisheries, agriculture, tourism, and hospitality organizations.

The engagement of all of these actors has been instrumental in shaping the governance trajectories of the SESs examined in this study. In several cases—most notably the Mar Menor and the Bahía de Portmán—such interactions have generated recurrent cycles of social mobilization that elevated these ecosystems to the forefront of the subnational political agenda. At the same time, participation has increasingly been institutionalized through multi-stakeholder forums, which operate as arenas for interest articulation, deliberation, and coordination between civil society and public authorities (Table 3).

[Table 3 about here]

Since the restoration of democracy in Spain, the Region of Murcia has experienced over four decades of self-government. Following the early short presidencies of Antonio Pérez Crespo (Union of the Democratic Centre) and Andrés Hernández Ros (Socialist Party of the Region of Murcia), the AC's political trajectory can be broadly divided into two phases: an initial period dominated by the center-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) from 1982 to 1995, followed by a prolonged phase of center-right leadership under the PP from 1995 to the present. The PP has ruled alone for nearly three decades, with the notable exception of 2019–2024, when it headed coalition governments of varying composition, at different times including the center-right Ciudadanos, the far-right VOX, and several independents expelled from both parties.

[Figure 2 about here]

The prolonged period of PP dominance entrenched a development model centered on construction, tourism, and, above all, intensive irrigated agriculture (de Castro et al., 2025; Ibarra, 2016). Consistent with this orientation, regional governments actively promoted the Tajo–Segura water transfer¹ (Khalil & Palacios, 2019) to address chronic water deficit and enable the expansion of irrigated agriculture. The sector's exponential growth thereafter consolidated its role as a cornerstone of the regional economy (Grindlay & Lizárraga, 2012), reinforcing a mutually dependent relationship between the PP-led regional administration and the agricultural interests (de Castro et al., 2025). In parallel, tourism and construction also experienced rapid growth, driven by the proliferation of holiday resorts around the Mar Menor and the region's participation into Spain's late 1990s real estate boom.

¹ Through this infrastructure, the Segura River (the main watercourse running through the Region of Murcia) receives additional water resources from the Tajo River via a connection built across the AC of Castilla-La Mancha.

This development model has continued to shape the PP's broader approach to environmental governance. In this context, the rapid expansion of intensive agriculture was enabled by the systematic easing of environmental and land-use regulations (Avilés, 2023). Similarly, the widespread conversion of rainfed farmland into irrigated land (Carreño, 2015; Martínez-Fernández et al., 2000), was facilitated by weak administrative oversight and a permissive enforcement of land-use and spatial planning regulations² (WWF, 2006). Regarding pollution in the Mar Menor, the regional government constantly failed to comply with its obligations under Directive 91/676/EEC on nitrate pollution from agricultural sources (Giménez, 2022).

Moreover, the regional Law 1/2001 on Land further encouraged real-estate development by relaxing environmental procedures and facilitating land reclassification. The approval of the aforementioned law also repealed the Law 3/1987 on the Protection and Harmonization of Uses of the Mar Menor, the first regional law enacted to protect the lagoon, which had been passed under previous PSOE's administration. Interestingly, following the first major ecological crisis in the Mar Menor, the PP, governing in coalition with Ciudadanos, briefly departed from this trajectory by supporting the adoption of new protective measures for the lagoon.

The PP's environmental governance model in the Region of Murcia has also been influenced by intergovernmental relations. The pro-water transfer rhetoric (Aragón, 2011) promoted a confrontational logic whereby any actor opposing water transfer policies was framed as acting against the interests of the Region of Murcia. The PSOE's accession to the national government in 2004 was accompanied by a discourse favoring desalination as an alternative to water transfers, in line with the strategy of its subnational counterpart. This position was forcefully contested by the PP-led Murcian government through an intensive campaign under the slogan "Agua para Todos" ("Water for All") (de Castro et al., 2025; Khalil & Palacios, 2019).

Intergovernmental conflicts have also crystallized around specific SES management. In the case of the Mar Menor, tensions emerged in 2018 following the PSOE's entry into the national executive. In this context, and especially after the 2019 anoxia crisis affecting the lagoon, a prolonged dispute developed over the distribution of responsibilities among administrations. Another prominent example is Bahía de Portmán, where the most recent controversy has focused on the selection among competing regeneration alternatives. This process has involved all three levels of government, as well as multiple stakeholders represented within the Joint Monitoring Commission for the Environmental Regeneration Works of Bahía de Portmán (Table 3).

