

I

Subnational Research in Comparative Politics

Substantive, Theoretical, and Methodological Contributions

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Comparative politics is conventionally seen as the study of politics across countries. Still, the field has a prominent and long-standing tradition of studying politics not across countries but *inside* them, especially by zooming down to subnational units. Indeed, political science was arguably born subnational: One of the discipline's oldest canonical texts, *The Politics*, written by Aristotle in the fourth century BC, offered a typology of political systems based on a comparative study of 158 city constitutions in ancient Greece. A focus on subnational politics also plays an important role in subsequent classic works of social science. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville drew inferences about the negative consequences of slavery for industrialization by studying "slavery's borderlands," that is, the Kentucky and Ohio banks of the Ohio River, which he argued varied "only in a single respect: Kentucky has admitted slavery, but the state of Ohio has prohibited the existence of slaves within its borders."¹ A century later, V. O. Key (1949) used a subnational approach to explore political competition across the US South and discovered surprising variation across states in levels of political conservatism at a time when political attitudes were assumed to be uniform in the so-called Solid South. Seymour Martin Lipset (1950) compared the political leanings of farmers in the Canadian and American "wheat belts" during the 1930s to explain variation in the emergence of agrarian socialism. And Robert A. Dahl (1961) studied the city

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¹ Tocqueville continues, "Thus the traveler who floats down the current of the Ohio to the spot where that river falls into the Mississippi may be said to sail between liberty and servitude; and a transient inspection of surrounding objects will convince him which of the two is more favorable to humanity" (1831, Chapter XVIII).

of New Haven, Connecticut, to answer the question “who governs?” and, in turn, advance his pluralist theory of democracy.²

Subnational research (SNR) also figures notably in more recent agenda-setting works of comparative politics. In *Making Democracy Work*, Robert Putnam (1994) explained sharp variation in subnational government performance between the Northern and Southern regions of Italy by highlighting how associational life, or “social capital,” determined service delivery and governance.³ Theda Skocpol (1992) developed a novel historical-institutional explanation for the birth of modern social policy in the United States by looking at subnational variation in the strength and strategies of locally based women’s and veterans’ organizations. Work on European integration also focuses on subnational factors. For example, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2001, 2016; see also Hooghe, Marks, & Schakel, 2010) showed that European integration was driven not only by national governments but also by a host of subnational political actors who operated directly in the supranational arena, often having a stronger impact on the integration process than national governments. In *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2012) opened their book by offering a vivid subnational vignette about two adjacent border cities – Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico. Despite their shared political, social, and cultural histories, these two neighboring cities are located in distinct national political and economic institutional contexts that, according to the authors, explain the stark differences between them in security, equity, provision of public goods, and the quality of democracy.⁴

Moreover, the past two decades have witnessed a strong surge of interest in SNR, as evident in the sharp increase in the number of studies with a subnational focus published by top-ranked political science presses and journals. For example, the share of books with a subnational focus published by the comparative politics series of Cambridge University Press, Cornell University Press, and University of Michigan Press increased from 24 percent in 1989–2001 to 34 percent in 2002–2016.⁵ Whereas 20 percent of the empirical

² Juan J. Linz’s (1986) work comparing the politics of the Basque regions in Spain and France offers another classic example of the subnational tradition. See also Linz and De Miguel (1966) on the “eight Spains.” Charles Tilly’s *The Vendee* (1964) and the work of Stein Rokkan offer further examples (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983; Rokkan et al., 1987).

³ Other prominent works by political scientists that apply a subnational perspective to the Italian case include Tarrow (1977), Locke (1995), and Ziblatt (2006).

⁴ The subnational tradition of research is also reflected in the organization of the political science profession: In the field of American politics, for example, there is an organized section of the American Political Science Association (APSA) dedicated exclusively to state and local politics. Likewise, the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) has a section on Subnational Politics and Society.

⁵ The data presented in this paragraph on the prevalence of subnational research in political science books and journals is drawn from Sellers (in press, Table 1). See also Pepinsky (2018), which shows that single-country studies have made a remarkable resurgence across the top US general interest and comparative politics journals, with a large share consisting of subnational, especially quantitative, studies.

articles published in 1989–2001 by the discipline’s leading journal, *American Political Science Review*, focused on subnational units of analysis, this amount increased to 28 percent in 2004–2016. Although the share of subnational articles published by the three top comparative politics journals (i.e., *Comparative Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, and *World Politics*) was smaller, this amount also increased notably, rising from 12 percent in 1989–2001 to 16 percent in 2004–2016. Today, SNR stands as a prominent and widely used approach to comparative politics.

Moreover, as indicated by the agenda-setting subnational works listed in the previous paragraphs, without SNR we would know far less about major substantive issues at the heart of political science. Indeed, as summarized in Table 1.1, this book is guided by the premise that SNR makes important substantive as well as theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of politics. With regard to substance, SNR makes it easier to see important phenomena obscured by a national-level focus. A good example of phenomena “under the radar” of national research can be found in what Guillermo O’Donnell (1993) evocatively labeled *brown areas*, that is, regions inside countries where the presence of state institutions, and hence the possibility of effective citizenship, were severely attenuated. Other humanly important outcomes that are difficult to detect with a national-level lens include subnational authoritarian regimes that curtail political and civil rights in certain areas of otherwise democratic countries, special economic zones and industrial clusters that can have a significant impact on national economic

TABLE 1.1 *Contributions of Subnational Research to Substance, Theory, and Methods in Comparative Politics*

Substance	Theory	Methods
Helps researchers see humanly important variation inside countries.	Mitigates the problem of “theory stretching,” that is, the inappropriate application to subnational levels of theories developed to explain national-level phenomena.	Expands the menu of units of analysis, thereby making possible new strategies of comparative research.
Brings into focus subnational actors, institutions, and units of analysis that are often neglected.	Spurs new theory-building to explain subnational outcomes.	Opens opportunities to employ conventional and vanguard tools of social science research, including case studies, small-N, large-N, mixed, and experimental methods, in new and powerful ways.
Prompts new research questions, especially when subnational observations cannot be explained by national-level theories.	Makes it easier to build multilevel theories that explain outcomes caused by variables at different scales.	

performance, and local inequalities across small distances that translate into large differences in life expectancy, access to social services, vulnerability to crime, and other fundamental aspects of well-being. By opening a window on important variation inside countries, SNR prompts us to pose new research questions, inviting us to explain why phenomena of both scholarly and public interest are distributed unevenly across territory. A subnational perspective also shifts the focus to a host of actors (such as mayors, governors, provincial legislators, local civic organizations and indigenous communities), institutions (including provincial legislatures, local courts, and subnational government agencies), and units of analysis that are too often neglected by comparative politics because of the dominant national-level perspective.

SNR spurs theoretical innovation by offering new data and political units with which to build, test, and refine theories. The contributions collected in this volume show that well-established theories of executive–legislative relations, citizenship, property rights, public goods provision, and criminal violence, among others, fail to explain outcomes at the subnational level. Because these theories were mostly developed to explain national-level phenomena, their limited explanatory power at subnational levels highlights what we call the problem of *theory stretching*, that is, the inappropriate application of a theory from one level of analysis to another level.⁶ SNR not only mitigates theory stretching by reining in overextended theories, it also underscores the importance of defining scope conditions for theories by specifying not just their international and historical scope but also the *scales* at which they operate. Moreover, as illustrated by the chapters in this volume, the inability of many existing theories to explain subnational outcomes prompts the building of new theories that offer stronger explanations for important phenomena inside countries.

