

Three Important Features You Need to Know About City and Urban Regions

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Cities and urban areas are vital for economic growth and are crucial for effectively addressing societal and environmental challenges. Providing adequate governance structures for cities and urban areas are essential for their success. Yet we know very little on how they are actually governed. In this blog, I use the Regional Authority Index to explore trends in government arrangements for city and urban regions in 46 countries between 1950 and 2018. I find that city and urban regions are on the rise. They govern over one fifth of the population and they are a recent phenomenon that commenced in the late 1990s. I also find two important differences. City regions have more authority and are designed to unify government whereas urban regions have less authority and are geared towards coordinating policy across member governments. Both city and urban regions may face hurdles to provide for an adequate governance structure. By having more authority, city regions can be in a better position to address challenges within but not outside their jurisdiction. In contrast, urban regions are better equipped to coordinate policy across jurisdictions, but limited authority may restrict their ability to fully address the challenges.

Introduction

The United Nations (2018) records that the percentage of the world population living in urban areas increased from 30 per cent in 1950 to more than half in 2018. The twenty-first century can be an era of urbanization and this is particularly the case for Europe where around 75 per cent of the population lives in urban areas (European Environment Agency 2017; OECD 2015). Cities and urban areas are often described as the ‘motors’ or ‘engines’ of the economy (see e.g. Jacobs 1969; Bairoch 1988; Quigley 1998; Duranton 2008) and they are frequently considered to be essential for addressing several societal and environmental problems (see e.g. Fitzgerald 2010; Floater et al. 2014; Gouldson et al. 2015; Johnson 2008). However, providing adequate governance is critical for addressing societal and environmental challenges while achieving economic growth (OECD 2015). Although there is a great societal need to know how cities and urban areas are best governed, research on urban government is relatively scarce (Ahrend, Gamper, and Schumann 2014; da Cruz, Oh, and Choumar 2020). The first task at hand is to observe what kind of government arrangements are being put in place before one can set out to explore when cities and urban areas are successful.

In this blog I will provide a sneak-preview of the development in government arrangements for city regions and urban regions in 46 European and OECD-countries. The Regional Authority Index (RAI) provides a detailed description on how regional government has developed between 1950 and 2018 and the next update of the RAI includes city and urban regions (we will publish an article in *Regional & Federal Studies*, forthcoming in Fall 2020). The RAI differentiates between two sub-types for both city and urban regions. A city region has an authority arrangement that applies to a single city or type of city which is either specific and differentiates a city from local government units (specific city region) or which grants a city the competences of both local and regional government (consolidated city

region). An urban region exercises authority over one or more cities and their surrounding areas and it either governs over an urban area with two or more equally sized cities and their surrounding municipalities (polycentric urban region) or a dominant city and its surrounding municipalities (metropolitan urban region). City and urban regions have in common that they have become very prominent. In 2018, they govern over almost one quarter of the total population of 1.3 billion people in 46 countries. The spread of city and urban regions is a recent trend which accelerated in the late 1990s. A comparison between city and urban regions reveals two important differences. First, urban regions tend to be differentiated and their autonomy arrangements set them apart from other local and regional governments. In contrast, city regions constitute unified government which makes them more similar to other local and regional governments. Second, urban regions are geared towards coordination of policies whereby the member municipalities keep in control of the budget and policy formulation and implementation. As a result, urban regions tend to have less authority than city regions.

The Regional Authority Index

An explanation of the Regional Authority Index is in order before I start exploring the data. A regional government is a *general purpose* administration that is *intermediate* between the national and local tiers and which has an *average population of 150,000 or more* across the units within that level. The RAI measures the authority of regional governments alongside two dimensions –self-rule and shared rule—which are each broken down into five sub-dimensions (see Table 1). Scores for individual regions range from 1 –a deconcentrated, general purpose administration—to a maximum of 30. Country scores are derived by weighing region scores by their population size and by summing the weighted regional scores for each tier. More detail on the RAI can be found in our book (Hooghe et al. 2016).

