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The Asymmetry of Power: Formalizing Authority Recovery Constraints in Distributed Governance

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Abstract

The allocation, dispersion, and recovery of authority are central concerns within political science, institutional analysis, and multilevel governance. However, existing literature frequently operates on the implicit assumption of bidirectional recoverability—the notion that institutional authority configurations, once decentralized or fragmented to accommodate complexity, can be linearly restored to a state of centralized authority given sufficient resources and formal authority. This article challenges the assumption of symmetrical elasticity in governance by introducing the Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM). By anchoring the analysis in established domains of structural inertia, path dependence, and institutional resistance, the GRCM formalizes the asymmetric nature of authority recovery in distributed systems. We demonstrate that while the dispersion of decision rights occurs as a functional response to institutional scaling, the subsequent recovery of those rights is inherently non-linear and cost-escalating. The model identifies a Critical Fragmentation Threshold beyond which authority recovery becomes structurally infeasible under ordinary endogenous conditions, transforming distributed governance from a reversible design choice into a durable structural state. We illustrate the model's dynamics through founder-led organizations as one applied site where concentrated authority, delegation, and recovery constraint become visible within broader distributed governance dynamics.

1. Introduction

How do central authorities reclaim power once it has been distributed across a complex institutional landscape? The dispersion of decision rights—whether through federalist decentralization, the delegation of state functions to specialized agencies, or the scaling of authority within central-authority systems—is a well-documented phenomenon in multilevel governance (MLG). Scholars have extensively mapped how authority "unravels" from the center to the periphery to manage functional complexity and transaction costs (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Yet the inverse process—the re-aggregation of that authority back to the core—remains significantly under-theorized.

The prevailing logic in institutional design often assumes a degree of structural symmetry: if authority can be delegated through formal authorization, it can be reclaimed through the same mechanism. This article argues that such an assumption ignores the political and institutional friction generated when decision rights become embedded in the routines, coalitions, and local resource dependencies of the periphery. Once distributed, authority is not merely a dormant asset held in trust; it becomes an active component of the peripheral unit's institutional identity and survival strategy.

We introduce the Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM) to formalize this asymmetry. The GRCM posits that authority recovery is not the linear reverse of delegation but is instead governed by a non-linear recovery-cost function. As governance fragmentation increases, the institutional cost of reclaiming a single unit of authority rises non-linearly, eventually outpacing the central authority's coordination and enforcement capacity. This article is a theory-building contribution. It develops a formal

conceptual model for analyzing authority recoverability rather than presenting an empirical test of recovery outcomes.

The core contribution of this paper is the identification of a Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit}). Beyond this point, the central authority's residual power is insufficient to overcome the cumulative resistance of embedded governance layers. In such states, recovery is not merely expensive; it becomes structurally infeasible under ordinary endogenous conditions. To illustrate these dynamics, we apply the GRCM to the evolution of founder-led organizations. While often viewed through the lens of management theory, these systems offer a high-resolution applied site for observing the political science of authority recovery, demonstrating how early-stage delegation creates path-dependent structures that even powerful central actors may struggle to reverse.

By shifting the focus from the distribution of power to the constraints on its recovery, this article provides a formal framework for understanding institutional lock-in and the limits of central authority in fragmented governance systems.

2. Literature Positioning: Authority Dispersion, Institutional Embedding, and the Recovery Gap

The study of political and institutional power has long been concerned with the mechanisms through which authority is allocated, dispersed, or reclaimed. However, institutional analysis often operates on the implicit assumption of bidirectional recoverability—the notion that institutional authority configurations, once decentralized or fragmented to accommodate functional complexity, can be linearly restored to a state of centralized authority. By synthesizing multilevel governance (MLG), path dependence, and dependency-based accounts of power, this section establishes that authority recovery is not a simple reversal of delegation, but a structurally constrained political process. For a journal concerned with political power, the relevant issue is not only where authority is formally located, but whether authority remains practically available to the actor that claims it. In this sense, GRCM treats power as a recoverable capacity embedded in institutional relationships, rather than as a static possession of a central office or actor (Dahl, 1957; Lukes, 2005; Mann, 1984).

2.1 The Logic of Authority Dispersion and Multilevel Governance

The literature on multilevel governance (MLG) primarily addresses the functional and political drivers behind the distribution of authority. Hooghe and Marks (2003) characterize the "unraveling" of central state authority into task-specific jurisdictions as a response to the need for efficient governance across varying scales. In this framework, authority is dispersed to reduce transaction costs and align decision-making with the specific scale of functional problems.