SNR contributes to methodological innovation by providing fresh opportunities for deploying vanguard tools of social inquiry, including mixed methods that combine quantitative and qualitative analysis, promising new techniques for spatial analysis,⁷ and experiments. With regard to experimental research, for example, national-level policy and institutional changes are often implemented unevenly within countries, and the exogenous and spatially uneven nature of these changes in relation to subnational units, in turn, may justify viewing them as “treatments,” with unaffected subnational units serving as a control group. Likewise, shifts in administrative, jurisdictional, and other boundaries can occur in an “as-if random” manner with respect to outcomes of interest and can thus offer potential sources of

⁶ Theory stretching is distinct from *theoretical stretching*, which Collier (1995) defines as the construction of concepts that are so ontologically distinct from their root concepts that they may be more fruitfully analyzed as subtypes of neighboring concepts in the semantic field. The term “theory stretching,” as used in this chapter, is an extension of Sartori’s (1970) notion of “conceptual stretching.”

⁷ On the affinity between SNR and new tools for spatial analysis, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS), see Harbers and Ingram (Chapter 2 of this volume).

	Political and Administrative Units	Other Territorial Units
National	Countries, National electoral districts, National supreme court jurisdictions.	National economies.
Subnational	<p><i>Jurisdictional Units:</i> Precincts, Wards, Boroughs, Townships, Cities, Counties, Municipalities, Cantons, States, Provinces, Regions, Territories, Special economic zones, Indigenous reservations, Tribal homelands; Legislative, Court, Police, School, and Military Districts.</p> <p><i>Non-Jurisdictional Units:</i> Squatter settlements, Shanty towns, Areas controlled or governed by non-state actors (e.g., paramilitary groups, gangs, criminal organizations, and insurgencies).</p>	<p><i>Formal Units:</i> Census tracts, Diocese, Districts of private voluntary organizations (e.g., trade unions, professional and civic associations), Public utility districts, Industrial parks, Legal parcels of property.</p> <p><i>Informal Units:</i> Regional economies, Extralegal parcels of property, Ecological zones.</p>

FIGURE 1.1 Varieties of Territorial Units

natural experiments.⁸ Precisely for these reasons, SNR and experimental methods are frequently used in tandem.

Before elaborating on these substantive, theoretical, and methodological contributions, we first offer clarification about what SNR is and is not. We define SNR as a strategy of social science inquiry that focuses on actors, organizations, institutions, structures, and processes located in territorial units inside countries, that is, below the national and international levels. Phenomena located within countries yet lacking a prominent territorial dimension, such as individuals, families, and interest groups, sit outside the scope of our definition of SNR. As seen in Figure 1.1, a subnational focus offers researchers a rich menu of political, administrative, and socioeconomic units of analysis, one that is far broader and more diverse than the set of units available in national-level research.⁹ Moreover, territorial units in SNR can be formal/jurisdictional or informal/non-jurisdictional. Formal territorial units have clearly demarcated, legally defined boundaries. Examples of formal units include provinces, states, municipalities, counties, departments, wards, voting precincts, school districts, police districts, judicial circuits, military regions, census tracts and blocks, and special-purpose districts that manage the provision of public goods like water,

⁸ The division of ethnic groups by a national boundary was employed implicitly as a natural experiment by Linz (1986) and Miles (1994) and explicitly by Posner (2004) and by Acemoglu and Robinson in the vignette mentioned in the second paragraph of this chapter. On natural experiments in social science research, see Dunning (2012) and Diamond and Robinson (2010).

⁹ The expanded set of units made available by SNR creates both opportunities and challenges, especially concerning the selection of appropriate units of analysis. The methodological chapters in this volume by Harbers and Ingram (Chapter 2) and by Soifer (Chapter 3) discuss these issues.

electricity, natural gas, waste collection, and transportation. Informal territorial units, by contrast, are not legally constituted and typically lack crisp boundaries, although actors equipped with local knowledge may be able to identify them.¹⁰ Informal subnational units include squatter settlements, shantytowns, areas controlled by gangs, rebels, criminal organizations, and other non-state groups, economic regions (e.g., “Silicon Valley” and the “Third Italy”¹¹), and extralegal parcels of property. It bears emphasis that SNR does not necessarily focus on units that are spatially contiguous or even proximate to each other. Indeed, scholars routinely study subnational units located in different countries.¹² Also, as discussed in Sections 1.2 and 1.3 of this chapter, SNR often has a multilevel scope that spans different subnational scales and can also include variables that operate at the national and even transnational level.

Second, we do not view SNR as a research method per se, although it is compatible with and can enhance the power of conventional social science methods, including case study, small-N, large-N, and experimental methods. It also bears emphasis that SNR cuts across the conventional schools and paradigms in comparative politics.¹³ As illustrated by the contributions in this book, scholars working in the historical institutional, rational choice, and interpretivist traditions fruitfully employ a focus on subnational politics.

Finally, this book does not aim to displace national and cross-national studies: We do not claim that all comparative research should be subnational. The choice of levels and units of analysis should depend on the nature of the research question. For example, it is hard to imagine a compelling study of foreign policy that does not focus on the national level. Still, as highlighted by the contributors to this book, a *multilevel* perspective that focuses on interactions between national and subnational factors can offer a stronger understanding of national policymaking. Moreover, in our increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the capacity of the national level to stand as an autonomous filter between the supra- and subnational levels may be attenuated, as suggested by recent research on how cities bypass the national level and connect directly with international markets (Davis, 2005; Robinson, 2002; Sassen, 2001).

¹⁰ See, for example, the Peruvian economist Hernando De Soto’s (2003) discussion of how informal property boundaries are signaled by barking dogs in settings where formal property rights are absent.

¹¹ The Third Italy refers to the industrial districts clustered within northeastern and central Italy that emerged in the late twentieth century.

¹² Recent studies that compare subnational units across different countries include Apaydin (2012, 2018); Arnold (2010); Durán-Martínez (2018); Gibson (2013); Holland (2016); Pasotti (2010); and Posner (2004). Sellers (in press) finds a striking recent increase in the number of studies that compare subnational units across countries.

¹³ Lichbach and Zuckerman (2009).

The rest of this introductory chapter provides an overview of the substantive, theoretical, and methodological contributions of SNR in comparative politics. Section 1 shows how SNR has advanced knowledge about substantive themes at the center of the field. Section 2 explores how SNR can strengthen theory building, especially by mitigating the problem of “theory stretching” and making it possible to craft multilevel theories. Section 3 turns to issues of method and research design, proposing a new set of strategies for SNR and showing how a subnational focus can be fruitfully combined with widely used methodologies.

