THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Identities and attitudes to decentralization in multi-level states

Citation for published version:

Henderson, A & Medeiros, M 2021, 'Identities and attitudes to decentralization in multi-level states: Understanding the territorial scales of political life', *Comparative European Politics*.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-020-00229-y>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1057/s41295-020-00229-y](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-020-00229-y)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Comparative European Politics

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in Comparative European Politics. The final authenticated version is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-020-00229-y>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Identities and attitudes to decentralization in multi-level states: Understanding the territorial scales of political life

Ailsa Henderson and Mike Medeiros

The process of decentralisation is both widespread and widely studied. Decentralisation includes efforts by central governments to devolve, deconcentrate and decentralise decision-making power and legislative authority to other, lower, territorial scales within the state (Hopkin and Van Houten, 2009, Sorens, 2009, Rodríguez-Pose and Krøijer, 2009). This political shift towards decentralisation can often coincide with tensions over the multi-level governance structures that are in place or desired. A devolution of political power, providing greater self-rule to other territorial scales can be grounded in a desire to manage ethnic and regional diversity within the state, by a desire to develop governance structures that are efficient, or by a commitment to the principle of subsidiarity, namely that decisions should be taken at the lowest, practical, level possible (Henderson et al., 2013). Despite recent examples of considerable decentralisation in the last 30 years, we lack robust data and tools for examining how citizens feel about the territorial scales of political life. Specifically, we understand little about how citizens feel about decentralisation, how it relates to the political communities to which they feel attached, and what impact these attitudes have on policy variation within states.

Understanding how citizens feel about the territorial scales of political life is particularly important given the salience of the topic. Spain, Iraq, and Hong Kong, offer diverse cases where discontent with the level of regional autonomy can have wider, grave socio-political consequences. There are therefore important risks to both political and social stability if there is significant dissatisfaction with or detachment from existing multi-level governance structures, or if governments and their electorates have contradictory 'ideal' structures at different territorial scales. This can include, for example, perceptions that specific policy competences are housed at the wrong territorial scale. A failure to understand how individuals feel about the multiple possible sites for citizenship in their lives can create problems between citizens and authorities.

In part, this is because multi-level governance offers more than multiple governance structures. Jurisdictional boundaries serve to demarcate and give credence to meaningful political communities, signalling how those communities are perceived and valued. This is particularly important in regions where inhabitants might consider themselves living in historic nations, with borders and cultures that predate the formation of the current state, such as, Quebec, Catalonia, and Scotland. But the same issues of dissatisfaction with governing structures that can affect regions with historical grievances and distinct cultures can also arise in regions without clear socio-historic markers of distinctiveness from the majority of the wider state's population, as we have seen recently in Western Australia and Alberta. Sociocultural similarity is not a guarantor of electoral contentment with governing structures and the division of responsibility within the state.

Decentralisation can bring powerful levers to influence citizen's lives. Fiscal decentralisation can determine the spending capacity of different levels of government and their capacity to mount social programs. This in turn can determine who gets credit for improving citizens' lives or blamed when problems arise. Fiscal decentralisation also establishes the ability to intervene in the economy, to mould it in line with dominant (or perceived) values. Decentralisation can therefore define, sustain and empower communities, offering a sub-state unit the political space to articulate a different political culture or policy vision. Enhanced self-rule at particular territorial scales can allow electorates to create policy that reflects the values of the dominant population, which is particularly important if those values are perceived to be distinct within the wider state. Decentralisation can also create new patterns of accountability and responsibility between citizens and their state, creating sites for citizenship (Marshall 1992) or indeed facilitating a form of split-level citizenship (Cutler 2006) in which

different levels of government have the capacity to influence wider political values such as trust, efficacy or confidence in the public sphere.

