Comparing National-Subnational Relations in 8 Unitary States

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Abstract:
In most developed democracies, both national and subnational governments are directly elected by different aggregations of the sample people even if both elections take place on the same date. Some independently mandated governments sometimes succeed in enhancing subnational autonomy in public economic activity better than their cohorts. To explain this cross-sectional, temporal variation in centralization in public economic activity, I will first examine how different countries’ constitutions codify national-subnational relations. Specifically, who has decision-making power regarding fiscal authority and how are these decision-makers selected across national and subnational governments? I will, then, explore what these constitutions do not specify but what has become institutionalized in intergovernmental relations. The main purpose of this paper is to compare national-subnational relations from perspectives of the legal-constitutional provision, administration, financial arrangement, subnational autonomy, and institutionalized intergovernmentalism in 8 unitary states, Denmark, Sweden, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom.

Keyword: national-subnational relations, unitary state, intermediate-level subnational government, self-management, subnational autonomy

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I. Introduction

What does the constitution tell us about intergovernmental balance in a country? Which aspects of national-subnational relations can a codified constitution fail to reveal? Woodrow Wilson claimed that one vital feature of a constitution is the relation of states or regions to the federal or national government. Indeed, each country’s constitution sheds formal-legal insights into how different levels of government finalize the intricate task of assigning the specific functions of governing among themselves. In practice, however, such national-subnational relations are constantly subjected to redefinition because different regimes envision their own distinct pattern of governance even within the same country.

In most developed democracies, both national and subnational governments are directly elected by different aggregations of the same people, even if both elections take place on the same date. Some independently mandated governments sometimes succeed in enhancing subnational autonomy in public economic activity better than their cohorts. To explain this cross-sectional, temporal variation in centralization in public economic activity, I will first examine how different countries’ constitutions codify national-subnational relations. Specifically, who has decision-making power regarding fiscal authority and how are these decision-makers selected across national and subnational governments? I will then, explore what these constitutions do not specify but what has become institutionalized in intergovernmental relations.

All developed democracies embrace local self-management but mostly from the vertical perspective, which is codified in constitutions. Samuels (1983) argues that not all national-subnational relations are vertical. As much as a subnational policy is the national government’s tool, it also presents potential for subnational governments to direct its benefit to their favor yet not necessarily involving regional constituencies in this process. Thus, Samuels (1983) reiterates Tarrow’s paradox of the modern state that policy-making has become more centralized while representation has become more localized. Leonardy (1999) further argues that not all national-subnational relations neatly fall into vertical or horizontal. If and when both national and subnational levels are represented on an equal footing, policy-making and representation need not be separated.

The main purpose of this paper is to compare national-subnational relations from perspectives of the legal-constitutional provision, administration, financial arrangement, subnational autonomy, and institutionalized intergovernmentalism. A proper starting point, thus, is the definition of institutional autonomy. Lane and Ersson (1990) define three modes of institutional autonomy: federalism, decentralization of a unitary state, and home rule. The first two are merely technical divisions based on the legal definition because an extensively decentralized unitary state, for example, can and does enjoy more institutional autonomy across different levels of governments than a symbolic federal state ever will. The last mode of institutional autonomy—home rule—is the granting of self-government to particular regions within a nation like devolution the United Kingdom. I will examine the institutional-structural features of intergovernmental relations in 8 unitary states, Denmark, Sweden, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom.

I will divide this paper into two sections based on two categories of developed democracies: two constitutionally unitary and unicameral states and six constitutionally unitary but bicameral states. I will also present tables, which summarize how many units make up the subnational level of government, whether national and subnational elections are held on different dates, and how subnational chief executives are selected. Then, I will draw additional tables on how the members of national upper houses are selected, whether they can play a