City and urban regions are included in the RAI where these regions perform regional government tasks in urban areas. Following Sharpe (1995) and Swianiewicz and Lackowska-Madurowicz (2012) one can distinguish between two forms of metropolitan government. The unitary or simple model focuses on internalizing externalities and scale effects within an urban area. The two-tier model retains the territorial boundaries of municipalities and superimposes a metropolitan authority over it. This model is geared towards coordinating externalities and scale effects across jurisdictions within an urban area. The RAI distinguishes between city regions (based on the first model, i.e. a two-tier city structure) and urban regions (based on the second model, i.e. a two-tier arrangement for urban areas) and identifies two sub-types within both categories.

A city region is a city that has an autonomy arrangement that sets the city apart from (other) local and regional government units. This can be achieved in two ways. First, an autonomy arrangement can be laid down in a specific law or in a specific section of a local or regional government law that applies to one single city. These are *specific city regions* and in the sample of 46 countries this kind of regime is applied to a number of capital cities of states and regions. Examples are the state capitals Beograd in Serbia, Bratislava in Slovakia, Ljubljana in Sloveni, and Skopje in Macedonia. Examples of regional capitals can be found in Spain: Barcelona (Catalunya), Palmas de Mallorca (Illes Balears), and Zaragoza (Aragón).

Table 1. The Regional Authority Index.

Self-rule (0 - 18): the authority exercised by a regional government over those who live in the region		
Sub-indicator	Scores	Measure
Institutional depth	0 – 3	The extent to which a regional government is autonomous rather than deconcentrated.
Policy scope	0 – 4	The range of policies for which a government is responsible.
Fiscal autonomy	0 – 4	The extent to which a regional government can independently tax its population.
Borrowing autonomy	0 – 3	The extent to which a regional government can borrow.
Representation	0 – 4	The extent to which a region has an independent legislature and executive.
Shared rule (0 - 12): the authority exercised by a regional government or its representatives in the country as a whole		
Sub-indicator	Scores	Measure
Law making	0 – 2	The extent to which regional representatives co-determine national legislation.
Executive control	0 – 2	The extent to which a regional government co-determines national policy in intergovernmental meetings.
Fiscal control	0 – 2	The extent to which regional representatives co-determine the distribution of national tax revenues.
Borrowing control	0 – 2	The extent to which a regional government co-determines subnational and national borrowing constraints.
Constitutional reform	0 – 4	The extent to which regional representatives co-determine constitutional change.

Source: Hooghe et al. (2016)

A second type of city region is established by a local or regional government law stipulating that a city or a group (or class) of cities exercise the competences allocated to municipalities as well as to the units of a regional tier. These are *consolidated city regions* because the city is both a unit of a local and a regional tier. There is one assembly, one executive, and one administration which all exercise municipal and regional competences. Some state capitals are consolidated municipal and regional government such as Oslo which is one of the eleven *fylker* in Norway, Vienna which is one of the nine *Länder* in Austria, and Zagreb which is one of the twenty-one *županija* in Croatia. A group (or class) of cities can also be declared to be consolidated government such as *Kreisfreie Städte* in Germany and cities with county rights such as *megyei jogú városok* in Hungary and *miasto na prawach powiatu* in Poland.

An urban region provides government for an urban area consisting of several local (or lower tier) government units which can be a combination of cities, towns, or municipalities. A *polycentric urban region* governs over a group of municipalities in an urban area which includes a number of equally populous cities or urban areas. An example is *Regionalverband Ruhr* (in Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany) which consists of four *Kreise* and eleven *Kreisfreie*