1.1 THE SUBNATIONAL TURN IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS: SUBSTANTIVE ACHIEVEMENTS

Whereas foundational works of SNR in comparative politics focused mainly on developed countries in Europe and North America, the empirical scope of SNR has widened over the last 25 years to include developing countries, or the “Global South.”¹⁴ To assess the contributions to knowledge resulting from the “subnational turn” in comparative politics, we focus on three broad themes, because they are central to the field and are also addressed by the substantive chapters in this book: political regimes and representation; state institutions and the provision of security and welfare; and economic inequality and development.

Subnational Regimes and Representation

The Third Wave of democratization that swept the globe over the past 45 years (Huntington, 1991) did not spread evenly inside countries. As scholars of newly democratic countries including Mexico, Russia, the Philippines, Argentina, and Brazil found, authoritarian regimes often persisted at the subnational level. The observation that democratization at the national level did not necessarily produce democratization at the subnational level spurred a first generation of research on the origins, maintenance, and consequences of subnational authoritarian regimes (Cornelius et al., 1999; Fox, 1994; Gibson, 2005; Hagopian, 1996; Heller, 2000; McMann, 2006; O’Donnell, 1993; Sidel, 1999; Snyder, 1999a; Solt, 2003; Stoner-Weiss, 2002).¹⁵ A surprising finding emerged from this research: Subnational authoritarian regimes often were not isolated “backwaters” disconnected from the newly democratic national

¹⁴ Moncada and Snyder (2012).

¹⁵ Some scholars argue that the term “authoritarian” inappropriately characterizes subnational units where rulers wield power in a less-than-democratic fashion (Behrend, 2011; Gervasoni, 2010a; Giraudy, 2010, 2015). Behrend and Whitehead (2016) object not only to the usage of “authoritarian” but also to the term “regime” to describe subnational units that deviate from national-level democracy, preferring to describe such cases as instances of “illiberal practices.”

political arena but were instead important sources of votes and other forms of political support for popularly elected national politicians. The previously dominant focus on national democratic regimes thus turned out to be doubly blind: Not only did a national-level perspective obscure the persistence of authoritarian regimes at the subnational level, a phenomenon that Edward Gibson (2005) labeled “regime juxtaposition,” but it also made it harder to see that the maintenance of democracy at the national level could, ironically, depend on support produced through undemocratic means by subnational authoritarian regimes.¹⁶

A second generation aimed to systematically measure levels of democracy (or non-democracy) across subnational units within democratic countries,¹⁷ while seeking also to explain the persistence of subnational authoritarian regimes. Studies in this second generation focused on the exclusionary practices of political elites, such as distorting local electoral rules and procedures,¹⁸ stacking electoral commissions with allies,¹⁹ politicizing local judiciaries,²⁰ and targeting extralegal violence against opponents.²¹ Others looked instead to economic factors to explain the emergence and durability of subnational authoritarianism, including local political economies,²² inter-governmental fiscal transfers,²³ and how subnational units were inserted into global markets.²⁴ Still other studies proposed multilevel theoretical frameworks that centered on strategic interactions between local and national political actors to explain both the endurance and breakdown of subnational authoritarian regimes.²⁵ Alongside these studies of subnational authoritarianism, researchers also assessed the origins and consequences of subnational democracies in the context of nondemocratic “hybrid” national regimes, including their potential to serve as beachheads for advancing national democratization.²⁶

In sum, the line of research on subnational political regimes offered new insights into territorial variation in representation, highlighting how interactions across levels of government help explain the origins and survival of such regimes. Moreover – as discussed later in this chapter in the section on “theory stretching,” as well as in Gavril Bilev’s Chapter 4 on subnational

¹⁶ See Gibson (2005, 2013) and Giraudy (2015).

¹⁷ See Benton (2012); Borges (2007); Gerring et al. (2015); Gervasoni (2010a, 2010b); Giraudy (2010, 2013, 2015); Lankina and Getachew (2006, 2012); McMann (2006); Montero (2007, 2010); Petrov (2005); Rebolledo (2011); Reisinger and Moraski (2010); Remington (2009, 2010a, 2010b); and Saikkonen (2016), among others.

¹⁸ Behrend and Whitehead (2016); Benton (2012); Calvo and Micozzi (2005); Green (2010). See also Snyder and Samuels (2001, 2004).

¹⁹ Rebolledo (2011). ²⁰ Brinks (2007); Castagnola (2012); Chavez (2004); Leiras et al. (2015).

²¹ Gibson (2005). ²² McMann (2006); Behrend (2011); Hale (2003).

²³ Gervasoni (2010b); Díaz-Rioseco (2016). ²⁴ Libman and Obydenkova (2014).

²⁵ Gibson (2005, 2015); Giraudy (2013, 2015); Reuter and Robertson (2012).

²⁶ Lankina and Getachew (2006). On hybrid national regimes, see Karl (1995), Schedler (2006), and Levitsky and Way (2010).

executive-legislative relations in Russia and Caroline Beer's Chapter 5 on women's rights across Mexico's states – the inability of theories of national political regimes to provide satisfactory explanations at the subnational level prompted efforts to build new theories that can account for the sharp variation in regimes and representation observed inside countries.

The Uneven Reach of the State: Citizenship, Security, and Public Goods

Another key area where SNR helped advance knowledge involved the territorially uneven reach and capacity of state institutions inside countries. A subnational perspective made it easier to see the uneven presence of state institutions and, in turn, to explore the consequences for important substantive outcomes, including effective citizenship and the provision of security and other public goods that have increasingly come under the authority of subnational institutions, actors, and interests because of the administrative and political decentralization that occurred across the world in the late twentieth century.

SNR revealed within-country variation in the accessibility and capacity of state institutions, which, in turn, resulted in sharply divergent opportunities for citizens to exercise their rights, even among citizens who lived in close proximity to each other.²⁷ To explain this variation in what O'Donnell (1993) called the "intensity of citizenship," researchers focused on a variety of subnational political factors that affected the state's territorial reach, including local partisan competition,²⁸ whether local judicial officials were affiliated with the governing national political party,²⁹ the political beliefs of local authorities,³⁰ informal institutions and norms,³¹ and efforts by local politicians to escape central government oversight.³²

SNR also contributed to a stronger understanding of security, especially in the face of the many "internal wars" that proliferated across the globe in the post-Cold War era. As discussed by Ana Arjona in her Chapter 7 on civilian support for rebel groups, a burgeoning literature on the micro-dynamics of civil war aimed to explain subnational variation in wartime violence,³³ patterns of recruitment,³⁴ forced displacement,³⁵ and post-war conflicts.³⁶ Recent research on civil wars found that rebel groups built different types of institutions at the local level for the provision of goods and services to civilians – in some

²⁷ Luna and Medel (2017). On subnational state capacity, see Luna and Soifer (2017).

²⁸ Chavez (2004); Leiras et al. (2015); Pribble (2015).

²⁹ Castagnola (2012); Niedzwiecki (2016). ³⁰ Ingram (2015).

³¹ Brinks (2007); Smulovitz (2015). ³² Trochev (2004).

³³ Balcells (2010, 2011); Kalyvas (2006); Kalyvas and Kocher (2009); Schutte and Weidmann (2011); Urdal (2008); Wood (2003).

³⁴ Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein (2009); Humphreys and Weinstein (2008); Straus (2015); Weinstein (2006).