Methods

Data were collected through document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group (Table 4), covering the analysis period from the 1980s onward, when the decentralization process in Spain initiated the development of regional self-government. Initial insights were drawn from both scientific and grey literature—primarily regulations, strategies and reports issued by international organisations and both national and subnational government bodies. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted in spring 2025, involving academic, institutional, social and political actors involved in each of the six SES of this study. Thirdly, a focus group was organised with stakeholders of similar profiles in the Region of Murcia in October 2025.

² Nor can it be overlooked that the national administration, under governments of different political orientations, acted similarly through the Segura River Basin Authority (Confederación Hidrográfica del Segura), the body responsible for river basin management, concerning the control of illegal agricultural irrigation (Martínez-Fernández et al., 2000; WWF, 2006).

[Table 4 about here]

The selection of SHs followed a two-stage process. First, a prospective analysis was developed to identify relevant actors, followed by a prioritization based on a matrix of two variables: the SHs (1) degree of interest in the issues addressed in the interviews/focus group and (2) level of influence or authority over these issues. In addition, chain sampling (snowball sampling) was applied, allowing the network of participants to be expanded beyond the initial contacts. As a result, a total of 27 SHs were involved: 9 in semi-structured interviews and 18 in the focus group.

The qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews and the focus group were analysed using thematic analysis (Miller & Brewer, 2003). All recorded materials were transcribed and thoroughly reviewed. Statements from the transcripts were then coded and categorized under overarching mechanisms of decentralization, identified in the theoretical framework as potentially central to governance transformation in SES. Following an abductive approach, these mechanisms were iteratively examined in light of the empirical data from each case study. Through this process, only those operations that consistently aligned with the observations across all cases were retained.

5. Governing Coastal Socio-Ecological Systems in the Region of Murcia

5.1. Decentralization

The evaluation of the decentralization of competences and its effects on coastal SES governance reveals important insights. Evidence regarding the capacity of subnational governments to drive transformation is mixed (FG01). On the one hand, our study confirms the significant role of regional administrations in SES management: “*we make most of the decisions ourselves*” (I01). This leadership, combined with the growing fluidity in the relationship between local stakeholders and this government tier (I03), supports the implementation of projects shaped by local demands. As one stakeholder put it: “*you ask for something, and usually the next day they give it to you*” (I02).

Yet this operational autonomy faces serious structural constraints. The administration is described as one where “*things move, but they move slowly*”, and it is “*very difficult to introduce meaningful changes*” (I01). This suggests that decentralization enables ad hoc actions but does not guarantee deep or lasting transformations. In some cases, “*the regions, despite having competences, has been described as less active or effective*” (I07), raising doubts about the real effectiveness of devolved powers. There is technical capacity within subnational administrations, but such technical teams do not guarantee that transformative policies are adopted in practice; execution often depends on political will and timing, and strong studies or proposals can still end up “*in a drawer*” (I09).

At the same time, the persistent challenge of multilevel coordination comes to the fore. Stakeholders consistently highlight that “*on the coast there will always be overlaps of administrations*” (I01; FG01), creating a reality in which “*there are many overlaps of marine spaces*” (I05), leading to “*chaos*” (I04) in governance. This fragmentation plays out in duplications and contradictions: “*sometimes they don’t talk to each other, sometimes they don’t understand each other, sometimes they don’t write to each other, they make contradictory decisions*” (FG01; I05). The issue is so pronounced that “*if you don’t have a centralized body where different actors collaborate, it is very difficult to produce public policies in an efficient way*” (I06), exposing structural gaps in the governance framework.

In conclusion, while E1 on the benefits of decentralization receives conditional support—indicating operational agility but limited transformative power—E2 on coordination challenges is strongly and consistently confirmed across interviewees, identifying administrative fragmentation as a fundamental obstacle to effective coastal SES governance.

5.2. Stakeholder Participation

Littoral SES governance at the subnational level in the Region of Murcia is shaped by a persistent tension around participation. Institutional mechanisms exist to channel participation, and when they function properly, they foster a sense of shared responsibility among actors. As one interviewee explained, the key is ensuring that “*stakeholders understand that they are active participants in the management of the protected area and that their opinions matter*” (I01). This collaborative spirit is reflected in processes where “*every time they make a change in the regulations, they also ask for our opinion*” (I02), and even in cases where the administration has advanced “*shared management between users and the public administration through co-management committees*” (FG01; I05).