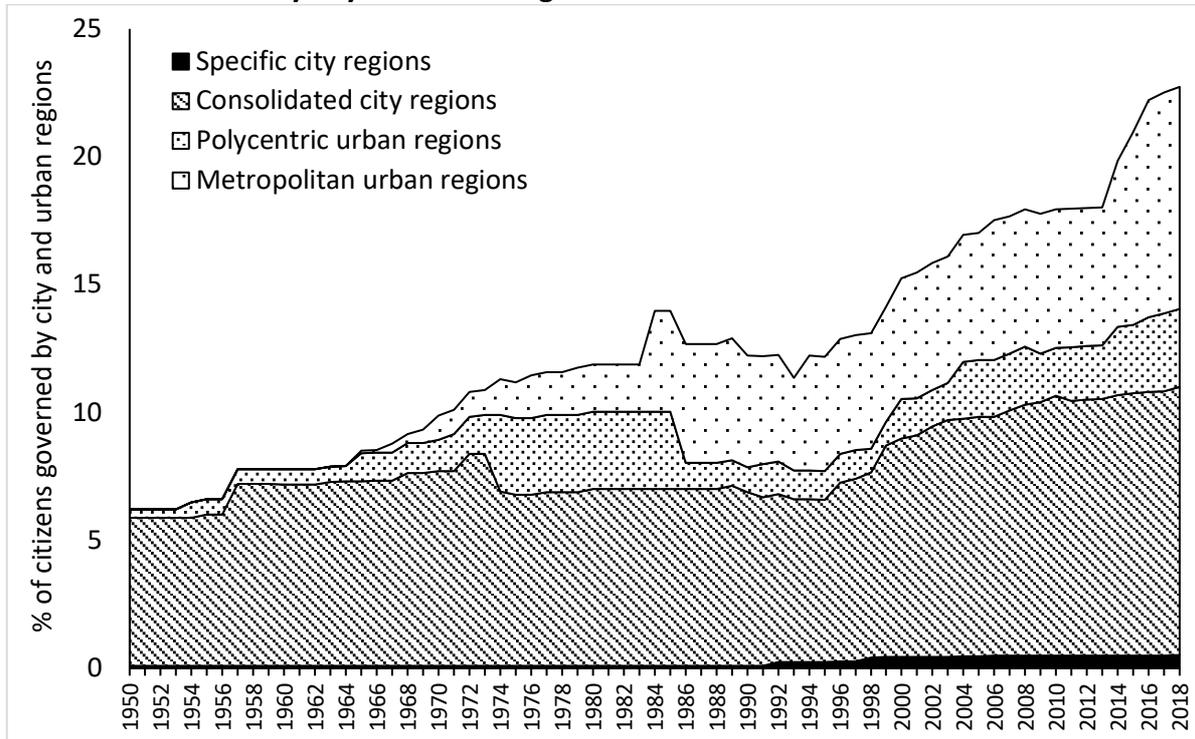
Städte whereby one *Kreise* and three *Kreisfreie Städte* have more than 500,000 inhabitants and an additional three *Kreise* and one *Kreisfreie Stadt* have more than 300,000 inhabitants. A metropolitan urban region includes one population-wise dominant city and its surrounding local (or lower tier) government units. In practice, metropolitan urban regions are identified when the population share of the most populous city is more than 40 per cent of the total population of an urban region and when the dominant city is more than twice as populous as the second most populous city or municipality in an urban region. Examples are *communauté métropolitaine* in Quebec (Canada), *métropoles* in France, and *città metropolitana* in Italy.

City and urban regions are on the rise

Figure 1 displays the percentage of citizens governed by city and urban regions between 1950 and 2018. The total population size of the 46 countries included in the analysis is close to 1.25 billion people. The population size is taken from censuses in 2010 or a census which was held close to 2010. By keeping the population size constant, the lines displayed in Figure 1 reflect the expansion of city and urban regional government rather than population growth. The overall trend is very clear, city and urban regions have significantly increased their scope. In 1950, around six per cent of the total population was governed by city and urban regions and this percentage increased to 23 per cent in 2018. In other words, almost a quarter of citizens in the developed world are governed by city and urban regions. Figure 1 clearly also reveals that city and urban regions are a recent trend. The percentage of citizens governed by city and urban regions doubled over the course of six decades from 6.2 per cent in 1950 to 13.3 per cent in 1998. This percentage doubled again in the following two decades, from 13.3 per cent in 1998 to 23 per cent in 2018.

