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Harbers, I.

DOI

[10.1080/21622671.2018.1445021](https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2018.1445021)

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Territory, Politics, Governance

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Harbers, I. (2019). Contributions of the postfunctionalist theory of governance to subnational research in comparative politics. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 7(2), 274-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2018.1445021>

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Contributions of the postfunctionalist theory of governance to subnational research in comparative politics

Imke Harbers

Over the past two decades, the way scholars of comparative politics think about governance has undergone a profound transformation. While governance was previously conceived of primarily as the work of the central state – with fairly marginal or derivative roles for other levels of government – we now generally view the central state as just one actor in a system of governance that spans multiple tiers. Empirically, this transformation is underpinned by the realization that decentralization has strengthened the formal role of subnational actors, and that we therefore need to look beyond the central level to understand the process of governance.¹ Research on the causes and consequences of decentralization and on subnational governance has matured considerably over the past two decades. Whereas an early generation of scholarship primarily envisioned benefits for the efficiency and effectiveness of public good provision, empirical research on the outcomes of decentralization reforms has found much more mixed results (e.g., Treisman, 2007). Scholars of comparative politics have therefore begun to examine the origins of this variance, and to probe the intervening variables that influence the outcomes of decentralized and multilevel governance. The two volumes at the heart of this symposium constitute key contributions to this literature on decentralization and subnational governance. While the first, *Measuring Regional Authority*, offers a novel conceptualization and original data on the territorial structure of governance within countries, the second, *Community, Scale, and Regional Governance*, theorizes this structure. It demonstrates the importance of community in determining governance, and provides a much-needed correction to functionalist accounts prioritizing scale. In this short commentary, I will highlight the conceptual contributions of this multi-volume project and the formulated postfunctionalist theory of governance to the subnational literature in comparative politics, and explain why geocoding the regional authority index (RAI) and taking a more explicitly spatial perspective could make the contribution even greater.

‘Scaling down’: a fresh perspective on the territorial structure of governance

Decentralization and the subsequent ‘subnational turn’ in comparative research have challenged comparativists to refine their conceptual toolbox, and to re-evaluate their approach to the study of governance. Following in the footsteps of many of the classics in comparative politics, countries had generally been understood as the ‘natural’ unit of analysis in the study of politics, and the causes and consequences of cross-country variation in governance were assumed to be contained within them. This approach inspired the conceptualization of decentralized governance as a characteristic that national states possess to varying degrees. Measures of decentralization have

thus looked from the top down and defined decentralization as the opposite of centralized governance, more specifically as the amount of authority not wielded by the central government. This, however, potentially conflates vastly different types of governance under one label. Vertically, it lumps together all subnational tiers and is therefore unable to speak to the relative importance of subnational tiers at different levels. Horizontally, such aggregate measures are insufficiently sensitive to within-country variation in the authority wielded by regions. Ultimately, studies drawing on these measures run the risk of constituting instances of what Snyder (2001) has described as 'mean spirited analysis' in which the use of national measures conceals internal heterogeneity. Rather than providing a useful summary of the role of subnational jurisdictions in governance, national-level decentralization measures may then blur the distinction between very different types of subnational governance. From a measurement perspective, this is imprecise but it constitutes a problem only if there is empirical variation across countries in the way subnational governance is organized both vertically and horizontally.

The RAI – developed in first of the two volumes – effectively pulls out the rug from under the approach of measuring decentralization as a national-level variable. It demonstrates not only that there is significant variation in the structure of subnational governance – along both the vertical and horizontal axes – but also it demonstrates that this diversity has increased over time. The RAI is novel in that it measures authority directly at the level of subnational jurisdictions. With regard to the vertical division of authority between regional tiers, the RAI shows that an increasing number of countries have more than one regional tier between the local and the national level of government, and that the relative authority of different tiers changes over time (Vol. II, ch. 3). Such changes are not picked up by national-level measures of decentralization, even though they may constitute significant changes in the territorial structure of governance. At the horizontal level, there is a persistent shift away from uniform frameworks that treat all jurisdictions within a country equally towards differentiated governance, in which the authoritative competences of some regions differ from those of others in the same country. 'Uniform governance has become the exception rather than the rule' (Vol. II, pp. 17–18), as the analysis of empirical trends in the RAI shows.