Nevertheless, these participatory spaces face significant structural weaknesses (FG01). Meetings of participatory bodies are often irregular, to the point that “*in one area, in 2023, it wasn’t even convened*” (I01). Moreover, the processes tend to remain largely consultative, with limited influence on policy design, since “*everything arrives already very watered down... they don’t take part in the genesis of the issue*” (I04). This lack of impact, combined with participants’ frequent need of having to use their own personal or volunteering time (I09), has led some to withdraw as they “*saw no viability in the actions being undertaken*” (I07).

At the same time, a sharp asymmetry in access to decision-makers becomes evident. Certain economic actors benefit from “*very open informal channels... picking up the phone or pressing a button and securing... a direct meeting*” (I01). This privileged access translates into effective pressure that weakens regulatory content, so that “*those regulatory instruments... are being issued... in my view, quite light*” (I01). The agri-industrial sector, in particular, exerts strong influence: “*the agricultural lobbies... are pressuring*” (FG01; I07) and have devised strategies to “*minimize the effects of the comprehensive Mar Menor law*” (I07). Their leverage is reinforced by political dependency, as this sector “*has traditionally sustained PP governments politically*” (I06), making “*interacting with them practically impossible*” (I06). Evidence even illustrates their ability to shape official documents, as “*they forced us to remove the word co-management from the document*” (I05).

In conclusion, despite shortcomings in the practice, our analysis confirms both E3 on enabling participation. Likewise, it validates E4 on the capture of subnational politics by private interests.

5.3. Party Politics

The influence of political-ideological factors on coastal SES governance appears in different ways across the collected testimonies. Some interviewees reported no notable differences based on partisan affiliation (e.g., I01; I05). Others, however, highlighted a clear partisan divide in responsiveness to environmental demands. While VOX “*generally goes very much against environmental policy*” (I09), left-wing parties were generally viewed as supportive (I07). For example, one interviewee recalled the endorsement of a set of principles developed in 2023 to protect the Mar Menor: “*the other parties [on the left], of course all of them... had to support our proposals*” (I07). By contrast, right-wing parties were described as either dismissive or hesitant to act on commitments: “*the VOX party didn’t even receive us,*” and “*while the PP assured us they*

would maintain their position in favour of protecting the *Mar Menor*... from words to deeds, there's a long stretch" (I07).

This pattern appears linked both to longstanding political dependencies—"agriculture is the sector that has traditionally sustained PP governments politically" (I06)—and to emerging pressures from VOX over the PP. VOX exerts its influence both as a coalition partner in the government formed by the two parties since 2023 and in competing for a shared electorate: "*VOX achieves a certain electoral presence in the Region of Murcia primarily by capturing traditional PP voters, especially those connected to business interests linked to agriculture (...)*" (I06). A tangible outcome of this dynamic has been the recent pact between the two parties to renegotiate, on more lenient terms, the protections for the *Mar Menor* established by Law 3/2020—a law originally approved by the PP itself five years ago (I07).

When it comes to coordination between levels of government, lack of partisan alignment often translates into friction. Interviewees described a "*clash of colours between the regional government and the central government. That [in Madrid] they have one colour and here another often severely limits communication between the two administrations*" (I02). In practice, this dynamic meant that "*we found the national Ministry said one thing, and the region contradicted it*" (I07). Even a municipality governed by the same party as the regional administration criticized a unilateral decision by the central government that undermined an existing agreement: "*the ministry decided unilaterally to seal the tailings in the bay, despite a previously signed accord*" (I08). Nevertheless, social pressure is perceived as capable of offsetting these partisan divides, as coordination has improved in part because "*given the massive social mobilization around these issues, they themselves are realizing they must be part of the solution to the problem*" (I07).

In short, E5 finds clear and consistent support. At the same time, while social mobilization may help to offset its impact, vertical ideological misalignment continues to impose significant constraints, thereby also confirming E6.