³⁵ Lubkemann (2005); Steele (2017). ³⁶ Autesserre (2010); Bateson (2013); Grandi (2013).

instances, ironically, in coordination with the very state they ostensibly aimed to topple and replace.³⁷

Likewise, as elaborated in Chapter 6 by Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley on the lethal consequences of national anti-narcotics policies for local politicians in Mexico, SNR played a central role in recent research on the politics of criminal violence.³⁸ To explain variation in both levels and forms of violence, recent subnational studies showed that criminal violence could be exacerbated by insufficient intergovernmental coordination,³⁹ different political parties holding power at the subnational and national levels,⁴⁰ “iron-fist” law enforcement strategies targeting the leadership of criminal organizations,⁴¹ and local socioeconomic crises.⁴² Other studies focused on law enforcement, showing how differences in the local political contexts where policing objectives and practices were defined caused subnational variation in crime⁴³ and, more broadly, in local state–society relations.⁴⁴ A subnational perspective also revealed significant local variation in how citizens, social groups, and state agencies responded to criminal violence and, in turn, constructed different kinds of local institutions for enforcing order.⁴⁵

The study of ethnic conflict also relied increasingly on SNR. By focusing on variation in levels of ethnic violence across neighborhoods, cities, regions and other subnational units, scholars produced new explanations. This can be seen especially in work on Hindu–Muslim violence in India, which generated a set of influential, if partly competing, explanations for ethnic conflict. For example, Ashutosh Varshney (2002) looked at pairs of Indian cities matched across demographic and socioeconomic factors yet with sharply contrasting levels of ethnic violence, finding that associational ties bridging ethnic groups differentiated peaceful from violent cities. Steven Wilkinson (2006) found instead that the electoral incentives of state-level politicians were a better predictor of ethnic violence, because these incentives determined whether state protection was extended to ethnic minorities facing violent threats. By contrast, Anjali Bohlken and Ernest Sergenti (2010) found that subnational economic conditions, specifically the annual growth rate of per capita GDP in each Indian state, was a far better predictor of ethnic violence than political, social or cultural factors.

³⁷ Arjona (2016); Arjona et al. (2015); Mampilly (2011); Staniland (2012).

³⁸ See also Harbers and Ingram’s Chapter 2 in this volume, as well as Barnes (2017); Hilgers and Macdonald (2017); Osorio (2013).

³⁹ Snyder and Durán-Martínez (2009a, 2009b); Ríos (2013); Shirk and Wallman (2015)

⁴⁰ Trejo and Ley (Chapter 6 of this volume). ⁴¹ Calderón et al. (2015); Phillips (2015).

⁴² Cotte Poveda (2012); Ingram (2014). ⁴³ Arias and Ungar (2009).

⁴⁴ Eaton (2008); Hinton (2006); Moncada (2009, 2016a).

⁴⁵ Arias (2009, 2013, 2017); Auyero (2007); Auyero and Sobering (2017); Durán-Martínez (2015); LeBas (2013); Leeds (1996); Moncada (2013b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017); Weinstein (2013); Wolff (2015).

As seen in the chapters on subnational social development in India by Prerna Singh (Chapter 8) and by Sunila S. Kale and Nimah Mazaheri (Chapter 9), SNR on the uneven reach and capacity of state institutions inside countries has also contributed to a stronger understanding of the provision of public goods, such as social welfare, both by state and non-state actors. Subnational studies revealed how the ability of state agencies to deliver public goods depended on a host of local contextual factors, including the stock of social capital,⁴⁶ the administrative capacity and fiscal solvency of subnational governments, grassroots mobilization by political parties, partisan alignments across levels of government, and the linkage of regional economies to global markets.⁴⁷ Building on pioneering work by Elinor Ostrom (1996) and Peter Evans (1996), subnational researchers identified ecologies of governance formed by local governments and authorities working in tandem with citizens, interest associations, and civil society organizations.⁴⁸ An especially fruitful line of research focused on participatory local governance in Africa,⁴⁹ Asia,⁵⁰ and Latin America.⁵¹

SNR on the provision of public goods highlighted key explanatory factors overlooked or de-emphasized as a result of the national-level focus in prior research. For example, subnational researchers found that clientelist networks played an important role in provision of social welfare, especially in cities and neighborhoods.⁵² And, as illustrated by recent work on non-state social welfare, a subnational approach brought into focus the crucial role played by non-state actors and institutions, such as local political factions and social groups, in providing public goods and services in areas where state institutions were weak or simply nonexistent.⁵³

⁴⁶ Here scholars have built on Putnam's (1994) seminal work in this area, including Tsai (2007).

⁴⁷ Early and influential studies in this vein include Kohli (1987), Tendler (1997), and Tendler and Freedheim (1994). More recent analyses include Alves (2015); Chibber and Nooruddin (2004); Díaz-Cayeros et al. (2014); Boulding and Brown (2014); Faguet (2009); Hecock (2006); Hiskey (2003); Kale (2014); McGuire (2017); Niedzwiecki (2016); Saez and Sinha (2009); and Ziblatt (2008).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Post et al. (2017).

⁴⁹ Heller (2008); Crook (2003). For cross-national subnational studies of the influence that participatory governance has on public goods provisions, see Blair (2000) and Heller (2009).

⁵⁰ Corbridge (2005); Heller (2000); Krishna (2002).

⁵¹ Abers (2000); Abers and Keck (2013); Alberti (2016, in press); Avritzer (2009); Baiocchi (2005); Boulding and Wampler (2010); Falletti and Riofrancos (2018); Goldfrank (2011); Heller et al. (2007); Montambeault (2015); Touchton and Wampler (2014); Wampler (2007).

⁵² For a subnational study of clientelism in two Italian cities, see Chubb (1982). More recent subnational studies of clientelism in Latin America include Calvo and Murillo (2004); Hunter and Sugiyama (2014); Szwarcberg (2013, 2015); Stokes et al. (2013); Sugiyama and Hunter (2013); and Weitz-Shapiro (2014), among others. Recent subnational studies of clientelism in Africa include Koter (2013); Resnick (2012, 2013); and Wantchekon (2003). For a subnational analysis of the politics of clientelism in the Middle East, see Corstange (2016). And for a cross-national subnational analysis of the breakdown of urban clientelist machines across Bogotá (Colombia), Naples (Italy), and Chicago (USA), see Pasotti (2010).

⁵³ Cammett and Issar (2010); MacLean (2010); Cammett (2014); and the contributions collected in Cammett and MacLean (2014); Amengual (2016).