While MLG explains the dispersion of the central authority into complex vertical and horizontal architectures, it remains largely silent on the mechanics of authority re-aggregation (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Scharpf, 1988). Existing frameworks treat dispersion as a functional adaptation to complexity, yet they provide few tools for analyzing the structural resistance encountered when the central authority attempts to reclaim those same decision rights.

2.2 Institutional Embedding and Path Dependence

If MLG explains the distribution of authority, theories of path dependence explain its durability. Once a governance arrangement is established, it generates increasing returns and positive feedback loops that favor the status quo (Pierson, 2000). Institutional analysis suggests that these mechanisms create lock-in effects, where the costs of switching to an alternative structure rise significantly over time (Sydow, Schreyögg, & Koch, 2009).

In the context of distributed authority, decision rights become embedded within institutional routines, coalitions, and local expectations. This embedding transforms a functional delegation into a durable institutional fact (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Consequently, the status quo becomes resistant to central mandates not merely due to political will, but due to the structural inertia and increasing returns inherent in the established governance layers (Hannan & Freeman, 1984).

2.3 Dependency, Power, and Recovery Capacity

The ability of a central authority to alter governance is fundamentally constrained by its recovery capacity, defined here as the practical ability of a central actor to compel, coordinate, or renegotiate compliance across embedded governance sites. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) posit that institutional power is derived from the control of critical resources and the management of dependencies.

As authority is distributed, the central authority often loses direct control over these resources, increasing its dependence on the very units it seeks to manage. This creates a capacity paradox: the act of distributing authority to achieve scale or efficiency depletes the internal coordinating capacity required to exert future control. Formal authority may remain intact while practical recovery capacity declines (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Scharpf, 1988; Tsebelis, 2002).

2.4 The Unresolved Gap: The Asymmetry of Authority Recovery

Existing scholarship provides a robust account of why authority is distributed and why distributed arrangements become institutionally durable. Scharpf's (1988) "joint-decision trap" further suggests that once decision rights are dispersed, the institutional requirements for agreement can block structural change. However, the literature lacks a formal model that accounts for the asymmetry between the ease of initial dispersion and the accelerating resistance encountered during recovery.

What remains under-theorized is the specific structural constraint that governs the transition from a distributed state back to a centralized one, particularly when recovery is necessitated by crisis or strategic realignment. Current accounts often treat recovery as a matter of formal authority, institutional redesign, or centralized mandate (Pierson, 2000; Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Scharpf, 1988; Tsebelis, 2002).

This authority recovery problem is visible in various political and institutional contexts. One visible applied site is the evolution of founder-led organizations. As these systems scale and decision rights become embedded across organizational units, delegated roles, and governance layers, the central authority faces the same structural barriers to re-aggregation seen in larger political bureaucracies. The Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM) addresses this gap by formalizing authority recovery as a structurally constrained process governed by fragmentation, declining capacity, and accelerating institutional cost.

3. Theoretical Framework: Authority Recovery as a Constraint Problem

The transition from a distributed governance arrangement to a centralized one is frequently treated as a matter of political will or executive mandate. However, a structural analysis of power suggests that the reclamation of decision rights is governed by institutional constraints that do not apply during the initial period of dispersion. This section develops a theoretical framework that treats authority recovery as a constraint problem rather than a behavioral or leadership challenge. By mapping the causal sequence from initial delegation to structural lock-in, we establish the theoretical foundations for the formal model.

3.1 From Authority Dispersion to Authority Embedding

Institutional complexity necessitates the dispersion of authority. As a system scales—whether a state bureaucracy, a multilevel treaty organization, or a central-authority system—the central authority must delegate specific decision rights to peripheral units to maintain functional efficiency. In this initial stage, the **Governance Fragmentation Index (F_t)** begins to rise as decision-making becomes localized.

However, authority dispersion is not a neutral administrative act; it initiates a process of institutional embedding. Once decision rights are localized, they are integrated into the routines, resource dependencies, and local coalitions of the peripheral units. This embedding creates a ratchet effect where delegated rights are no longer held in trust for the center but become essential to the functional survival of the peripheral actors (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Consequently, what began as a functional dispersion of power evolves into a rigid architecture of embedded decision rights.

3.2 Recovery Capacity and Institutional Resistance

The central authority's ability to govern this fragmented landscape depends on its Recovery Capacity (C_t), defined as the practical coordinating and enforcement resources available to it. Crucially, as F_t increases, the central authority must expend more of its finite capacity simply to maintain the existing distributed system. This leads to a depletion of the residual capacity required for structural realignment.

