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Insights: Methods and Data Beyond Methodological Nationalism

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The six contributions in this special issue are diverse in content and method. But they nonetheless deliver a range of insights into the character and the research challenges of multilevelled statehood.

THE LIMITS OF ‘OFF-THE-PEG’ POLITICAL SCIENCE

A first insight is that ideas developed for the study of state-scale politics should not be adopted uncritically for the study of regional scale politics. Schakel and Jeffery’s historiographical dissection of the concept of second-order elections is an obvious example. That dissection reveals not only the ‘nationalized’ assumptions which pervade that concept and import bias into the study of regional elections, but also the intellectual lassitude of many of those who use the concept but have failed to look much further than the first article that popularized it back in 1980 (REIF and SCHMITT, 1980). Schakel and Jeffery’s finding that only 18% of the 2933 cases they analyse reveal obvious second-order characteristics underlines the point. In other words, taking received wisdom ‘off the peg’ and applying it for purposes for which it was not designed risks producing flawed research.

Vanlangenakker *et al.* make a similar point in their contribution on multilevel political careers. None of the three cases they look at provides confirmation of the commonplace expectation, drawn largely from US studies of political careers, but present also in European analyses, that careers in national elected office are prioritized over careers in regional elected office. Either the opposite appears to be more accurate in the cases of Belgium and Spain – that national-to-regional career moves are more common – or, in the case of Scotland, that regional and national careers appear to be distinct choices that do not stand in any kind of zero-sum relationship with one another; state- and regional-scale politics do not necessarily have a causal relationship with one another; they can have their own, unrelated logics.

They may though be deeply interrelated. This is the finding of Bäck *et al.* who combine ‘off-the-peg’ approaches to coalition formation at the regional level derived from theories of coalition-building in statewide politics, along with a range of ‘made-to-measure’ supplementary hypotheses around variables designed to reveal factors specific to regional-scale politics. This sophisticated approach to research design pays off by revealing both the constraints imposed on autonomous decision-making at the regional scale by coalition alignments in national parliaments, but also the scope for regional coalition innovations to prefigure national alignments, reversing, in some cases, the causal arrow.

TERRITORIAL EFFECTS

Such challenges to conventional understandings of national–regional causality signpost the ‘territorial effects’ (KEATING, 1998, p. ix) that persist, and may indeed be growing, within the ‘nation-state’. The extent and implications of these ‘effects’ are the heartland of this special issue. They are most obvious in states in which national political community was never achieved, Spain and the United Kingdom, where, amongst others, Catalonia and Scotland, Wales and Galicia host distinctive political communities with their own collective concerns and priorities. Henderson *et al.* illuminate that distinctiveness in their treatment, and ultimately resolution, of the ‘devolution paradox’ in those regions (or better, stateless nations): these are the places in their dataset of regional public attitudes where citizens are most likely not only to want their regional political institutions to be more powerful, but also to deliver distinctive policies.

These findings have echoes in other contributions. Vanlangenakker *et al.* explain the choice for regional over national political careers in Belgium (and more tentatively elsewhere) as being about the strength of regional identity. Such strength can lend a regional career more prestige and status than one at what may appear a more distant and less relevant statewide level. And three other contributions point to the effects of

party-political mobilization around distinctive regional identities. Bäck *et al.* find that regional-level coalitions follow the logic of coalition alignments in national parliaments less where party competition at the regional level is 'localized' rather than following a 'nationalized' pattern. One dimension of 'localization', highlighted by Schakel and Jeffery, is the presence of non-statewide parties (NSWPs) that organize around cleavages of regional identity within the state; that presence limits the extent to which regional elections can be considered 'second-order' national elections and points to a territorial differentiation of party competition. This differentiation is in turn a central theme in Fabre and Swenden's contribution on statewide parties. Where statewide parties face significant competitive challenges by NSWPs, they are *caused* to respond. Those responses vary, including relatively minor changes to organizational and programmatic autonomy at the regional level (the latter evidenced further in Bäck *et al.*'s analysis of differentiated regional election manifesto content) to enable more effective competition in regional elections, but also, in some cases, commitments to reform the structure of the state to accommodate or defuse the NSWP challenge. The regional agency encapsulated in NSWPs matters, and can matter in ways that have quite fundamental consequences for the state as a whole.

If regional identity can in these ways produce territorial effects, so too can regional institutions. Using the Regional Authority Index produced by HOOGHE *et al.* (2008), Ezcurra and Rodríguez-Pose find that while the strength of regional political institutions has no discernible effect on statewide economic performance, stronger regional institutions, as defined by a 'self-rule' measure focused on autonomous regional decision-making powers, do seem to produce greater inter-regional economic disparities. This is in a sense logical enough. If powers are decentralized, regional institutions will have to contend with differences in economic structure which will constrain their policies, will use their powers differently because of such structural constraints or through political choice, will exhibit differing degrees of competence in the use of those powers, and will help in these ways to bring about different outcomes. Henderson *et al.* provide some insight into the consequences of such different outcomes for regional politics, showing that support for inter-regional transfers and other fiscal equalization mechanisms is lower in richer regions (and higher in poorer regions). One can see here, in outline, a nexus of territorial effects linking institutional powers and economic performance in producing differences in public understandings of a regional collective interest.