For the literature on decentralization and subnational governance, these findings have two important implications. First, they provide some pointers as to why previous studies have found contradictory results for the outcomes of decentralization reforms. Decentralization, measured as the absence of centralized governance, is simply too blunt a tool to capture adequately different types of governance arrangements. The question is thus not so much whether decentralization leads to more efficient public good provision, but which types of governance may have the desired effects.

Second, for the broader literature in comparative politics, these findings highlight why conceiving of states as primary units of analysis has become less appropriate over time. A measure, as Hooghe et al. point out, 'is a disciplined summary. It attaches conceptual relevance to some phenomena and ignores others' (Vol. II, p. 3). When most countries had just one regional tier and uniform authority across regions, the analytical costs of measuring decentralization at the national level were fairly minimal. As subnational jurisdictions have come to wield more authority, however, and do so within differentiated frameworks, privileging the national level creates blind spots that are hard to justify and analytically costly. By making new data available at the regional level, the RAI enables scholars to refine their analysis and move forward.

Interdependence in overlapping systems

Another piece of heritage that the comparative politics literature has taken from the classics in the field is the notion that the causes and consequences of the phenomena we care about are contained within well-bounded units, traditionally countries. These units are then assumed to be independent from one another, so that scholars can select one (or more) for analysis of a causal process of interest. When subnational units, rather than whole countries, are the units of analysis, this assumption of unit independence comes under pressure. Subnational boundaries are arguably

more permeable than national borders, and units within a country are exposed to common influences from the national level. Subnational units are therefore embedded both vertically and horizontally. Relaxing the assumption of unit independence, however, requires expanding the canon of comparative politics to include methodological approaches better suited to the analysis of interdependence. Because many of the founders of the field focused on interactions within well-bounded systems (e.g., Sartori, 1976/2005), the analysis of interactions between and across multiple systems – either horizontally or vertically – has remained a challenge for comparativists.²

In examining the division of territories into jurisdictions, Hooghe and Marks contribute to shifting the focus of comparative politics from dynamics within well-bounded systems to interdependence among multiple overlapping systems. Interestingly, they draw inspiration from the work of Rokkan (1970), one of the founding fathers of the field of comparative politics. His work on modernization and state-building sought to understand the creation of national political systems from dispersed local communities, and the very creation of boundedness within countries. While Rokkan's work examined how communities were initially integrated into states and which factors favoured integration, Hooghe and Marks explore how distinct communities have survived in the face of homogenizing pressure from the centre. They highlight the footprint of historical communities in contemporary governance and the role of community in creating pressure for differentiated governance.

Interdependence enters their analysis in multiple ways. For one, the analysis seeks to uncover the factors that allow minority territorial communities to maintain distinct identities even in the face of homogenizing pressures from a central state. Their conceptualization of community emphasizes dense interactions within the community, contrasted with less intense interactions between the community and outsiders. A community is best able to survive when it is geographically isolated: 'the greater the time and effort required for communication between a core and a periphery, the weaker the pressure of homogenization' (Vol. II, p. 20). Communities at the margin of the territory can therefore resist homogenization even when they are fairly small. Communities in closer proximity to the centre need to be populous and large in order to avoid assimilation, because size 'increases interaction within the region as a proportion of all interaction' (Vol. II, p. 22). Hooghe and Marks do not just 'scale down', however, and replace countries with regions as building blocks of analysis, they also scale back up and identify how the formal empowerment of some communities reverberates throughout other communities in the country. The recognition of some communities may spark demands for empowerment, and thus pressure for regional authority, in others, leaving a broader imprint on the structure of governance.

Conceptually, this book contributes significantly to the study of comparative politics by proposing and in some instances rediscovering ways to think about interdependence. Hooghe and Marks' engagement with some of the classics in the field – chiefly Stein Rokkan and Karl Deutsch – serves to remind comparativists that boundaries and boundedness were not always taken for granted, and that their emergence and the extent to which they delimit political processes has and should be a core focus of the field. Moreover, while Rokkan had strong intuitions about how the intensity of interaction between local communities and the national state came to transform politics in the process of state building, he lacked the empirical and analytical tools to effectively test his intuitions. Recently, the development of geographic information systems (GIS) and new techniques for the analysis of spatial data has provided scholars with new techniques to analyze spatial dependence. Rather than assume independence among units, these techniques investigate the existence and nature of interdependence.³ To access these techniques, data must be geocoded so that non-spatial data are associated with physical locations. A crucial and timely way to push forward the study of interdependence in comparative politics would therefore be to geocode the RAI.