As the central authority attempts to reclaim embedded decision rights, it encounters **Recovery Cost (K_t)**, which represents the sum of institutional resistance generated by the periphery. This resistance is a structural byproduct of the embedding process: peripheral actors utilize their localized authority to create sites of resistance, withhold information, or leverage local resource dependencies against the center. Formal authority may remain intact while practical recovery capacity declines. In this framework, the failure to recover authority is not a result of leadership incompetence or a lack of intent, but a structural outcome where K_t begins to exceed the available C_t.

3.3 The Asymmetry Condition

The central theoretical claim of this model is the **Asymmetry Condition**: the institutional friction encountered during authority recovery is significantly higher than the friction encountered during authority distribution. Distribution typically occurs in a state of institutional fluidity, often legitimated as a mutually beneficial functional adaptation by both the center, which sheds complexity, and the periphery, which gains autonomy.

In contrast, recovery is a zero-sum political contest. Reclaiming authority requires the dismantling of established routines and the disruption of local coalitions that have formed around embedded rights. Because these embedded structures generate self-reinforcing increasing returns for peripheral actors, the cost of recovery (K_t) scales non-linearly with the degree of fragmentation. Recovery is therefore not the reverse of delegation; it is a distinct, path-dependent process that operates under a different set of structural constraints (Pierson, 2000; Scharpf, 1988; Tsebelis, 2002).

3.4 From Theory to Model

To formalize these relationships, we introduce the **Central Authority State (A_t)**, which represents the degree of centralization within the governance system at any given time. The trajectory of A_t is determined by the interplay between fragmentation, capacity, and cost. While the model is generalized for central authority across distributed governance systems, founder authority within scaling organizations is treated here as a case-specific form of central authority, where authority concentration and subsequent delegation are especially visible.

The theoretical framework culminates in the logic of the **Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit})**. We posit that there exists a structural limit where the cost of overcoming institutional resistance (K_t) surpasses the maximum possible recovery capacity (C_t) of the central authority. Beyond this threshold, authority recovery becomes structurally blocked under ordinary endogenous conditions. The following section formalizes these dynamics into the Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM),

providing a formal basis for conceptualizing the transition from an elastic governance state to a state of durable structural lock-in.

4. Model Formalization: The Governance Recovery Constraint Model

Building upon the theoretical mechanisms established in Section 3, this section formalizes the Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM). The model treats authority recovery as a path-dependent structural problem governed by the interplay between institutional fragmentation, the depletion of central coordinating capacity, and the non-linear escalation of resistance costs.

The GRCM proceeds from the causal sequence of authority dispersion: functional necessity leads to the delegation of decision rights, which triggers institutional embedding across peripheral sites. This embedding generates structural resistance that consumes central capacity. When the cost of overcoming this resistance exceeds available capacity, the system reaches a point of structural lock-in.

4.1 Model Variables

The GRCM is defined by six core variables that represent the state and capacity of a distributed governance system at any time t:

- **Central Authority State (A_t)**: The degree of centralized authority retained by the central actor. It represents the extent to which decision rights within the system remain subject to central authorization, direction, or veto.
- **Governance Fragmentation Index (F_t)**: A measure of the degree to which decision rights are dispersed across governance sites, institutional layers, peripheral coalitions, or roles. F_t increases as authority is localized and embedded.
- **Recovery Capacity (C_t)**: The finite total of coordinating, enforcement, political, and institutional resources available to the central authority to reclaim embedded decision rights.
- **Recovery Cost (K_t)**: The total institutional friction, resistance, and coordination burden generated by attempts to reclaim authority.
- **Authority Recovery Target (ΔA)**: The specific quantity of authority the central actor seeks to recover to shift from a distributed state back toward a centralized state.
- **Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit})**: The theoretical point at which the institutional cost of recovery (K_t) exceeds the available recovery capacity (C_t) under ordinary endogenous conditions.

These variables are introduced as conceptual constructs for theory-building rather than as operationalized empirical measures.

4.2 Authority State and Fragmentation

In the GRCM, the Central Authority State (A_t) is a function of the level of fragmentation within the system. As functional complexity or scaling requirements increase, the system moves toward higher fragmentation (F_t).

$$A_t = f(F_t)$$

where $\frac{dA}{dF} < 0$. This relationship reflects the traditional multilevel governance view that dispersion is the necessary byproduct of institutional scaling. As decision rights are pushed to the periphery to manage transaction costs, the central authority's direct control (A_t) decreases. In founder-led organizations, one applied site for this model, this relationship can be observed as authority moves from concentrated founder control into organizational units, delegated roles, and governance layers.