From National to Subnational Development

Like regimes and states, patterns of economic development can also vary widely inside countries. By zooming in on vibrant regional economies driven by clusters of firms specializing in similar products, such as the industrial districts of the “Third Italy” and cutlery producers in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, pioneering studies by Richard M. Locke (1995) and Gary Herrigel (1996) challenged the “national models” approach that had previously dominated the field of comparative political economy. Subsequent SNR on the political economy of development focused on the Global South, exploring how distinct regional economies emerged as a result of divergent patterns of industrialization⁵⁴ and, as illustrated by Meg Rithmire’s Chapter 10 on the politics of regulating land markets across China’s cities, the postindustrial transformation of urban economies.⁵⁵

A related line of research looked at the subnational consequences of national policies that aimed to promote economic and human development. These studies converged in finding that the implementation of national policies depended on local political conditions. For example, studies of market-oriented, or “neoliberal,” policy reforms in countries as different as Brazil, China, Mexico, Russia, and Argentina found that these initiatives often ended up producing new institutions for regulating markets at the subnational level instead of territorially uniform “free markets.”⁵⁶ These new subnational institutions, in turn, had contrasting consequences for capital–labor and state–labor relations.⁵⁷ Researchers have also taken what we describe in Section 2 as a “bottom up” approach, exploring how subnational political and economic factors themselves drove national development outcomes, ranging from economic recoveries to the sustainability of economic policy reforms.⁵⁸

The recent reconceptualization of development to include participatory and deliberative components, a move largely inspired by the work of Amartya Sen

⁵⁴ Montero (2010); Naseemullah (2016); Sinha (2005).

⁵⁵ Logan and Swanstrom (2009); Sellers (2002). The analysis of urban political economies is part of a broader movement in the field of urban studies that seeks to add a comparative focus, both within and across countries, to the single-case studies that have traditionally characterized research in this area (Denters & Mossberger, 2006; Kantor & Savitch, 2005; Pierre, 2005; Robinson, 2011; Sellers, 2005).

⁵⁶ Amengual (2010); Coslovsky and Locke (2013); Jayasuriya (2008); Snyder (1999b, 2001b); Herrera (2014, 2017); Contarino (1995); Rithmire (2014); Stoner-Weiss (2006); Wengle (2015).

⁵⁷ Contarino (1995); Locke (1992); Hurst (2004, 2009).

⁵⁸ See, for example, Katznelson (2013) and Mickey (2015) on how the support of authoritarian and racist subnational elites in the US South proved essential for implementing the progressive New Deal social policies. On the role of subnational elites in shaping the sustainability of economic reforms in Argentina in the 1990s, see Gibson and Calvo (2000). See Pogrebinschi and Samuels (2014) on how local experiences with participatory governance had a transformative effect on national policymaking in Brazil.

(1999), also spurred new subnational research. It is at local scales where public policies that impact the day-to-day lives of citizens are often formulated and implemented. Moreover, the possibilities for deliberation and other forms of consultation designed to increase citizen engagement in policy making are likely to be greater at smaller scales, as reflected in the city and municipal-level focus of recent research on participatory budgeting and participatory security.⁵⁹

The burgeoning literature on the political and economic consequences of natural-resource wealth also focused increasingly on subnational units. Mineral and other natural resources are rarely, if ever, distributed evenly within countries, and researchers effectively exploited this subnational variation in the distribution of natural resources to test, refine, and even challenge the well-known national “resource curse” hypothesis that mineral wealth leads to authoritarianism and economic underdevelopment.⁶⁰ While most of these subnational studies offered new evidence that supported the resource curse hypothesis, they also showed that some of the causal mechanisms proposed in the national-level literature to explain the association between resource wealth and underdevelopment either did not travel to the subnational level or required modifications when applied there. For example, in a study of the US states, Ellis Goldberg et al. (2008) concluded that the “Dutch disease” mechanism, whereby natural resource booms caused an appreciation of the exchange rate which, in turn, resulted in poor economic performance, could not explain why resource-rich states in the United States performed worse economically, because all the US states shared the same currency and real prices varied little among them. Similarly, in a study of the political consequences of an offshore oil boom in Brazil’s municipalities, Joana Monteiro and Claudio Ferraz (n.d.) showed that, as predicted by the national-level resource curse literature, oil windfalls also stifled political competitiveness at the municipal level by providing incumbents with increased resources to spend on patronage, especially in the form of expanded public employment. However, they also found that the mechanism of resource-driven patronage as a source of incumbency advantage worked differently at the subnational level, because of federal regulations in Brazil that constrained the use of oil rents to hire public employees on a permanent basis. As a result of an increase in the enforcement of these federal constraints, the large incumbency advantage at the municipal level associated with the oil windfall boom proved fleeting, disappearing after two elections.

Other studies went further, using a subnational perspective to challenge the notion of a resource curse altogether. For example, in his analysis of oil wealth

⁵⁹ On participatory budgeting, see: Abers (2000); Abers and Keck (2013); Avritzer (2009); Baiocchi (2005); Boulding and Wampler (2010); Goldfrank (2011); Heller et al. (2007); Montambeault (2015); Touchton and Wampler (2014); Wampler (2007). On participatory security, see: Arias and Ungar (2009); Baker (2002); Bénit-Gbaffou (2008); González (2016); Moncada (2009).

⁶⁰ Beblawi and Luciani (1987); Mahdavy (1970). See also Sachs and Warner (1995); Smith (2004); and Ross (2012).

in the Argentine provinces, Diego Díaz-Rioseco (2016) showed that, in some instances, oil actually led to more, not less, political contestation at the subnational level. To explain the contrasting consequences of oil on levels of political competitiveness at the provincial level, Díaz-Rioseco focused on “rent sharing regimes,” that is, the fiscal institutions for sharing resource revenues among levels of government. When these institutions distributed rents to municipal governments, rather than concentrating them under the control of provincial governments, the result was an increase in political competitiveness at the provincial level.⁶¹ SNR has thus provided a stronger and more nuanced understanding of the contrasting political and economic consequences of natural resource wealth.

In sum, the proliferation of SNR in comparative politics over the past 25 years yielded new and often surprising insights about regimes, states, and development, thereby advancing knowledge about important substantive issues at the heart of political science.

1.2 SUBNATIONAL RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL PROGRESS

A subnational perspective spurs theoretical progress by giving researchers new ways both to refine existing theories and build new ones. We focus on three specific contributions of SNR to theory building. First, SNR mitigates what we call theory stretching, that is, the inappropriate application of a theory from one level of analysis to another. Second, SNR drives the development of new theories with an explicitly subnational scope. Third, SNR fosters multilevel theories that highlight causal relationships across levels of analysis to explain subnational and also national outcomes of interest.

The Problem of Theory Stretching

Theories in comparative politics traditionally have focused on the national level, relying on national-level variables to explain national outcomes. This national-level focus is evident across well-known theories of political regimes,⁶² elections,⁶³ institutional change,⁶⁴ and public policy.⁶⁵ As seen most notably in the chapters in this volume by Kale and Mazaheri (Chapter 9), by Singh (Chapter 8), and by Bilev

⁶¹ Additional recent subnational studies of the political and economic consequences of resource wealth include Mahdavi (2015); Saikkonen (2016); González (2018); and González and Lodola (n.d.). See also Gervasoni (2010b), who finds that federal transfers, like natural resource rents, have a negative effect on political contestation at the subnational level. Gervasoni argues that such monies are similar to resource rents because they also consist of funds that incumbents can spend without taxing.

⁶² Collier and Collier (1991); Dahl (1971); Huntington (1968, 1993); Lijphart (1992); Linz and Stepan (1996); Lipset (1959); Moore (1966); Przeworski (2000).

⁶³ Duverger (1978); Downs (1957). ⁶⁴ Knight (1992); North (1990).

⁶⁵ Shonfield (1965); Bates (1981); Pierson (1994).