6. Discussion

This study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on transformative environmental governance and environmental federalism by qualitatively assessing key factors driving governance transformation of coastal SES at the subnational level in multilevel democracies. Specifically, it explores whether, how, and to what extent decentralization, stakeholder's participation and partisan politics shape coastal SES protection in the Region of Murcia. The results largely affirm the complex, and often contradictory, dynamics outlined in the literature, while also highlighting context-specific particularities that challenge or refine prevailing assumptions.

Concerning the decentralization of competences (E1), the Murcian case offers conditional support, mirroring the ambivalent "compensatory federalism" observed in other contexts (Rabe, 2011). The operational agility of the regional administration—exemplified by its ability to implement localized measures like access controls—demonstrates the potential for subnational tiers to act as drivers of policy innovation, a phenomenon similarly noted in US littoral communities (Kauneckis & Martin, 2020). However, the pervasive "inertia" and slowness in enacting deeper transformations reveal a critical limitation. This suggests that decentralization, while necessary for fostering proximity and responsiveness, is insufficient on its own to overcome entrenched institutional path dependencies. The transformative potential is thus conditional on internal administrative capacity and political will, a nuance that extends the theoretical proposition of E1.

The evidence for E2, on coordination challenges, aligns with the literature on "clearance points" and "veto players" (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Tsebelis, 1995). The described "chaos" of overlapping administrations, contradictory decisions, and the lack of a central coordinating body in the Region of Murcia is an example of the institutional ambiguities and gaps identified in other regions like the Canary Islands or Reunion Island (Ferraro et al., 2023; Ferraro & Failler, 2024). The Murcian case confirms that a high number of decision-makers, without robust coordination mechanisms, is a fundamental obstacle to coherent governance transformation, directly undermining policy delivery.

The findings on stakeholder participation present a dual narrative that both confirms and complicates the theoretical expectations. The functionality of mechanisms like co-management committees and the tangible influence of persistent actors (E3) validate the literature on how participatory practices enable tailored interventions (Vogel et al., 2020). The success of SES management and the proactive role of stakeholders in shaping the regional tourism pact are clear examples of governance innovation emerging from subnational engagement. However, the systematic limitations—infrequent meetings, consultative rather than co-decisive processes, and frustration among participants—reveal a significant gap between the formal architecture of participation and its transformative potential. This suggests that the mere existence of participatory venues is not enough; their design, frequency, and actual influence on decision-making are critical determinants of success.

Simultaneously, the evidence for the capture of subnational policymaking (E4) is clear and aligns with warnings about vested interests (Bellanger et al., 2020; Zafrin et al., 2014). The "privileged informal channels" of economic actors, the "light" regulatory outcomes, and the direct editing of policy documents under pressure provide a compelling case study of how powerful lobbies can distort governance. The specific case of the agri-industrial sector's influence over the regional government illustrates a form of "capture" that is deeply embedded in long-standing political-economic dependencies, going beyond mere lobbying to reflect a structural distortion of the policy arena.

Finally, the role of party politics in the Region of Murcia provides confirmation of the theoretical expectations. The partisan divide in receptivity to environmental demands reported (E5) supports the literature linking right-leaning governments to weaker environmental prioritization (Enguer & Navarrete, 2025; Knill et al., 2010). The explicit rejection by right-wing parties (PP and VOX) contrasted with the support from left-wing parties offers a clear, real-world illustration of how ideological preferences shape coastal governance priorities on the ground.

Likewise, the "clash of colours" and its detrimental effect on intergovernmental coordination (E6) confirms the thesis that vertical ideological alignment facilitates cooperation (Ștefuriuc, 2009). A lack of partisan alignment thus translates into fragmented governance that hinders transformation. However, the observed improvement in coordination driven by social mobilization introduces a crucial moderating variable. It suggests that intense societal pressure can, at times, override the constraining effects of partisan discord, a dynamic that merits further exploration in comparative studies.

While this case study provides valuable insights into a specific context, its single-region, qualitatively oriented design imposes clear limitations on external validity and causal inference: the focus on six coastal SES within the Region of Murcia and reliance on documentary sources, stakeholder testimony, and a limited temporal window. To address these weaknesses, future research should adopt comparative and longitudinal designs that explicitly test the conditionalities identified here, complement qualitative depth with quantitative indicators, and employ methodological approaches that strengthen causal attribution.