4.3 Recovery Capacity and Recovery Cost

The model identifies a fundamental divergence between the resources required to maintain a status quo and the resources required to change it. Recovery Capacity (C_t) is finite. In highly fragmented systems, a significant portion of C_t is diverted toward simply managing the existing peripheral units, leaving less residual capacity for re-centralization efforts (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Scharpf, 1988).

Recovery Cost (K_t) is the resistance generated by the embedding of decision rights. As peripheral units develop local dependencies and coalitions around their delegated rights, they can function as sites of resistance against recovery attempts. This logic is consistent with veto-player theory, insofar as fragmented governance creates additional actors and institutional sites capable of blocking or delaying central mandates (Tsebelis, 2002). However, in the GRCM, recovery cost is broader than formal veto capacity; it also includes routine disruption, dependency management, coalition resistance, and coordination burden. We formalize K_t as a function of the current fragmentation level and the size of the recovery target:

$$K_t = g(F_t, \Delta A)$$

This means that recovery cost is shaped both by the existing level of fragmentation and by the amount of authority the central actor seeks to reclaim.

As F_t increases, K_t grows non-linearly. Each additional layer of fragmentation creates new institutional sites of resistance, compounding the friction the central authority must overcome to reclaim authority.

4.4 The Asymmetry Condition

The core of the GRCM is the **Asymmetry Condition**. This posits that the capacity required to reclaim a unit of authority is significantly greater than the capacity that was required to delegate it.

Distribution ($F \uparrow$) occurs in a state of institutional fluidity where central and peripheral interests are often aligned by the need for efficiency. Recovery ($A \uparrow$), however, is a zero-sum political contest against embedded interests (Pierson, 2000; Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Scharpf, 1988).

The model posits that K_t increases non-linearly as fragmentation rises: as fragmentation increases, the resistance encountered by the central authority accelerates. This non-linearity ensures that even if a central authority possesses the same nominal power it held during initial delegation, that power is often insufficient to overcome the structural resistance generated by the embedded state.

4.5 Critical Fragmentation Threshold

The interaction between C_t and K_t leads to the model's most significant diagnostic feature: the **Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit})**. This is defined as the point where the cost of overcoming institutional resistance equals the maximum available recovery capacity:

$$K_t(F_t, \Delta A) \geq C_t$$

The threshold is conceptual rather than empirically fixed; it identifies the point at which the model predicts a shift from costly recovery to endogenous blockage.

When $F_t \geq F_{crit}$, authority recovery is no longer a matter of executive intent, administrative will, or improved coordination. It is structurally blocked. Under ordinary endogenous conditions—meaning without a significant external shock that resets institutional path dependencies—the system becomes locked into its fragmented state.

While the GRCM is a theory-building framework and not an empirical measurement instrument, it serves as a diagnostic tool for identifying systems where authority is so deeply embedded at the periphery that centralized recovery becomes structurally infeasible under ordinary endogenous conditions. In the subsequent section, we define the specific recovery regimes that emerge from these relationships, from elastic governance to durable structural lock-in.

5. Recovery Regimes, Threshold Logic, and Propositions

The interaction among governance fragmentation (F_t), recovery capacity (C_t), and recovery cost (K_t) produces distinct structural states within a distributed system. As decision rights become embedded across institutional layers, the Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM) identifies three conceptual regimes that define the limits of central authority. These regimes illustrate the transition from a system of fluid, functional delegation to one of durable structural lock-in, where the **Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit})** acts as the boundary of endogenous recovery.

5.1 The Elastic Zone

The Elastic Zone describes a state of governance where authority recovery remains relatively feasible. In this regime, fragmentation is low ($F_t \ll F_{crit}$), and the central authority retains significant residual capacity relative to the institutional friction generated by the periphery ($C_t > K_t$).

In the Elastic Zone, decision rights have been dispersed for functional efficiency but have not yet undergone the deep institutional embedding required to generate systemic resistance. Peripheral units operate with delegated autonomy, but they remain dependent on the center for resources, legitimacy, or coordination. Because path dependencies have not yet hardened, the central authority can reclaim decision rights through ordinary administrative mandates or moderate resource reallocation (Pierson, 2000; Hannan & Freeman, 1984). In this state, authority dispersion is functionally bidirectional.