Figure 1 also reveals some interesting differences between the sub-types of city and urban regions. Both city and urban regions provide government for around 11 per cent of the total population in 2018. Consolidated city regions govern over 10.5 per cent of the total population whereas specific city regions are quite rare and provide regional government for around 0.5 per cent of the total population (which still involves over 6.5 million citizens). Metropolitan urban regions provide government for 8.7 per cent of the total population whereas 3.1 per cent of the total population are governed by polycentric urban regions. Another interesting difference is that the recent increase in scope can be largely attributed to metropolitan urban regions. The population share governed by consolidated city regions increased from 5.8 per cent in 1950 to 10.5 per cent in 2018. The population shares are zero per cent in 1950 and 8.7 per cent in 2018 for metropolitan urban regions.

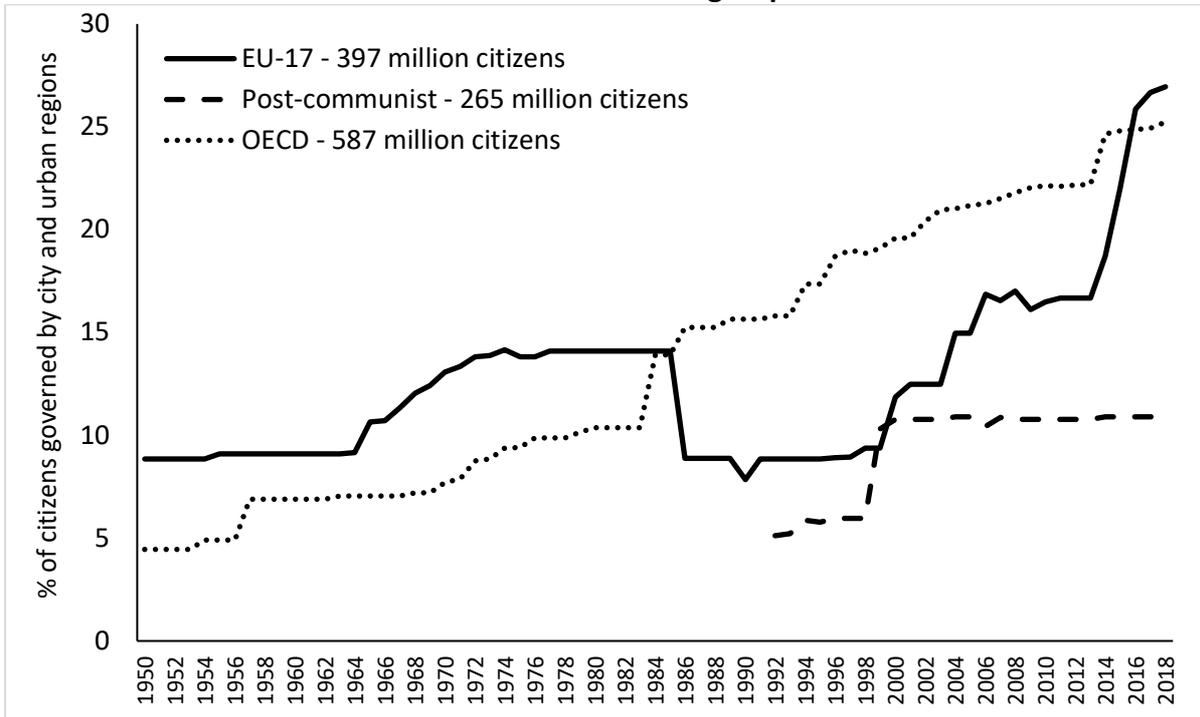
Figure 1. Percentage of citizens who are governed by city and urban regions between 1950 and 2018



Notes: Shown are the percentages of citizens who are governed by city and urban regions between 1950 and 2018. Population data is taken from a country census in 2010 or close to 2010. Therefore, changes in percentages over time reflect the expansion of city and urban regional government. See the main text for definitions for specific and consolidated city regions and for polycentric and metropolitan urban regions.