For one, geocoding would allow for a more explicit test of some of the spatial concepts contained in the postfunctionalist theory of governance. Notions of distance, remoteness and connectedness are well theorized and operationalized in spatial analysis. Hooghe and Marks now

operationalize ‘distance’ as a binary variable, and a jurisdiction is coded as geographically peripheral if ‘it is an island or non-contiguous territory that is 30km or more distant from the mainland of its state’ (Vol. I, pp. 130–131). The implication of the theory is more continuous, however, as distance seeks to capture the ‘geographical barriers that impede political, economic, and cultural interaction and which sustain cultural distinctiveness even in the face of a prolonged state strategy to assimilate’ (Vol. I, p. 73). Only coding non-contiguous islands as remote, therefore, constitutes a very conservative test of the theory. An alternative operationalization might be travel time to the closest population centre in which the majority language is spoken, a variable that can fairly easily be calculated with GIS software.

Geocoding the RAI would also make it possible to take the analysis one step further. Since there is an empirical trend towards more regionalized and more differentiated governance over time, one might suspect that the recognition of the distinctiveness of specific communities generates pressures not just within but also across countries. The formation of states often divided linguistic and cultural communities. Where minority territorial communities share a language and culture with a group in a neighbouring country, the empowerment of the community in one country might spark similar demands across the border. The recognition of indigenous peoples’ right to self-rule during the 1990s, for instance, begs the question of whether the recognition of a community in a given country increases the importance of community in the territorial structure of governance in nearby countries.

While geocoding the RAI would thus make it possible to expand the analysis and examine additional implications of the postfunctionalist theory, it is also worth emphasizing that such a data set would be a tremendous service to the field and to the burgeoning literature on multilevel and decentralized governance. Hooghe et al.’s ambition is to ‘make it possible for researchers to investigate the causal links between the structure of government and its causes and consequences’ (Vol. I, p. 21). In many cases, however, variables on causes and consequences may not be available at the level of contemporary general-purpose jurisdictions. This could be because a phenomenon of interest does not map onto subnational jurisdictions (Harbers & Ingram, forthcoming). It could also be because data are not collected for all subnational tiers. Moreover, one of the key findings of the two volumes is that the territorial structure of governance within countries is not static over time, as tiers are created, consolidated and boundaries redrawn to accommodate changing pressures of community and scale. In addition, Hooghe and Marks show that discontinuity at the central level, for instance in the aftermath of a revolution, decolonization or regime change, is a likely trigger for reforms in the structure of regional governance as incoming central rulers seek to impose their vision on the country. This dynamism is a challenge for subnational research because new and old units often do not line up in a spreadsheet (Lankina, 2012). They do, however, overlap in space. Geocoding then makes it possible to match units over time by identifying ‘common geographies’ (Slez, O’Connell, & Curtis, 2017).

In suggesting geocoding the RAI, let me be clear in acknowledging that there are excellent reasons for being reluctant to embark on such an endeavour. While international borders tend to be fairly stable over time, subnational jurisdictional boundaries – as discussed above – are much more dynamic. There is, to the best of my knowledge, no comprehensive geospatial data set of subnational jurisdictions containing all subnational tiers, and tracing boundary changes on an annual basis. Geocoding the RAI would therefore require compiling such a database, most likely by obtaining geospatial data from country-level sources. The magnitude of data gathering required may therefore seem daunting. However, the team behind the RAI has already demonstrated its ability to bring an ambitious data project to a successful conclusion. Since research at the subnational level as well as on interdependence in overlapping systems is likely to occupy the field of comparative politics for years to come, a geocoded RAI would be an invaluable resource.

FUNDING

This work was supported by H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions [grant number 656361].

NOTES

1. The forthcoming volume 'Inside Countries: Subnational Research in Comparative Politics', edited by Agustina Giraudy, Eduardo Moncada and Richard Snyder, provides an insightful overview of different types of contemporary subnational research.
2. For a more in-depth discussion of how to incorporate spatial dependence in comparative methodology, see Giraudy et al. (forthcoming), Harbers and Ingram (2017a) and Harbers and Ingram (2017b).
3. Darmofal (2015) offers an informative and accessible introduction to spatial analysis in the social sciences.

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