Bibliography

- Allès, C. (2012). The Private Sector and Local Elites: The Experience of Public–Private Partnership in the Water Sector in Tripoli, Lebanon. *Mediterranean Politics*, 17(3), 394–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2012.725303>
- Aragón, V. (2011). *Aragón, 2011*. Universidad de Murcia.
- Avilés, A. D. (2023). Conflicto socioambiental en el Mar Menor: Más de un mar y menos de dos. Matrices de producción de sentido al territorio. In *Mirando a los ríos desde el mar. Viejos y nuevos debates para una transición hídrica justa* (pp. 129–138). Ediciones de la Universidad de Murcia; Fundación Nueva Cultura del Agua.
- Banikoi, H. (2024). Legal pluralism, ideology, and institutional change: The evolution of institutions for coastal resource governance in Ghana. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 20, e32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744137424000225>
- Bellanger, M., Speir, C., Blanchard, F., Brooks, K., Butler, J. R. A., Crosson, S., Fonner, R., Gourguet, S., Holland, D. S., Kuikka, S., Le Gallic, B., Lent, R., Libecap, G. D., Lipton, D. W., Nayak, P. K., Reid, D., Scemama, P., Stephenson, R., Thébaud, O., & Young, J. C. (2020). Addressing Marine and Coastal Governance Conflicts at the Interface of Multiple Sectors and Jurisdictions. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 7, 544440. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2020.544440>
- Brás, G. R., Lillebø, A. I., & Vieira, H. (2025). Holding Sustainability Promises in Politics: Trends in Ecosystem and Resource Management in Electoral Party Manifestos. *Sustainability*, 17(15), 6749. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17156749>
- Carreño, M. F. (2015). *Seguimiento de los cambios de usos y su influencia en las comundiades y hábitats naturales en la cuenca del Mar Menor, 1988-2009, con el uso de SIG y teledetección*. Universidad de Murcia.
- Chaffin, B. C., Garmestani, A. S., Gunderson, L. H., Benson, M. H., Angeler, D. G., Arnold, C. A. (Tony), Cosens, B., Craig, R. K., Ruhl, J. B., & Allen, C. R. (2016). Transformative Environmental Governance. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 41(1), 399–423. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-110615-085817>
- Cigliano, J. A., Meyer, R., Ballard, H. L., Freitag, A., Phillips, T. B., & Wasser, A. (2015). Making marine and coastal citizen science matter. *Ocean & Coastal Management*, 115, 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2015.06.012>
- Cinner, J. E., & McClanahan, T. R. (2015). A sea change on the African coast? Preliminary social and ecological outcomes of a governance transformation in Kenyan fisheries. *Global Environmental Change*, 30, 133–139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2014.10.003>
- Cocciolo, E. (2020). Cambio climático en tiempos de emergencia. Las comunidades autónomas en las veredas del ‘federalismo climático’ español. *Revista Catalana de Dret Ambiental*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.17345/rcda2868>
- Cuesta de Loño, P. (2024). La organización territorial del Estado y el Dominio Público Marítimo Terrestre: Consecuencias sobre las competencias autonómicas en el mar. *Revista Canaria de Administración Pública*, (2), 70–95. <https://doi.org/10.36151/RCAP.2.3>

de Castro, C., Pedreño, A., & Sánchez, M. A. (2025). Agrarian reasen, deep stories and environmental destruction in the Campo de Cartagena-Mar Menor: A Gramscian world-ecology perspective. In *The history of Environmental Degradation in Mar Menor* (pp. 40–52). Routledge.

De Mulder, J. (2008). The institutional context for transboundary environmental impact assessment in Belgium: Multi level setting — a matter of smooth governance? *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 26(4), 277–288.
<https://doi.org/10.3152/146155108X379622>

Del Carmen Peña-Puch, A., & Rivera-Arriaga, E. (2025). Challenges for good governance in coastal socio-ecological systems of Campeche: Analysis from the expert users' perspective. *Marine Policy*, 176, 106634. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2025.106634>

Enguer, J. (2025). Comparing Regional and National Climate Policy Preferences: An Analysis of Political Parties in the Basque Country and Catalonia. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 55(1), 30–57. <https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjae035>

Enguer, J., & Navarrete, R. M. (2025). Protecting the climate to challenge the centre? Secessionism and climate policy preferences in Catalonia. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 35(2), 205–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2023.2263834>

Enguer, J., & Schaub, S. (2024). Local preferences for the adoption and modification of climate policy instruments under a radical left government: Unveiling the impact and legacy of Barcelona in Common. *Local Government Studies*, 1–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2024.2400284>