A third interesting observation in Figure 1 concerns the uneven development in the scope of city and urban regions over time. There is a slow and gradual process of increasing scope until the early 1970s. This is followed by a period of stasis which lasts from the second half of the 1970s until the early 1990s. From the mid-1990s onwards the increase in scope is accelerating. In addition, the developments in city and urban regional government is uneven across the group of 46 countries. Figure 2 displays the percentage of citizens that are governed by city and urban governments between 1950 and 2018 for three groups of countries: 17 EU member states, 19 post-communist countries, and 10 OECD countries. A striking observation is that the three stages in the development of city and urban regions observed in Figure 1 can be ascribed to the EU-17 countries. City and urban regions in the ten OECD countries have been gradually on the rise since 1950. In the 19 post-communist countries, the scope of city and urban regions has been stable since 2000 after a significant increase during the 1990s.

Figure 2. Percentage of citizens who are governed by city and urban regions between 1950 and 2018 for three groups of countries



Notes: Shown are the percentages of citizens who are governed by city and urban regions between 1950 and 2018 for three groups of countries.

EU-17 (N = 17): Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Post-communist (N = 19): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Serbia and Montenegro (until 2006), Slovakia, and Slovenia.

OECD (N = 10): Australia, Canada, Iceland, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United States.

Zooming into the EU-17 reveals that the dip for 1986 can be traced to a reform in the United Kingdom which abolished six metropolitan county councils and the County of Greater London in 1986. Out of a total of 58 city and urban regions or regional tiers only ten have been abolished without being replaced with a new city or urban regional government. And all these ten reforms occurred in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United Kingdom mostly during the 1980s and 1990s. The location and timing of these reforms may be linked to decisions taken and implemented by national governments led by conservative parties and inspired by Thatcherism (see e.g. Anderson, Hansen, and Jørgenson 2002; Stoker 2003) but future research should systematically test this hypothesis.

In some countries the abolishment of city and urban regional governments meant that local government units were empowered. For example, most of the functions of the metropolitan county and Greater London councils were transferred to 36 metropolitan boroughs and 32 London boroughs. These are local government units which, until recently, did not have an subnational tier of government above them. In other instances, task-specific governance bodies took over the competences. For example, the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council (*Pääkaupunkiseudun yhteistyövaltuuskunta*) in Finland was abolished in 2010 and its tasks

were taken over by the Helsinki Regional Transport Authority (*Helsingin seudun liikenne*) and the Helsinki Region Environmental Services Authority (*Helsingin seudun ympäristöpalvelut*). In few instances, the city or urban region was transformed into a standard unit of a statewide regional tier. For example, the short-lived *grandes áreas metropolitanas* and *comunidades urbanas* in Portugal were established in 2004 and replaced in 2008 by *comunidades intermunicipais* which cover the whole statewide territory.