5.2 The Friction Zone

As governance fragmentation increases, the system enters the Friction Zone. In this regime, authority recovery remains possible but becomes increasingly costly and politically fraught. Decision rights have begun to settle into institutional routines, and peripheral actors have started forming coalitions to protect their localized autonomy.

In the Friction Zone, K_t begins to grow non-linearly as the central authority attempts to reclaim authority. Each unit of recovered authority (ΔA) requires a disproportionate expenditure of C_t because the central authority is no longer merely moving administrative markers; it is challenging established institutional interests (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Tsebelis, 2002). Recovery in this zone is characterized by protracted negotiation, institutional bargaining, and the potential for significant administrative delay.

5.3 The Locked Zone

The Locked Zone represents a regime where authority recovery becomes structurally infeasible under ordinary endogenous conditions. This state occurs when fragmentation reaches or exceeds the Critical Fragmentation Threshold ($F_t \geq F_{crit}$), and the cost of overcoming institutional resistance surpasses the available recovery capacity ($K_t \geq C_t$).

In the Locked Zone, the system has achieved a state of durable structural lock-in. Decision rights are so deeply embedded across roles, routines, and coalitions that any attempt at re-centralization triggers a recursive cost escalation. The central authority’s attempts to compel compliance are met with systemic resistance from multiple institutional sites simultaneously, exhausting the central authority’s finite coordinating resources (Scharpf, 1988; Pierson, 2000; Tsebelis, 2002). In this regime, the central authority may retain formal authority (A_t), but it lacks the practical capacity to exercise it against the fragmented periphery. Recovery typically requires an extraordinary exogenous shock—such as a systemic crisis or external intervention—to reset the institutional constraint structure.

5.4 Propositions

Based on the regime logic of the GRCM, we offer the following propositions regarding the nature of authority in distributed governance systems. While these apply to distributed governance systems generally, the scaling founder-led organization serves as a case-specific expression of the Central Authority State (A_t) under these constraints.

Proposition 1

The institutional cost of recovering distributed authority (K_t) increases non-linearly as governance fragmentation (F_t) increases.

Proposition 2

As governance fragmentation (F_t) approaches the Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit}), authority recovery becomes structurally infeasible under ordinary endogenous conditions because the recovery cost (K_t) exceeds the available recovery capacity (C_t).

Proposition 3

Authority recovery efforts undertaken near or beyond the Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit}) are more likely to generate systemic disruption than successful re-centralization.

This disruption occurs because recovery attempts at the threshold must attack embedded routines, peripheral coalitions, and resource dependencies simultaneously, destabilizing the functional output of the system without successfully reclaiming centralized control (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Scharpf, 1988; Tsebelis, 2002).

6. Applied Illustration: Founder-Led Organizations as a Site of Authority Recovery Constraint

To illustrate the mechanics of the Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM), this section applies the formal framework to founder-led organizations. Founder-led systems provide a useful applied site for observing authority recovery because they often begin with unusually concentrated decision rights before scaling requires delegation. This applied site clarifies how concentrated authority can become dispersed through scaling and later constrained by the very governance structures created to manage complexity.

6.1 Founder-Led Organizations as Concentrated Authority Systems

Founder-led organizations offer a distinct baseline for analyzing the **Central Authority State (A_t)**. In their initial phase, these systems are characterized by a concentrated authority structure where decision rights are held by a single central actor. This high-authority state allows for rapid institutional pivots and the direct exercise of power without significant horizontal or vertical friction.

In this applied context, founder authority is treated as a case-specific expression of the Central Authority State. The utility of this illustration lies in the transparency of its initial centralization; because A_t begins from a highly concentrated baseline, the subsequent decline in recovery capacity and the escalation of recovery costs become more analytically visible than in established state bureaucracies or long-standing multilateral institutions.

6.2 Scaling, Delegation, and Decision-Rights Embedding

As an organization scales, it encounters the functional necessity of authority dispersion. To manage increasing transaction costs and operational complexity, the central authority must distribute decision rights across organizational units, delegated roles, operational nodes, and governance layers. This process increases the **Governance Fragmentation Index (F_t)**.

However, consistent with the GRCM, this dispersion is not merely a temporary administrative loan. Once decision rights are localized, they undergo a process of institutional embedding. Delegated authority is integrated into the routines, role-based authority, and resource-access structures of peripheral units (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Pierson, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Over time, these embedded rights are protected by internal coalitions and stakeholder expectations—including those of investors, boards, and advisors—who rely on the stability of the fragmented state.