The institutional bases of regional authority appear to have effects in other ways too. Bäck *et al.* find that greater regional authority is associated with a greater tendency at the regional level to form coalitions that do not match national-level coalitions. And Schakel and Jeffery find that stronger regional authority is

associated with weaker second-order election effects in regional voting behaviour. There is again an obvious logic here: the greater the powers regional governments have, the greater the 'territorial effects' (and the weaker and more subordinate the statewide effects) in regional politics. The regional political arena is less subject to national-level agency and more a location for regional-level agency the more voters and parties (and, it is presumed, other political actors) understand that arena as important in its own right.

Significantly a number of the contributions dwell on the distinction made in the Regional Authority Index between self-rule powers of autonomous regional decision-making and shared rule powers which institutionally embed regional roles in statewide decision-making. In some respects self rule – as Ezcurra and Rodríguez-Pose find – makes a difference. In others shared rule effects are present. Bäck *et al.* find that political systems with a strong regional shared rule tend to produce more coalitions that are incongruent with national coalition alignments. They appear surprised by this, but to us sharing 'rule' with national institutions may serve to 'nationalize' voting behaviour and government formation in regional elections by importing a national balancing option in to regional elections; regional elections may be used in this way by regional voters as instruments to constrain the power of national governments.

Henderson *et al.* produce an intriguing, related hypothesis. They find especially in Austrian but also German and French regions that citizens both prefer very high levels of regional authority *and* very high levels of statewide policy uniformity. But this version of the 'devolution paradox' may not be paradoxical at all if in those systems – in Austria and Germany through cooperative federalism, in France through the multilevel *cumul des mandats* – the regional voice is strong in national decision-making processes geared to statewide policy uniformity. The territorial effect here is one of regions shaping national politics.

RECOGNIZING DIFFERENTIATED MULTILEVEL STATEHOOD

There are in other words different dimensions in which regional-level politics impact on the contemporary state. There are states in which the regional effects are ones which mark out parts of the state as distinct political arenas in which the substance of political contestation may have little to do with the preoccupations of politics at the national level, and in which regional politics is largely compartmentalized from national politics. There are others in which regions are bound into national decision-making. There may be combinations of these different effects which pit central political institutions into asymmetrical relationships with regional institutions – conflicting with some over the very

structure of the state, collaborating with others in shared objectives. Regions exist in similarly diverse relationships with one another, in part acting highly autonomously, in part in conflict (for example, over the consequences of regional economic disparity), in part in shared purpose. The politics of multilevel states are highly differentiated both at and across regional and national levels of government (and, it goes without saying, though it is not a subject of this special issue, in the extension of this differentiation to transnational forms of government such as the European Union).

There are no simple, unidirectional causal relationships. While the national level may shape the regional level in many respects, in many others it does not because the regional level eludes national agency, and in some areas regional dynamics shape national politics. If we fail to develop research strategies capable of accommodating such complexity, we risk failing to understand the operation of contemporary democracy.

KNOWING THE MULTILEVEL STATE: THE DATA CHALLENGE

It was noted above that some of the findings in this special issue are 'logical'. If there are powerful regional institutions, strong regional identities or stark regional economic disparities then these will be in a broad sense causal, the sources of political contestation and change, at times with significant impacts on national politics. Logical reasoning is best built, though, on evidence, despite the advances made by research reported in this special issue and elsewhere that evidence is still too scant. There is a major challenge here. Building the datasets around regional units of analysis that would enable a more nuanced appreciation of the regional dimensions of multilevel statehood is difficult for the simple reason that there are many more regions than there are states. Collecting the data that enable a regional political science is a herculean and

often very expensive task. The contributions in this issue give some insight into that task. Schakel and Jeffery's dataset of nearly 3000 regional elections was put together in intensive, full-time work over a year. Vanlangenakker *et al.* had to trace the political careers of several hundred politicians. Bäck *et al.* were able to analyse government formation in ninety-two regions in eight states only through the innovative use of digital data-mining techniques (and much intensive work by the research team). Henderson *et al.* constructed a public attitudes dataset of around 13000 respondents in fourteen regions only after an extraordinarily complex process of application for funding which endured several setbacks and in the end required the support of twelve different funding bodies to the value of well over €500000, and even then covered only fieldwork costs in full, leaving much of the analysis to be cross-subsidized by other activities in the participant universities. Fabre and Swenden, and Ezcurra and Rodríguez-Pose's contributions did not rest on such efforts, but they also note the scale of the data challenge they would need to master if they were to be in a position to report as comprehensively as they would like on the research agendas they set out.

The answers to this data challenge are obvious enough: more funding, more methodological innovation that enables large-scale qualitative datasets to be analysed with efficiency (and without losing rigour), and more collaboration and data-sharing. A regional data observatory, organized on open-access principles, would open up possibilities for the integration of different datasets, for building multi-site research collaborations alert to local nuances of regional politics, and for mobilizing new researchers in the development of a regional political science. Only such a collective effort is likely to put us in a position to capture more accurately the realities of contemporary multilevel statehood, some of whose contours have been set out, however imperfectly, in this special issue.

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