However salient, multiple layers of government are not without their complications. They can muddy lines of accountability, leaving voters unclear over who to reward or punish at election time, and posing risks to governments for unpopular policies introduced elsewhere in the state (Johns et al 2012). They can create confusion over entitlements and access if policy varies across neighbouring regions. As the current COVID-19 pandemic makes clear, variations in social distancing requirements, access to schooling or financial assistance can inhibit understanding or compliance from citizens. Besides highlighting regional variability in responses to the COVID-19 crisis, the pandemic has also underlined tensions between regional and central governments (Kettl, 2020, Béland et al., 2020). These types of situations can create races to the bottom in efforts to attract or repel intra-state migration just as much as they can serve as sources of policy learning. Furthermore, in addition to the virtuous reasons for decentralization, central governments can choose to pursue it to devolve power and responsibility in an effort to offload problematic policy areas, or to pass on the responsibility for implementing unpopular policies, including budget cuts. The result is a form of political theatre, as central government and regional authorities' battle for the opportunity to acquire or offload responsibilities, to take credit for or attribute blame for various policies and outcomes. National, regional, and even local-levels of government each search to portray themselves as competent authorities in the hopes a gaining or retaining the satisfaction of their citizens.

Given the salience of decentralisation it is perhaps peculiar that we lack a robust body of scholarship on attitudes to decentralisation. Evidence we do have is sometimes contradictory and rarely drawn from comparative studies (see Henderson et al 2013 for an exception). What we know so far about attitudes to decentralisation is that they are not always rational (in a purely economic sense). Affective ties can encourage citizens to prefer decision making at territorial scales that are, from an economies of scale point of view, inefficient. Debates about the 'ideal' distribution of policy competences across territorial scales can be bound up in the sociological or political salience of different communities for individuals. Those who believe that the meso-level entity is a nation do not necessarily have the same expectations as those who perceive it as 'merely' a region.

Despite studies of policy variation within multi-level states (Keating 2015), we know little about citizen preferences for evaluations of this. What we do know suggests that attitudes are not necessarily consistent. Citizens might well wish their region to be more powerful, but still want policy uniformity across the state (Henderson et al., 2013). So far, the sources of this inconsistency remain unclear, but it appears to stem in part from a fear of losing out to more generous policy provision elsewhere in the state. Studies of how individuals attribute responsibility for policy success and failure suggest that knowledge is patchy, and this in turn can influence vote choice (see, for example, Henderson et al., 2014, Medeiros et al., 2015).

The impact of decentralisation on inter-regional solidarity is also unclear. While attention is often paid to relations between central governments and the sub-state entities, or to centre-periphery relations, the growth of regions' political power warrants attention to the relationships among different lower (or meso-) level administrations and their electorates, including the extent, predictors and impact of inter-regional solidarity. Cooperation between different regions implies the recognition and willingness to share resources and wealth from one region to another as well as seeking to work together to achieve common goals. Its opposite can create difficult policy contexts for legislators. The extent to which multi-level governance provides a challenge to state-wide social solidarity, or whether social solidarity adapts to decentralization, operating at multiple scales simultaneously, remains to be seen.

While understanding the predictors of attitudes to decentralisation are important, so too is a better accounting of the possible consequences of decentralisation on attitudes and on policy variation. Although recent studies have shown that attitudes towards decentralisation can determine vote choice (see, for example, Gauvin et al., 2016, Oberhofer et al., 2014), these have been constrained to a limited number of cases. Such an influence on political behaviour should theoretically be more widespread and, even, not limited to regions with strong nationalist movements. However, at present, there is a lack of empirical knowledge on the influence of attitudes towards decentralisation on political behaviour.

Partly, efforts to analyse attitudes to decentralisation have been hampered by a persistent methodological nationalism, taking the state as the seemingly natural and preeminent political community for individuals. This is true across a range of disciplines but is particularly evident in political science (Jeffery and Wincott, Jeffery and Schakel etc). Surveys of attitudes often lack robust samples at the sub-state level to evaluate variations in attitudes within the state, and lack survey questions that allow researchers to evaluate or compare how citizens feel about the different territorial scales of political life. The ISSP Role of Government surveys, for example, tend to focus on the appropriate roles for the public and private sector rather than the ideal distribution of policy competences, or different senses of trust, across different levels of government. The European Social Survey fails to capture data about region of residence and likewise excludes variables about politics at different territorial scales.