Ferraro, G., & Failler, P. (2024). Biodiversity, multi-level governance, and policy implementation in Europe: A comparative analysis at the subnational level. *Journal of Public Policy*, 44(3), 546–572. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X24000072>

Ferraro, G., Failler, P., & Tournon-Gardic, G. (2023). Biodiversity policy and subnational implementation in the remote regions of France. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 25(10), 12033–12050. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-022-02502-4>

Gelcich, S., Hughes, T. P., Olsson, P., Folke, C., Defeo, O., Fernández, M., Foale, S., Gunderson, L. H., Rodríguez-Sickert, C., Scheffer, M., Steneck, R. S., & Castilla, J. C. (2010). Navigating transformations in governance of Chilean marine coastal resources. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107(39), 16794–16799.
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1012021107>

Giménez, M. (2022). El Mar Menor y la contaminación por nitratos. Nuevos instrumentos jurídicos, mismas incertidumbres. *Actualidad Jurídica Ambiental*, (128), 1–31.

Grindlay, A. L., & Lizárraga, C. (2012). Regadío y territorio en la Región de Murcia: Evolución y perspectivas de futuro. *Ciudad y territorio: estudios territoriales*, 128, 185–193.

Ibarra, J. (2016). *Cartagena en llamas: La crisis industrial de 1992*. Editorial Corbalán.

IPCC special report on the ocean and cryosphere in a changing climate. (2019). Intergovernmental panel on Climate Changes (IPCC). <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/>

Jouffray, J.-B., Blasiak, R., Norström, A. V., Österblom, H., & Nyström, M. (2020). The Blue Acceleration: The Trajectory of Human Expansion into the Ocean. *One Earth*, 2(1), 43–54.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2019.12.016>

Kauneckis, D., & Martin, R. (2020). Patterns of Adaptation Response by Coastal Communities to Climate Risks. *Coastal Management*, 48(4), 257–274.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08920753.2020.1773209>

Kearney, J., Berkes, F., Charles, A., Pinkerton, E., & Wiber, M. (2007). The Role of Participatory Governance and Community-Based Management in Integrated Coastal and Ocean Management in Canada. *Coastal Management*, 35(1), 79–104.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10.1080/08920750600970511>

Khalil, N., & Palacios, I. (2019). La competición partidista en la Región de Murcia (1983-2015). El desarrollo del nacionalismo hídrico. In *En busca del poder territorial. Cuatro décadas de elecciones autonómicas en España* (pp. 369–390). Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas.

Kim, D.-R., & Yoon, J.-H. (2018). Decentralization, Government Capacity, and Environmental Policy Performance: A Cross-National Analysis. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 41(13), 1061–1071. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2017.1318917>

Knill, C., Debus, M., & Heichel, S. (2010). Do parties matter in internationalised policy areas? The impact of political parties on environmental policy outputs in 18 OECD countries, 1970–2000. *European Journal of Political Research*, 49(3), 301–336. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.01903.x>

Knoepfel, P., Larrue, C., Varone, F., & Hill, M. (2010). *Public policy analysis*. Policy Press.

Losen, B., Lagabriele, E., & Aabid, S. (2025). Beyond Ecology: Land–Sea Governance, Policy, and Research in Réunion Island (2000–2024). *Ocean and Society*, 2.
<https://doi.org/10.17645/oas.i470>

Luján, I., Enguer, J., Aldegue, B., & Barberà, O. (2025). Governance Innovation for Coastal Wetlands: Dependencies, Challenges, and Opportunities in the Valencian Community. *Ocean and Society*, 2, 10286. <https://doi.org/10.17645/oas.10286>

Martínez-Fernández, J., Esteve-Selma, M. A., & J. Martínez (coord.). (2000). El regadío en la cuenca de Segura y sus efectos ambientales y sociales. In *Documentos para una gestión alternativa del agua en la Cuenca del Segura* (pp. 53–70).

Miller, R. L., & Brewer, J. D. (2003). *The A-Z of social research: A dictionary of key social science research concepts*. SAGE.