(Chapter 4), SNR highlights surprising outcomes that cannot be explained by national-level theories. This, in turn, prompts these authors to propose new theories attuned to subnational contexts and thus able to explain subnational outcomes. Moreover, the evidence they provide that national-level theories can be ill equipped to explain subnational outcomes serves to underscore the risk of “theory stretching,” that is, drawing on theories designed to explain phenomena at one level of analysis to account for outcomes at other levels. Whether or not theories can travel across levels of analysis is an important matter that has received insufficient attention in comparative politics: When a theoretical framework is proposed, the level of analysis, in contrast to international and historical scope, is more often assumed than specified.⁶⁶

In Chapter 9, on policies intended to improve the welfare of indigenous people in India, Kale and Mazaheri consider two hypotheses drawn from national-level theories of public goods provision: (i) socio-cultural homogeneity increases citizens’ support for public goods; and (ii) political units anchored in a clearly defined group identity offer more robust welfare benefits. Kale and Mazaheri’s comparative analysis across Indian states shows that states with strong subnational identities surprisingly failed to implement robust welfare agendas unless they also had vibrant civil society organizations (CSOs). By focusing on subnational units, the authors are thus able to identify a key factor, undertheorized in prior national-level studies, that influences the provision of public goods: the strength of local CSOs. Kale and Mazaheri find that CSOs serve as a critical intervening variable that determines the relationship between group identities and welfare provision at the subnational level. Drawing on these findings, the authors propose a new theory of provision of public goods, one that provides a stronger explanation of the variation in the implementation of welfare-enhancing policies observed across Indian states.

Singh’s Chapter 8 also highlights the inability of national-level theories to explain important subnational outcomes. Through a comparative historical analysis of social development in two Indian states, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, Singh challenges well-known theories that predict a strong and positive relationship between economic and social development. She shows instead that robust cultural solidarities in subnational units, a phenomenon she calls “subnationalism,” can help surmount barriers to development predicted by national-level theories and, in turn, yield surprisingly positive educational and health outcomes even in places with low levels of economic development. Moreover, because powerful collective solidarities may be more likely to arise and persist at scales smaller than countries, Singh’s Chapter 8 highlights more generally the importance of a subnational perspective for understanding how sociocultural forces shape political outcomes.

⁶⁶ As discussed in Soifer’s Chapter 3 in this volume, some theories operate equally well at more than one level of analysis and are therefore less susceptible to inappropriate stretching.

In his Chapter 4 on executive-legislative relations in Russia, Bilev finds that the institutional incentives faced by subnational elected officials differ starkly from those faced by national officeholders. In Russia, as in many countries, whereas the national legislative assembly is a full-time, professional body, subnational assemblies are not. Consequently, subnational legislators are often compelled to combine their work as elected representatives with extra-legislative private work. In Russia's provinces (*Oblast*), this phenomenon of part-time legislators, who depend on income from other sources, makes subnational deputies especially vulnerable to pressure from monied interests, undercuts their professionalism, and weakens their ability to challenge governors and hold them accountable. Bilev further documents a range of tools available only at the subnational level which governors use to neutralize the capacity of the provincial assembly to check their power – for example, by supporting mayors as candidates for the assembly. Mayors in Russia typically depend on the governor's discretionary allocation of revenue transfers, which renders them a reliable base of support for governors. Sponsoring mayors as candidates for the assembly thus serves as a way for governors to try to stack it with loyal deputies. A focus on subnational political actors and the distinct institutional environments in which they operate thus provides a foundation for a stronger theory of executive–legislative relations, one that explains variation in the power and influence of legislative assemblies and executives both across subnational units and also at different levels of the political system.

Together, these and other chapters show that successful theory building in comparative politics requires specifying the level(s) of analysis at which the theory operates. Prior work on scope conditions focuses on risks that arise when theories are stretched beyond their historical and international scope.⁶⁷ SNR, by contrast, highlights the importance of including the level of analysis, and therefore the scales and types of territorial units to which a theory applies, as a further – and indispensable – component of scope conditions for theories.⁶⁸

Multilevel Theory Building

By making it possible to study causal relationships among variables at different scales and levels of analysis inside countries, SNR fosters the building of

⁶⁷ Geddes (2003); Mahoney and Goertz (2004). For an example of a substantive debate framed explicitly in terms of the historical and international scope of theories, see Bunce (1995); Schmitter and Karl (1994); and Karl and Schmitter (1995) concerning the applicability to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe of theories of regime change developed to explain transitions from authoritarianism in Southern Europe and South America. See also Gans-Morse (2004).

⁶⁸ Relatedly, Soifer (Chapter 3 in this volume) divides theories into three categories: “those that are *unit-independent* and can apply to any unit of analysis we might imagine, those that are *unit-specific* to certain units of analysis, those that are *unit-limiting* in that they can be evaluated with certain units of analysis but not others.” Soifer notes that “unit-independent” theories are rare in political science.

multilevel theories that combine national and subnational factors to offer stronger explanations for outcomes of interest (Rokkan, 1970; Tarrow, 1978; Rokkan & Urwin, 1982, 1983). Multilevel theories have a long pedigree in the field of international relations (Evans et al., 1993; Gourevitch, 1978; Singer, 1961), and, because of the recent proliferation of SNR, they are now increasingly common in comparative politics (Hooghe & Marks, 2001, 2016). Two kinds of multilevel theory are routinely employed in SNR: (i) *bottom-up theories*, where subnational variables explain national-level outcomes; and (ii) *top-down theories*, where, conversely, national-level variables explain subnational outcomes.⁶⁹

Bottom-Up Theories

Bottom-up theories identify how national, and even international,⁷⁰ phenomena are shaped by subnational factors. From this standpoint, national politics cannot be properly understood without paying attention to subnational institutions, actors, and events. Indeed, scholars attuned to bottom-up causation often aim to destabilize theories that fail to incorporate subnational forces, showing how this neglect results, at best, in incomplete explanations and, at worst, in fundamental misunderstandings of national-level outcomes.

Research on national social policy in the United States provides a good example of bottom-up analysis. Studies of the New Deal social programs proposed by Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration during the 1930s show that their successful implementation depended on the political support of racist southern Democrats, whose elected representatives were the dominant force in the US Congress, counting among their ranks several Speakers of the House and many chairpersons of key committees. As historian Harvard Sitkoff (1981, p. 51) succinctly observed, "Congress held the power of the purse, and the South held power in Congress." In turn, President Roosevelt remained ambivalent about black civil rights, largely because raising this issue would have jeopardized his social policies by angering southern congressional leaders. The successful implementation of the New Deal thus hinged on the maintenance of Jim Crow in the "Solid South," an unsavory fact obscured by a strictly national vantage point (Katznelson, 2013; Mickey, 2015).

Research on the implementation of market-oriented, "neoliberal" reforms further illustrates how bottom-up theories can help provide a stronger understanding of national politics.⁷¹ In their study of economic reforms

⁶⁹ As discussed in Section 3, top-down and bottom-up perspectives can be combined into theories characterized by *reciprocal causality*, where factors at one level shape and, in turn, are shaped by factors at other levels.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Bates (1997), which shows how the policy preferences and political power of the coffee-producing states in Brazil and regions in Colombia had an important impact both on global prices for coffee and the evolution of an international regulatory framework under the auspices of the International Coffee Organization (ICO).