As a result, such works fall to those interested in nationalism. While survey research has so far concentrated on the determinants that lead ethnic or regional minorities to demand greater autonomy from central authorities (see, for example, Denver, 2002, Guinjoan and Rodon, 2014, Nadeau and Fleury, 1995), the essential role of national majorities to support or oppose greater power to the regional-level remains somewhat underexplored. This is peculiar because multi-level governance structures, and changes to them, necessitate the acceptance of a wide range of citizens within a polity.

Some scholars have sought to outline the components of a federal political culture, namely the extent of support for the principles of federalism (Brown 2013, Brown and Deem 2016, see also Burgess 2012 for a non-quantitative approach). There is little attention in these efforts, though, to the distinction between the multi-level nature of institutions (including attachment or affinity to the constituent units of federations, the perceived salience or effectiveness of institutions) and a multi-level or plural construction of the demos other than to say, at times, that identities and evaluations do not always overlap. Brown (2013, Brown and Deem 2016) seeks to tease these apart, referring to state-regionalism (assessments of the operation of federalism) and region-regionalism (attachment to territorial scales) but there remains more to be done both in terms of fleshing out these different notions as well as understanding their inter-relationships.

Multi-level governance thus covers a range of salient political issues. Notwithstanding, the current understanding of the factors that lead citizens to develop particular attitudes towards decentralisation as well as the manner in which these attitudes influence political behaviour remain relatively underexplored. In an effort to move this field of study forward, this special issue assembles a range of papers to further our understanding of citizens' attitudes towards decentralisation and their consequences.

The proposed special issue concerns itself with these issues, examining how individuals feel about the different territorial scales of political life, and identifies the relationship between communities of identity, attitudes to decentralization, and attitudes to (and influence of) policy variation. The six

following articles each explore the territorial scales of political life, with a focus on identities and attitudes to decentralisation in five European countries (Germany, the UK, Switzerland, France, Belgium) and Canada. The assembled cases vary in terms of institutionalised devolution, as well as ethnic and linguistic diversity. The manuscripts draw on varied empirical data, with five employing a quantitative analysis of survey data and a sixth utilising qualitative data collected from focus groups. This collection of articles seeks to enhance our understanding of citizen reactions to and preference concerning decentralization within states.

The first two studies explore the manner in which identity and decentralisation co-evolve. In their study on Germany, Hildebrandt & Trüdinger compare regional identity in the eastern and western *länder* of the country. Their results show that East Germans have slightly stronger regional identities than their Western compatriots and that this is related to political grievances with the central state. Their research demonstrates that citizens' attachment to their region can be stronger in recently created *länder* than in sub-state units with a longer history. The article by Henderson & Wyn Jones develops a multidimensional measure of states as 'unions of the mind'. Using the United Kingdom as a case study they outline the relationship between shared identities, shared influence, shared resources and shared values, highlighting the influence of grievance. The resulting analysis demonstrates how debates about decentralisation can relate to the social constructs of states as communities of solidarity and identity.

The relationship between identity and attitudes to decentralisation occupies the remaining papers. In their analysis comparing eight metropolitan areas in four West European countries (France, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom), Strebel & Kübler do not find evidence of local attachment relating to the desire for more autonomy; rather their findings point to partisan preferences being a predictor of the desire for greater decentralisation. In contrast, Medeiros & Gauvin's study on Canada demonstrates a significant relationship between identity and support for decentralisation, but noted that this is conditioned by regionalised patterns. The article from Reuchamps and colleagues, based on focus group data from Belgium's three linguistic groups, also shows that individuals' identity is an important factor in explaining their preferences towards (de)centralisation, but that considerations about efficiency play a greater role. Finally, Verhaegen and colleagues also look at attitudes towards decentralisation amongst Belgians, but in a longitudinal manner from 1991 to 2019. Their results point to a policy feedback that highlights regional identification being affected by institutional regionalisation, which they show connects back to attitudes about regionalisation.