Neumann, B., Vafeidis, A. T., Zimmermann, J., & Nicholls, R. J. (2015). Future Coastal Population Growth and Exposure to Sea-Level Rise and Coastal Flooding—A Global Assessment. *PLOS ONE*, 10(3), e0118571. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118571>

Petersson, M. T., Dellmuth, L. M., Merrie, A., & Österblom, H. (2019). Patterns and trends in non-state actor participation in regional fisheries management organizations. *Marine Policy*, 104, 146–156. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.02.025>

Pichler, M. (2023). Political dimensions of social-ecological transformations: Polity, politics, policy. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 19(1), 2222612.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2023.2222612>

Pressman, J. L., & Wildavsky, A. B. (1984). *Implementation: How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland* (3. ed). Univ. of California Press.

- Rabe, B. (2011). Contested Federalism and American Climate Policy. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 41(3), 494–521. <https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjr017>
- Rodrigo, S. G., Alda-Fernandez, M., & Kölling, M. (2023). Climate Governance and Federalism in Spain. In A. Fenna, S. Jodoin, & J. Setzer (Eds), *Climate Governance and Federalism* (1st edn, pp. 263–284). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009249676.014>
- Rodríguez-Chaves Mimbrero, B. (2022). Medio ambiente urbano. *Anuario de Derecho Municipal*, (15), 331–350. https://doi.org/10.37417/ADM/15-2021_12
- Rölfer, L., Celliers, L., & Abson, D. J. (2022). Resilience and coastal governance: Knowledge and navigation between stability and transformation. *Ecology and Society*, 27(2), art40. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-13244-270240>
- Sanz Larruga, F. (2016). Costas y litoral: Biodiversidad marina, cambio climático y otras cuestiones. *Anuario de Derecho Ambiental. Observatorio de Políticas Ambientales*, 535–562.
- Schlüter, A., Vance, C., & Ferse, S. (2020). Coral reefs and the slow emergence of institutional structures for a glocal land- and sea-based collective dilemma. *Marine Policy*, 112, 103505. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.04.009>
- Selin, H., & VanDeveer, S. D. (Eds). (2009). *Changing climates in North American politics: Institutions, policymaking, and multilevel governance*. MIT Press.
- Siry, H. Y. (2006). Decentralized Coastal Zone Management in Malaysia and Indonesia: A Comparative Perspective. *Coastal Management*, 34(3), 267–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08920750600686679>
- Soler I Lecha, E. (2003). The External Dimension of Sub-national Governments: Dealing with Human Rights at the Barcelona and Valencia Euromed Civil Fora. *Mediterranean Politics*, 8(2–3), 112–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629390308230008>
- Ştefuriuc, I. (2009). Government Formation in Multi-Level Settings: Spanish Regional Coalitions and the Quest for Vertical Congruence. *Party Politics*, 15(1), 93–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068808097895>
- Tsebelis, G. (1995). Decision Making in Political Systems: Veto Players in Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, Multicameralism and Multipartyism. *British Journal of Political Science*, 25(3), 289–325. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400007225>
- Vadillo, V. (2024). El PP de Murcia se abre a modificar la ley de protección del mar Menor. *El País*. <https://elpais.com/clima-y-medio-ambiente/2024-04-17/el-pp-de-murcia-se-abre-a-modificar-la-ley-de-proteccion-del-mar-menor.html>
- Vodden, K. (2015). Governing sustainable coastal development: The promise and challenge of collaborative governance in Canadian coastal watersheds. *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes*, 59(2), 167–180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12135>
- Vogel, B., Henstra, D., & McBean, G. (2020). Sub-national government efforts to activate and motivate local climate change adaptation: Nova Scotia, Canada. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 22(2), 1633–1653. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-018-0242-8>

Wen, J., Hao, Y., Feng, G.-F., & Chang, C.-P. (2016). Does government ideology influence environmental performance? Evidence based on a new dataset. *Economic Systems*, 40(2), 232–246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecosys.2016.04.001>

Wescott, G. (2009). Stimulating Vertical Integration in Coastal Management in a Federated Nation: The Case of Australian Coastal Policy Reform. *Coastal Management*, 37(6), 501–513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08920750903044824>

WWF. (2006). *Uso ilegal del agua en España: Causas, efectos y soluciones*. WWF.

Zafrin, S., Rosier, J., & Baldwin, C. (2014). Queensland's Coastal Planning Regime: The Extent of Participation in Coastal Governance. *Planning Practice & Research*, 29(4), 331–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2013.872916>