6.3 Recovery Attempts and Institutional Resistance

The transition through the GRCM recovery regimes becomes apparent when the central authority attempts to reclaim decision rights to execute a strategic pivot or address systemic misalignment.

1. **The Elastic Zone**: In the early stages of scaling, F_t remains low. The central authority can reclaim delegated rights with minimal friction because the institutional routines have not yet hardened. In this zone, C_t (Recovery Capacity) significantly exceeds K_t (Recovery Cost), and dispersion remains functionally bidirectional.
2. **The Friction Zone**: As the organization matures, recovery becomes a zero-sum contest. Reclaiming authority requires the central actor to dismantle embedded routines and challenge the local autonomy of delegated roles or operational nodes. The **Recovery Cost (K_t)** begins to grow non-linearly as these peripheral units leverage their control over information and specialized resources to resist re-centralization (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Pierson, 2000).
3. **The Locked Zone**: If fragmentation reaches the **Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit})**, the system enters a state of durable structural lock-in. In this regime, the central authority may issue mandates for re-centralization, but the cumulative resistance—manifested as procedural delay, resource withholding, or coalition-based blocking—exceeds the central actor's available coordinating capacity (K_t ≥ C_t). Under ordinary endogenous conditions, the system is no longer responsive to unilateral executive recovery.

6.4 Founder-Led Organizations as a High-Resolution Site, Not the General Theory

While founder-led organizations provide a vivid illustration of these mechanics, the GRCM is not limited to management theory. The constraints observed in this applied site—the non-linear escalation of recovery costs and the depletion of central coordinating capacity—are manifestations of a broader political phenomenon: the structural asymmetry of power.

Founder-led organizations are used here as an applied site to observe how concentrated authority can become constrained by the very structures it creates to achieve scale. This applied illustration clarifies the broader institutional problem of authority recovery: distributed governance systems generate path-dependent resistances that make the re-aggregation of power structurally distinct from its initial distribution. By formalizing these constraints, the GRCM provides a diagnostic framework for understanding the limits of central authority across complex, multi-layered institutional systems (Pierson, 2000; Scharpf, 1988; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Tsebelis, 2002).

7. Discussion: Institutional Power and Authority Recovery

The Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM) shifts the analytical focus of institutional governance from the mechanisms of authority distribution to the structural conditions of authority recoverability. While existing scholarship has extensively mapped the functional and political drivers of delegation, the GRCM identifies authority recovery as a distinct theoretical problem that cannot be analyzed as the linear reverse of dispersion. By formalizing the constraints of fragmentation, capacity, and cost, this model provides a new framework for understanding the durability of distributed power and the limits of central authority.

7.1 From Authority Dispersion to Authority Recoverability

Existing literature on multilevel governance and institutional design primarily treats authority distribution as a response to functional complexity or political negotiation. In these frameworks, the central problem is often defined by the optimal location of decision-making. The GRCM contributes to this field by establishing that the recoverability of authority is a core dimension of institutional power that deserves separate theoretical treatment.

The model demonstrates that once decision rights are dispersed, they do not remain inert administrative assignments. Instead, institutional embedding converts delegated authority into durable political and institutional claims. Because these rights become woven into the routines, coalitions, and resource dependencies of peripheral units, the path back to centralization is structurally obstructed by resistances that were absent during the initial period of delegation. Consequently, recoverability should be treated as a primary analytical variable when assessing the stability and flexibility of distributed governance systems (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Pierson, 2000; Scharpf, 1988).

7.2 Reversibility, Constraint, and Institutional Power

A central implication of the GRCM is the decoupling of formal authority from practical recovery capacity. In many distributed governance systems, the central authority retains the nominal or legal right to override peripheral decisions or re-centralize jurisdictions. However, the GRCM illustrates that this nominal authority is often insufficient to overcome the structural resistance generated by an embedded state.

This distinction also clarifies the difference between formal possession of authority and effective power. In Dahlian terms, formal authority may remain assigned to a central actor even when that actor lacks the practical capacity to alter the behavior of embedded peripheral units. In Lukes's broader sense, institutional embedding shapes the conditions under which recovery is thinkable, contestable, or practically available (Dahl, 1957; Lukes, 2005).

The GRCM also clarifies the distinction between formal authority and infrastructural capacity. In Mann's terms, a central authority may retain formal authority while losing the practical capacity to coordinate, penetrate, and act through the institutional periphery (Mann, 1984).

