

New Directions in Federalism Studies

Edited by
Jan Erk and Wilfried Swenden



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Wilfried Swenden**



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New Directions in Federalism Studies

Federalism has experienced a remarkable renaissance in recent decades – as an alternative way to accommodate ethnic differences; as a tool to combat remote, undemocratic and ineffective central governments; and, lastly, as a means to promote economic performance in the developing world through decentralization.

This book seeks to bring different aspects and perspectives of federalism studies closer together, by providing an analytical framework which transcends the sub-fields and encourages contributors to look beyond the comfort zones of their own disciplinary approaches to the topic. The authors seek to achieve this aim by structuring the contributions around four dimensions of federalism studies:

- the development and design of federal institutions;
- federalism and democratic participation, representation and accountability;
- federalism and the accommodation of territorially based ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences;
- federalism and public policy.

With a strong comparative framework, *New Directions in Federalism Studies* will be of interest to students and scholars of Federalism, Government, Regionalism, and Multi-level Governance. It will also provide insights of relevance to Comparative Politics, Public Policy, Public Administration, Nationalism, and West European Politics.

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Series editor's preface

It can hardly be called into question that the current volume addresses a highly relevant topic. As the editors point out in their introductory chapter, some 40 percent of the world's population lives in federal states. To be sure, if we exclude those who do not live in democratic systems, the proportion goes down considerably. Furthermore, if we wanted to ascertain exact figures we would be confronted with the dual challenge of defining "democracy" and "federalism" – concepts which lend themselves to a considerable degree of ambiguity. Yet, it is beyond doubt that the number of federal systems has grown significantly in recent decades, sometimes as a result of external pressures emanating from international monetary institutions such as the World Bank or the IMF, who have advocated vertical power sharing as a means of enhancing economic efficiency in developing nations. Such demands need not necessarily lead to a fully fledged federal system. There are many examples of vertical power sharing which stop short of a true transfer of political authority to sub-national units – which is the defining criterion of federalism. Such instances of decentralization may come very close to federalism in that many of the institutional arrangements may look very similar, but there is no guarantee of subnational autonomy.

The belief in the superior efficiency of federalism is but one cause of the emergence and development of federal systems. Path dependency is a powerful explanation, as is the need to accommodate deeply divided subcultures by giving them far-reaching rights of self-government. In addition, democratic theorists have maintained that federalism simply makes for better democracy because it brings much decision-making closer to the people. However, much of this rests on shaky empirical grounds and this volume shows that unambiguous evidence for the presumed effects of federalism is hard to generate.

Focusing mainly on European democracies but looking as far afield as India and Argentina, the contributors draw our attention to the considerable variation in individual federal arrangements which make large *N* comparisons risky, because like may not be compared with like. Federalism is a multifaceted phenomenon and its precise effects depend to a large degree on the specific institutional rules of a given country. Federalism may be integrated or unintegrated, it may have in-built incentives that foster competition or enforce cooperation, and the required level of equalization across subnational units may differ

substantially. Furthermore, federalism interacts with a range of other institutional variables like the degree of neo-corporatism, the power of constitutional courts or the nature of the party system.

Regional diversity is another case in point. While federalism aims, as César Colino writes in this volume, at facilitating the integration and coexistence of different territorial groups or entities, the very nature of such entities differs widely and may hence lead to very different kinds of federalism. Germany, for example, has little need to accommodate substantially different communities through a federal system of governance. Arguably, German federalism owes its existence mainly to the historical trajectory of nation-building. The absence of strong sub-national variation has facilitated or even promoted emergence of a highly sophisticated and almost unintelligible mechanism for making the conditions of life largely similar across the German *Länder*. This differs sharply from other federal systems where the very essence of federalism is the preservation of difference – be it cultural, linguistic or economic. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on cooperation has increased the risk of gridlock and, contrary to what some democratic theorists would expect, led to a conspicuous lack of democratic accountability. Co-decision by the *Bundesrat* makes it almost impossible even for informed citizens to attribute policy outcomes to specific political camps. Unsurprisingly, the confrontational British political system is frequently regarded to be superior from this perspective. Yet, devolution means that the UK has taken decisive steps in the opposite direction while two rounds of federalism reform in Germany seem to cast doubt on the validity of some overly pessimistic accounts of the capacity of German federalism to reform.

In any case, there can be little doubt that federal institutions normally embody powerful checks against excessive central power. At least under conditions of democratic government the growing number of federal systems can be regarded as a gain in terms of freedom. As many stateless nations have accomplished some degree of self rule in the recent past, we may see fewer of such developments in the future. Furthermore, as the editors point out in their concluding chapter, there are significant countervailing trends. The global economic crisis has resulted in a “resurgence of central government activism”, and geopolitical considerations related to Russia’s increasingly assertive role may make it likely that “concerns over international security are likely to trump concerns over domestic federal reforms”.

Thomas Poguntke, Series Editor
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