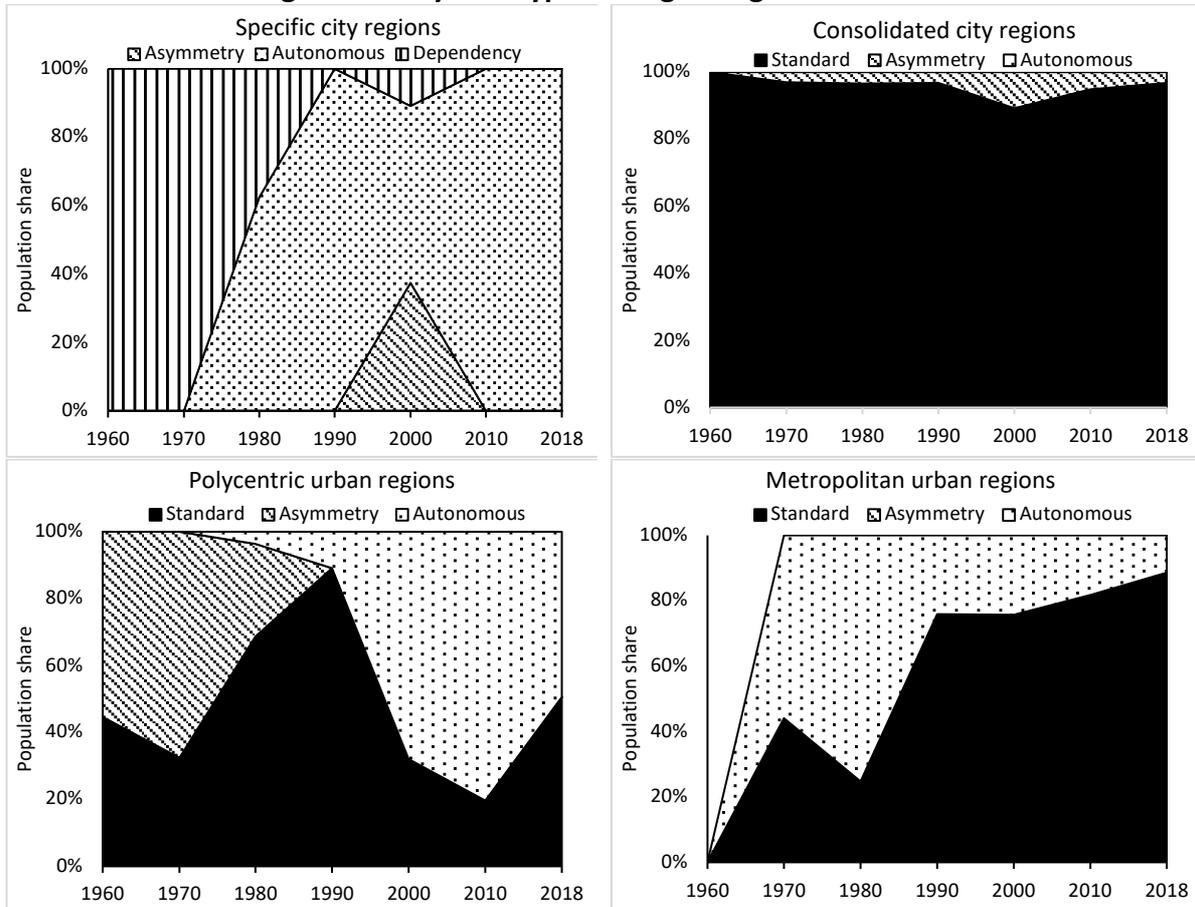
These examples also reveal that there is a strong functional need to coordinate policy across local jurisdictions either through task-specific government, within a unit of a standard regional tier, or via city and urban regional government specifically designed for urbanized areas. This observation is underlined by the introduction of nine combined authorities in the United Kingdom (England) in 2011 out of which six include the former six metropolitan county councils which were abolished in 1985. In addition, the Greater London Authority which was established in 2000 has the exact same territorial boundaries as the former County of Greater London which was abolished in 1985.

City and urban regions are differentiated governments

The RAI also codes regions according to four types of sub-national government (Hooghe et al. 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2016). A *standard* region has a uniform institutional set-up within a tier and all units within that tier receive the same competences. An *asymmetric* region is embedded in a national tier but has distinctive authority on one of several dimensions of the RAI. An *autonomous* region is not part of a country-wide constitutional framework and receives special treatment as an individual region. A *dependent* region is not part of a standard tier and is governed hierarchically by the central state. This coding scheme on four types of regions enables a further exploration into the characteristics of city and urban regions. Figure 3 compares population shares within city and urban regions that are governed by the four different types of regional government. The distributions are weighted by population size relative to the total population size governed by the type of city or urban region.

Given the definition of specific city regions it is not surprising that none of them are part of a standard tier. *Specific city regions are differentiated regions* because they have autonomous arrangements that are specifically designed for one single city. Similarly, it may not be surprising that consolidated city regions are overwhelmingly standard regions. The low population share governed by asymmetric city regions clearly signals that not many city regions gain distinctive authority when they are both a unit of a local and a regional tier. However, consolidated city regions do receive additional competences which are too fine-grained for the RAI to capture. For example, consolidated city regions may be responsible for primary education which is a local responsibility and for secondary education which is a regional competence. Or a consolidated city region may set the rate of a property tax which is a local tax as well as the rate of a tax on motor vehicles which is levied by regions. Hence, *consolidated city regions are differentiated* from other local and regional units because they combine local and regional competences in one single unit.

Figure 3. Percentage of population in city and urban regions governed by four types of regional government



Notes: Shown are the percentages of the population that is governed by city and urban regions differentiated by four types of regional government between 1960 and 2018.

A standard region is part of a nation-wide regional tier whereby all units have similar competences.