By identifying **Recovery Capacity (C_t)** and **Recovery Cost (K_t)** as central variables, the model reframes institutional power as a question of recoverability rather than mere possession. If the cost of overcoming embedded resistance exceeds the available coordinating resources of the center, the central authority's power becomes practically constrained, regardless of its formal status. This reframes institutional lock-in not merely as a persistence condition, but as a recovery constraint (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Scharpf, 1988; Tsebelis, 2002).

7.3 Implications for Multilevel Governance and Institutional Analysis

The GRCM extends multilevel governance (MLG) by adding a recovery-side theory to the study of authority dispersion. While MLG Type I and Type II frameworks explain how authority unbundles to manage scale and task-specificity, they rarely account for the structural consequences of attempting to rebundle that authority. The GRCM formalizes the asymmetry between these two directions of institutional change, suggesting that the "unraveling" of central authority may produce path-dependent arrangements that become structurally difficult to reverse under ordinary endogenous conditions.

Furthermore, the model extends institutional analysis by formalizing the conditions under which path-dependent arrangements become resistant to re-centralization. By utilizing the logic of **increasing returns** and **structural inertia**, the GRCM identifies why recovery costs scale non-linearly with fragmentation. This contributes to the literature on institutional change by specifying the mechanism through which distributed systems achieve durable structural lock-in—not through a lack of executive intent, but through a structural imbalance between resistance and capacity (Pierson, 2000; Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

7.4 Limits of Central Authority in Distributed Governance Systems

The introduction of the **Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit})** provides a theoretical boundary condition for endogenous authority recovery. It suggests that there is a structural limit to the degree of fragmentation a central authority can manage before the system becomes durably locked into a distributed state. Beyond this threshold, authority recovery is structurally infeasible under ordinary endogenous conditions, as any attempt to reclaim power triggers a recursive cost escalation that exhausts the center's remaining capacity.

This threshold logic reframes the limits of central authority. The failure to re-centralize a fragmented system—whether a state bureaucracy or the founder-led organization used as an illustration in Section 6—is often mischaracterized as a failure of leadership or a lack of political will. The GRCM argues that such failures are frequently the result of a structural constraint: the system has reached a level of fragmentation where the cost of attacking embedded routines and coalitions simultaneously is greater than the center’s power to compel compliance.

Taken together, the GRCM posits that recoverability must be treated as a core dimension of institutional power. By formalizing the asymmetry between authority dispersion and authority recovery, the model provides a diagnostic framework for identifying systems where power has been so deeply embedded at the periphery that centralized recovery becomes structurally infeasible under ordinary endogenous conditions. This prepares the way for a deeper investigation into the structural persistence of distributed governance and the institutional limits of central authority (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Scharpf, 1988; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

8. Conclusion

While the literature on multilevel governance and institutional analysis has extensively documented the mechanisms of authority dispersion, the structural constraints governing authority recovery have remained largely under-theorized. This article has sought to address this gap by introducing the Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM), formalizing authority recovery as a distinct, path-dependent process rather than a simple reversal of delegation.

The central contribution of the GRCM is the formalization of the asymmetry between authority dispersion and authority recovery. We have demonstrated that as decision rights become embedded across institutional layers, routines, and peripheral coalitions, the cost of recovery increases non-linearly. By defining the relationships between the Central Authority State (A_t), the Governance Fragmentation Index (F_t), Recovery Capacity (C_t), and Recovery Cost (K_t), the model establishes that formal authority can persist even as practical recovery capacity declines.

A critical feature of this framework is the Critical Fragmentation Threshold (F_{crit}), which identifies the structural boundary beyond which authority recovery becomes infeasible under ordinary endogenous conditions. At this threshold, the system enters a state of durable structural lock-in where the cumulative resistance of the fragmented periphery exceeds the coordinating resources of the central authority. While founder-led organizations provide a high-resolution applied site for observing these mechanics, the GRCM offers a general diagnostic framework applicable to distributed governance systems facing the pressures of scaling and institutional embedding.

By treating authority recovery as a structural constraint problem rather than a matter of executive intent, the GRCM provides a new lens through which to analyze institutional inertia and the limits of central authority. The GRCM therefore establishes that recoverability is a core dimension of institutional power in distributed governance systems.