⁷¹ Gibson and Calvo (2000). See also Gibson (2004).

implemented by the national government in Argentina in the 1990s, Edward Gibson and Ernesto Calvo (2000) showed how a focus on subnational coalitions helps explain the puzzling political sustainability of the new policies, despite their unpopularity among the vital urban working-class constituency of the governing Peronist Party. Whereas prior research on the politics of neoliberal economic reforms focused mainly on the national level, the authors shifted the focus to the provincial level, arguing that the overrepresentation of rural provinces by Argentina's malapportioned electoral system made it possible for the Peronist Party to pursue a regionally segmented strategy of building new alliances with rural elites and voters who had not traditionally supported the Peronists.⁷² The government of President Carlos Menem (1990–1999) was thus able to target public spending to “low maintenance,” mostly rural constituencies in overrepresented districts, thereby cushioning these groups from the costs inflicted by the economic reforms. By contrast, “high maintenance” constituencies in underrepresented districts located in urban areas saw large cuts in public spending and bore the brunt of the hardships resulting from the new policies. The resulting patchwork coalition, which reflected the territorially uneven distribution of the costs of the neoliberal reforms, ensured the national electoral viability of the Peronist Party and, hence, the political sustainability of new policies.⁷³

Bottom-up perspectives have also spurred theoretical progress in the comparative study of industrialization. For example, Herrigel (1996) challenged the widely accepted idea, introduced by Alexander Gerschenkron (1962), that Germany was a paradigmatic example of centralized industrialization dominated by large firms and big, national-level banks. Instead, Herrigel showed that key regions of Germany actually experienced a different kind of industrialization rooted in small firms and regional banks. By situating the process of industrialization in a regionally differentiated framework, Herrigel “recodes” German industrialization as a bimodal phenomenon. What emerges is a reconfigured national composite formed by two distinct modes of industrialization: centralized, “organized capitalism” in some regions and a “decentralized industrial order” in others. In light of these findings, it would be a mistake to conclude based on the German case that an entire country could follow the path of centralized, organized capitalism. Rather, Herrigel's study suggests that organized capitalism is suited only for specific regions and kinds of firms, not entire countries. Moreover, to the degree that Germany's centralized industrialization was not an independent,

⁷² On electoral malapportionment and the over- and underrepresentation of subnational political units in Latin America and beyond, see Samuels and Snyder (2001) and also Snyder and Samuels (2001).

⁷³ See Luna (2014) and Alves and Hunter (2017) for further studies that focus on the territorially segmented strategies of political parties. For a bottom-up theory that links local experiences with participatory governance to national policy decisions, see Pogrebinschi and Samuels (2014).

separately determined process but was in fact causally related to the decentralized industrial order, a failure to analyze the latter phenomenon could lead to a serious misunderstanding of the former (Snyder, 2001a).⁷⁴ In this instance, a bottom-up focus thus destabilized a long-standing national theory of industrialization.⁷⁵

Top-Down Theories: Homogenous versus Heterogeneous Effects

Whereas bottom-up theories focus on national effects of subnational causes, top-down theories focus on the opposite, that is, subnational effects of national-level causes. Moreover, in contrast to bottom-up theories, which justify, at least implicitly, their focus on subnational factors as a way to provide stronger explanations for national outcomes, top-down theories stake a different claim: Subnational outcomes are worth explaining and understanding in their own right, and, therefore, a subnational focus is legitimate whether or not it sheds light on national-level phenomena. We identify two kinds of top-down multilevel theories depending on whether national-level factors are understood to have homogenous or, alternatively, heterogeneous effects at subnational levels. The first treats major national events and phenomena, such as decentralization, democratization, and economic liberalization, as having similar consequences across subnational units. For instance, Alfred Montero and David Samuels (2004) argue that national policies of decentralization, which swept across Latin America in the late 1980s and 1990s, shifting political, fiscal, and administrative power to subnational governments, gave local elected officials more resources and independence, which, in turn, had the convergent effect of strengthening subnational incumbents. And Carla Alberti (in press) shows how national-level political strategies, especially populist mobilization by ruling parties, hinder the implementation of indigenous autonomy at the local level in Bolivia and Ecuador.

A second approach to top-down theory begins with the opposite premise, namely that national causes have heterogeneous effects with divergent consequences across subnational units. From this standpoint, subnational actors and institutions are seen not as passive recipients of national policies and initiatives but as active agents with the potential to engage, challenge, and even modify, top-down forces. Depending on subnational actors and institutions, therefore, a variety of different outcomes can result across subnational units.⁷⁶ Theoretical frameworks that emphasize heterogeneous top-down effects are

⁷⁴ See also Anderson (1992) for a subnational study of the political economy of Germany.

⁷⁵ On the emergence of distinct subnational modes of industrialization in Brazil and Spain, see Montero (2002). On this phenomenon in India, see Sinha (2005).

⁷⁶ See, for example, Eaton's (2004) study of waves of decentralization and recentralization in Latin America; Vergara's (2015) study of center-periphery relations in Bolivia and Peru; González's (2017) study of intergovernmental relations in Argentina and Brazil.

increasingly common in SNR.⁷⁷ The chapters in this book by Trejo and Ley (Chapter 6) and by Rithmire (Chapter 10) show how top-down multi-level theories can advance knowledge about policy implementation, violence and state capacity, and economic reforms.

Trejo and Ley propose a top-down theory to explain subnational variation in the nature and consequences of the coercive strategies of criminal organizations in Mexico. They explore why a group that had previously not been targeted by drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) – municipal officials and political candidates – suddenly became victims of hundreds of lethal criminal attacks starting in 2007. To explain this rapid shift, the authors focus on two key national-level variables: a major change in federal policy toward confronting DTOs militarily; and the federal government's decision to provide protection from criminal attacks to local officials who were co-partisans and political allies yet deny it to those affiliated with opposition parties, especially in states where the governor belonged to the leftist party that had opposed the president and his conservative party since the 2006 election. The authors use quantitative and qualitative evidence to test these propositions. Based on statistical analyses of criminal attacks across more than 2,000 municipalities, they show that violence against local authorities was more common in municipalities experiencing the most intense levels of inter-cartel violence, where DTOs were engaged in bitter conflicts over drug trafficking routes and in need of fresh resources to finance turf wars.⁷⁸ They also show that local authorities affiliated with the opposition parties in states ruled by leftist governors were far more likely to become targets of criminal attacks than local authorities in states ruled by the president's co-partisans. Trejo and Ley thus show how a combination of national and local factors, including intergovernmental partisan conflict, explains the emergence of subnational regions where DTOs and their criminal associates enjoyed a monopoly on violence, security, and taxation: DTOs sought to tap new sources of revenue by targeting local officials, and national officials, in turn, tolerated, and even tacitly supported, the resulting violence in regions where their co-partisans were not in power. More broadly, Trejo and Ley's attention to how partisan preferences can shape the behavior of federal officials responsible for providing security challenges the assumption in much of the vast social science literature on state institutions that national authorities

⁷⁷ See, for example, Snyder (2001b); Boone (2003, 2014); Ziblatt (2006); Giraudy (2010, 2015); Moncada (2013a, 2013b); and Alves (2015). The logic of this approach to theory building corresponds to the “most similar systems” research design proposed by Przeworski and Teune (1970), which is also known as John Stuart Mill's “method of difference.”