An asymmetric region is embedded in a national tier, yet has distinctive authority on one or several dimensions of the RAI.

An autonomous region is exempt from the country-wide constitutional framework and receives special treatment as an individual jurisdiction.

A dependent region is governed hierarchically by the central state.

The patterns over time for polycentric and metropolitan urban regions are quite different. During the first growth wave in urban government that lasted until the early 1980s most citizens were governed by asymmetric polycentric urban regions and autonomous metropolitan urban regions. At the end of the second growth wave of urban government (late 1990s-2018), about half of the citizens are governed by autonomous polycentric urban regions whereas the other half is governed by standard polycentric urban regions. The population share governed by standard metropolitan urban regions has increased to more than 80 per cent in 2018. There has been a clear ‘standardization’ of urban government.

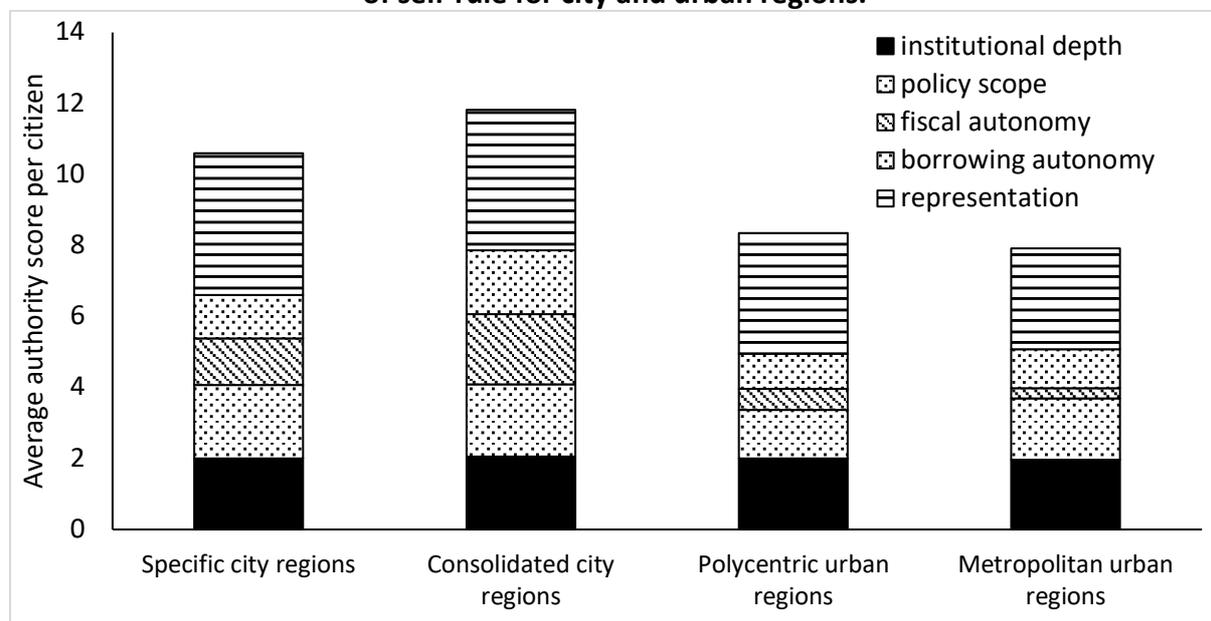
Although the competences of many urban regions are regulated in national law that applies across the statewide territory, in practice, the law often applies only to specific territories that meet certain population criteria. For example, in France a *communauté urbaine* (urban community) can be established in areas with over 250,000 inhabitants and a *métropole*

(metropolis) can be introduced in a territory which includes more than 400,000 inhabitants. Another example is Turkey where municipalities with more than 750,000 inhabitants automatically become a metropolitan municipality which takes over the competences of their provincial administration which is dissolved once a metropolitan municipality is established. In sum, *urban regions are differentiated*: either their autonomy is laid down in a specific law that applies to one jurisdiction or their autonomy is stipulated by a nation-wide regulatory framework, but population thresholds permit only particular territories to institute urban regional government.