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Figures

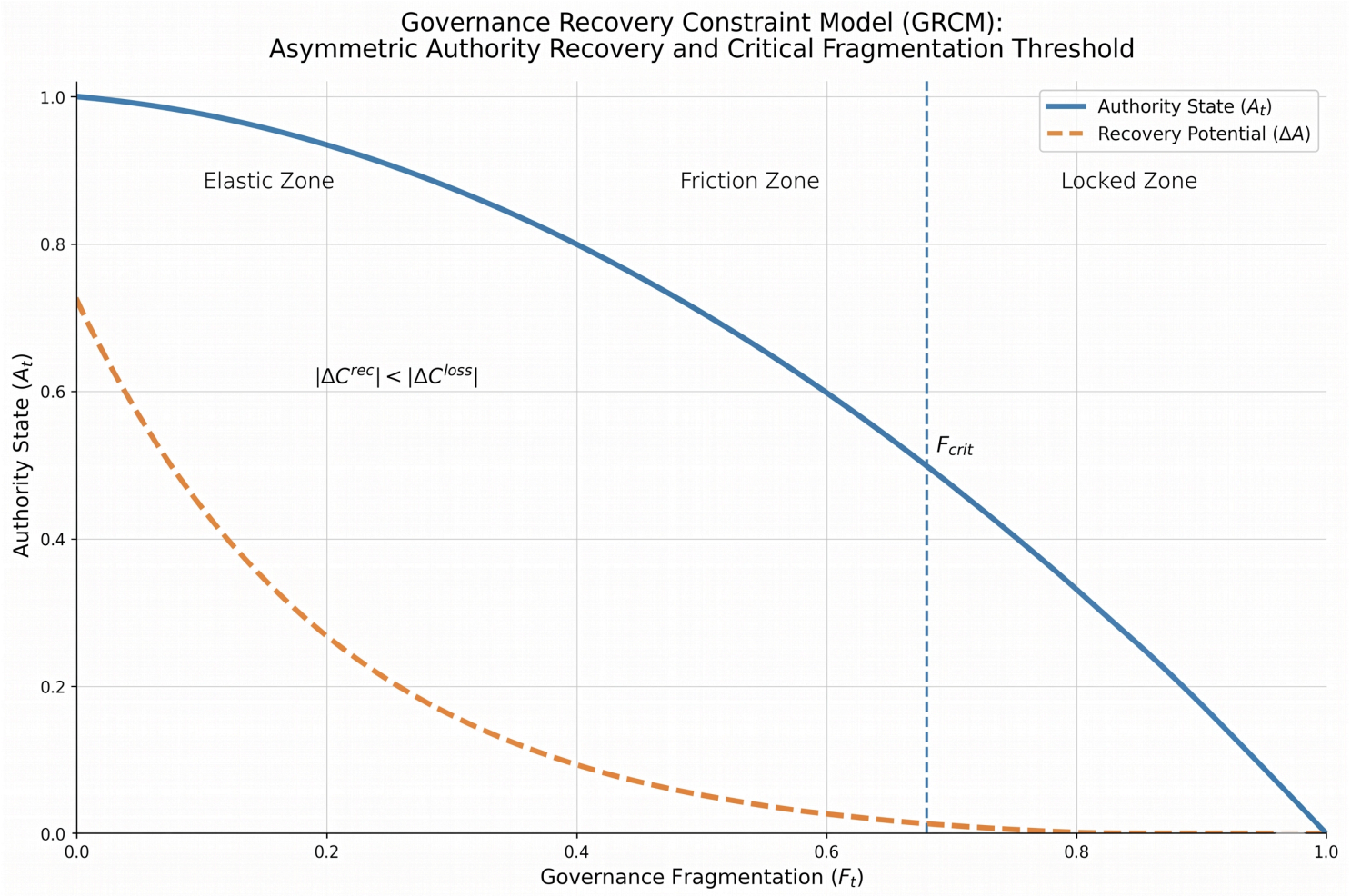


Figure 1

Governance Recovery Constraint Model (GRCM): Asymmetric Authority Recovery and Critical Fragmentation Threshold.
This figure illustrates the relationship between governance fragmentation and authority recovery within distributed governance systems. The solid curve represents the declining authority state (AtA_tAt) as fragmentation increases, while the dashed curve represents diminishing recovery potential (ΔA\Delta AΔA). The model identifies three governance regions: the Elastic Zone, where authority recovery remains feasible; the Friction Zone, where recovery costs escalate asymmetrically; and the Locked Zone beyond the Critical Fragmentation Threshold (FcritF_{crit}Fcrit), where endogenous recovery becomes structurally infeasible under ordinary institutional conditions.