Together, the assembled papers allow us to better understand the determinants of attitudes to decentralisation and how this relates to the territorial scales of politics that matter to citizens. Specifically, they emphasise that socio-political debates regarding decentralisation are not limited to historic, culturally distinct regions. Hildebrandt & Trüdinger demonstrate the limits of socio-historic markers in accounting for regional identity; and Medeiros & Gauvin highlight the rather similar role that identity has on attitudes towards decentralisation in the Prairie Provinces of Canada and culturally distinct Quebec. Rather than being historical and cultural differences that accounts for individuals' attitudes towards decentralisation, several other factors are highlighted in this special issue. Strebel & Kübler underline political factors, the study from Verhaegen and colleagues demonstrate the powerful influence that institutions can have, and Reuchamps and colleagues underscore a rational choice based on effectiveness to explain these attitudes. Secondly, this special issue also furthers our understanding of inter-regional solidarity. Strebel & Kübler demonstrate the importance of ideological predispositions in explaining support for inter-regional solidarity; whereas Henderson & Wyn Jones highlight particular regional contexts in accounting for support towards inter-regional solidarity.

While much remains to be explored regarding the antecedents and consequences of attitudes towards decentralisation, the assembled articles in this special issue make significant progress in furthering our

understanding of this important aspect of multi-level governance. In particular, all of the studies underline the importance of emotional attachments towards the different multi-level units. Therefore, the assembled articles make an important contribution to the scholarship on territorial politics by advancing our understanding of the predictors of an individual's (sub-)national identity, and the manner in which it contributes to their attitudes towards decentralisation.

References

- BÉLAND, D., LECOURS, A., PAQUET, M. & TOMBE, T. 2020. A Critical Juncture in Fiscal Federalism? Canada's Response to COVID-19. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*.
- DENVER, D. 2002. Voting in the 1997 Scottish and Welsh devolution referendums: Information, interests and opinions. *European Journal of Political Research*, 41, 827-843.
- GAUVIN, J.-P., CHHIM, C. & MEDEIROS, M. 2016. Did they mind the gap? Voter/party ideological proximity between the BQ, the NDP and Quebec voters, 2006–2011. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 49, 289-310.
- GUINJOAN, M. & RODON, T. 2014. Beyond identities: Political determinants of support for decentralization in contemporary Spain. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 24, 21-41.
- HENDERSON, A., JEFFERY, C., WINCOTT, D. & WYN JONES, R. 2013. Reflections on the 'devolution paradox': A comparative examination of multilevel citizenship. *Regional Studies*, 47, 303-322.
- HENDERSON, A., JEFFERY, C., WINCOTT, D. & WYN JONES, R. 2014. Citizenship after Devolution in the United Kingdom: Public Attitudes in Scotland and Wales. In: HENDERSON, A., JEFFERY, C. & WINCOTT, D. (eds.) *Citizenship after the nation state: Regionalism, nationalism and public attitudes in Europe*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- HOPKIN, J. & VAN HOUTEN, P. 2009. Decentralization and state-wide parties: An introduction. *Party Politics*, 15, 131-135.
- KETTL, D. F. 2020. States Divided: The Implications of American Federalism for Covid-19. *Public Administration Review*.
- MEDEIROS, M., GAUVIN, J.-P. & CHHIM, C. 2015. Refining vote choice in an ethno-regionalist context: Three-dimensional ideological voting in Catalonia and Quebec. *Electoral Studies*, 40, 14-22.
- NADEAU, R. & FLEURY, C. J. 1995. Gains linguistiques anticipés et appui à la souveraineté du Québec. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 28, 35-50.
- OBERHOFER, J., ROTH, D., STEHLIN, J., STURM, R. & WILLE, F. 2014. Regional citizenship in Germany: solidarity and participation in a unitary federal state. In: HENDERSON, A., JEFFERY, C. & WINCOTT, D. (eds.) *Citizenship after the Nation State: Regionalism, Nationalism and Public Attitudes in Europe*. London: Springer.
- RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, A. & KRØIJER, A. 2009. Fiscal decentralization and economic growth in Central and Eastern Europe. *Growth and change*, 40, 387-417.
- SORENS, J. 2009. The partisan logic of decentralization in Europe. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 19, 255-272.