City and urban regions are ‘thin governments’

City and urban regions have no or very limited shared rule. In 2018, no metropolitan urban region had shared rule and the average shared rule score exercised per citizen was 0.4 for polycentric urban regions, 0.6 for specific city regions, and 1.1 for consolidated city regions. Hence, city and urban regions *can be considered to be ‘thin government’*. The average shared rule scores stand in stark contrast to the average self-rule scores. Figure 4 displays the average authority score exercised by city and urban regions over their citizens. The averages are around 11 for city regions and about 8 for urban regions. The three-point difference between city and urban regions is a remarkable and unanticipated observation. Zooming into the five sub-dimensions of self-rule reveals that the difference can be attributed to a lower score on policy scope (2 versus 1.3 and 1.7), fiscal autonomy (above 1 versus far below 1), borrowing autonomy (above one versus below one), and representation (4 versus 3.4 and 2.8).

Figure 4. Average scores on five sub-dimensions of self-rule for city and urban regions.



Notes: Shown are average scores per citizen for the five sub-dimensions of self-rule (see Table 1) for 2010 until 2018 for city and urban regions.

A typical urban region is a non-deconcentrated administration subject to central government veto (a score of 2) responsible for economic (+1) and/or cultural-educational (+1) policy. Most urban regions can set the rate of a minor tax (a score of 1) and can borrow under centrally imposed restrictions with prior authorization by the central government (a

score of 1). They often have an indirectly elected assembly with members elected or appointed by the assemblies and executives of their member municipalities (a score of 1) and their executives are typically elected by and from the metropolitan assembly (a score of 2). In comparison to urban regions, a typical city region is responsible for economic and cultural-educational or welfare policy (a score of 2) and they can set the base and rate of a minor tax (a score of 2). Their assembly is directly elected (+2) and their executive is either selected by the assembly or directly elected (+2). Hence, most urban regions have a total RAI-score that ranges between 7 and 9 points whereas city regions have a total RAI-score that goes beyond 10 points. Hence, urban regions *can be considered to be 'thin self-governments'*.

The characteristics of urban regions –i.e. virtual absence of shared rule, policy scope restricted to economic and/or cultural-educational policy, little fiscal and borrowing autonomy, and an indirectly elected assembly—in comparison to city regions (and other non-urban regional governments) leads to another observation: urban regions are geared towards coordination of policies that have externalities beyond the member municipalities whereby the member municipalities keep in control of the budget and policy formulation and implementation. These observations corroborate the findings by Ahrend, Gamper, and Schumann (2014) who find that governance bodies of metropolitan areas focus on regional development, spatial planning, and transport, that they have relatively small budgets and low numbers of staff, and that their political leadership often consists of elected officials of the local governments whose territories they cover.

Conclusion

Providing adequate governance for urban areas is often considered to be crucial for achieving economic growth while improving the quality of life. A common hindrance in realizing these objectives is administrative fragmentation across cities and municipalities which significantly hampers policy coordination (Ahrend, Gamper, and Schumann 2014). An important gap in our knowledge is how to institutionally design urban governance so that urban areas can live up to their expectations. The updated Regional Authority Index provides a thorough and comprehensive description on the development of government in city and urban regions in 46 countries between 1950 and 2018. Thereby, the RAI may prove to be a very useful starting point in exploring when city and urban regions succeed.

An exploration of the Regional Authority Index reveals three crucial features of city and urban regions. First, city and urban regions are on the rise. They are notably increasing their scope since the late 1990s and nowadays close to a quarter of a total of 1.3 billion people in 46 countries are governed by city and urban regions. Second, city and urban regions are differentiated regional governments. Their competences are laid down in specific national laws that apply to a single or relatively few jurisdictions. Third, city regions have more authority and are designed to unify government whereas urban regions have less authority and are geared towards coordinating policy across member governments. City and urban regions may face different hurdles to provide for an adequate governance structure for urban areas. By having more authority, city regions may be in a better position to address challenges within but not outside their jurisdiction. In contrast, urban regions are better equipped to coordinate policy across jurisdictions, but limited authority may restrict their ability to fully address the challenges.

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