⁷⁸ According to Trejo and Ley, DTOs discovered two lucrative markets that set municipal authorities at the center of their operations: extortion and kidnapping for ransom. Acting as racketeers, criminals could levy a “tax” on municipal authorities and also get illegal access to the local property-tax registry, using this privileged information to extort local businesses and carry out lucrative kidnappings for ransom.

will always seek a monopoly of violence. Instead, national elites may prefer selectively abdicating local control of violence to criminals over sharing it with their partisan foes.⁷⁹

Rithmire's Chapter 10 on China shows that, even in a highly centralized authoritarian regime, the implementation of national economic reforms can produce sharply contrasting institutions for regulating markets at the local level. Focusing on land markets and property rights across three cities in the "rust belt" region of northeastern China, Rithmire proposes a theoretical framework that combines national and subnational variables to explain the distinct local economic orders that resulted from economic reforms launched by the national government in the 1980s and 1990s. Her framework focuses on how these new national policies interacted with two critical subnational variables: intra-governmental cohesion, which includes the degree of bureaucratic coherence at the municipal level, and state-firm relations, which refers to the amount and kind of control that local governments exert over economic actors. The resulting economic orders, in turn, led to different property rights systems across cities, with local governments emerging in some instances as the monopoly owners of urban land in order to capitalize monetarily on its value, whereas local governments in other instances distributed land as a political resource, selectively enforcing claims to property and allowing illegal land use by politically important constituencies. Rithmire's study challenges dominant explanations of the emergence of property rights institutions, which operate at the national level and emphasize broad changes in economic structure or national regimes.⁸⁰ Consequently, these explanations fail to account for the diverse political uses of property rights that Rithmire shows can occur across subnational units. A focus on property rights institutions at the local level highlights how they can emerge as a product of political bargaining about matters far removed from either questions of economic development or the intentions of the architects of national economic reforms. By taking a subnational perspective, Rithmire thus finds that "sometimes property rights are not about property rights at all."⁸¹

Together, these chapters show how SNR can help build new multilevel theories that challenge established national-level theories and offer stronger explanations for a variety of humanly important outcomes.

⁷⁹ See Díaz Cayeros et al. (2015) for an analysis of subnational variation in relations between drug trafficking organizations and communities across Mexico.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Acemoglu and Johnson (2005); North and Weingast (1989); North (1990); North and Thomas (1973).

⁸¹ Albertus (2015) uses a subnational approach to show that – contrary to the conventional wisdom – land redistribution is greater under autocratic national regimes than under democracies. See also Saffon (n.d.).

1.3 SUBNATIONAL RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION: NEW STRATEGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to contributing to theoretical progress, SNR also fosters methodological innovation. Nearly 20 years ago, Richard Snyder (2001a) argued that subnational research offered important methodological advantages for research design, measurement, and theory building in comparative politics. Focusing on “small-N” comparative research, he argued that a subnational perspective helped mitigate the problem of “many variables, small-N” (Lijphart, 1971) both by increasing the number of observations and by making it easier to design controlled comparisons.⁸² Snyder identified two strategies of subnational research – within-nation comparisons, which focus on subnational cases inside a single country; and between-nation comparisons, which focus on subnational cases across countries – discussing exemplary works that deployed each strategy. Over the past two decades, as SNR has proliferated in comparative politics, advances in theory and methods now make it possible to propose an expanded set of strategies of SNR.⁸³ Moreover, these advances invite us to consider how a subnational perspective can be combined effectively not only with conventional small-N comparisons but with new and increasingly popular methodologies such as “mixed methods,” sophisticated tools for spatial analysis, and experiments.

New Strategies of Subnational Research

A focus on subnational units opens many new options for designing comparative research. As seen earlier in Figure 1.1, scholars can choose to study outcomes in a broad set of different kinds of subnational territorial units. Moreover, they can seek explanations by looking at variables at the same subnational scale as outcomes of interest – for example, a study that focuses on state-level elections to explain state-level policies. Alternatively, as discussed in the previous section, scholars can craft multilevel research designs, seeking to explain subnational outcomes by focusing on variables at lower or higher scales, including at the national and even international levels. For example, explanations for state-level policies might be found at lower scales, perhaps in the political power and strategies of city mayors or municipal interest groups, or at higher scales, say in the partisan composition of the national government or in the performance of the international economy. Finally, as

⁸² With regard to measurement, Snyder (2001a) argued that subnational research improved the capacity of researchers to code cases accurately and thus make valid causal inferences. With regard to theory building, he argued that subnational research played an indispensable role in developing explanations of spatially uneven phenomena.

⁸³ Recent contributions that address important methodological and inferential challenges involved in subnational research include Tsai and Ziblatt (n.d.); Pepinsky (2017); and Sellers (in press).

illustrated by the examples of “bottom-up” theorizing already discussed, scholars can choose to focus not on subnational outcomes but on national ones, seeking explanations in variables that operate at subnational scales.

To organize this new set of research design options, Table 1.2 identifies distinct strategies of SNR defined by two dimensions: (i) the number of levels of analysis; and (ii) the type of causal relationship among variables. With regard to levels of analysis, strategies are defined by whether they are unilevel, focusing on variables at a single scale, or, alternatively, multilevel, focusing on variables at two or more scales. The type of causal relationship among variables, in turn, takes one of three forms: no relationship, unidirectional, or reciprocal.⁸⁴

Together, these two dimensions result in seven strategies of SNR. A freestanding units strategy (Quadrant I) treats subnational units as self-contained entities in which variables located at higher scales (for example,

TABLE 1.2 *Strategies of Subnational Research*

		Number of Levels of Analysis	
		Unilevel	Multilevel
Type of Causal Relationship	None	I. Freestanding Units <i>Subnational units at a single scale are independent entities.</i>	II. Freestanding Levels <i>Levels are independent entities.</i>
	Unidirectional	III. Horizontal <i>Causes at a single subnational scale have effects only at that scale.</i>	IV. Top-down <i>Causes at higher scales have effects at lower scales.</i>
	Reciprocal	VI. Reciprocal Horizontal <i>Causes at a single subnational scale affect and are affected by other causes at that same scale.</i>	V. Bottom-up <i>Causes at lower scales have effects at higher scales.</i>
			VII. Reciprocal Vertical <i>Causes at one scale affect and are affected by causes at higher and lower scales.</i>

⁸⁴ These different strategies are not unique to subnational research. Scholars of international relations implement multilevel research designs to assess, for instance, how international organizations affect national policy making or domestic politics. Likewise, comparativists who carry out cross-national research on a wide variety of subjects adopt strategies resembling the unilevel ones in Table 1.2.

national government policy) or even in other subnational units at any scale have no causal effect.⁸⁵ A freestanding levels strategy (Quadrant II), by contrast, sets subnational phenomena in a multilevel framework. Still, only variables at the same scale as the outcome of interest are understood to have a causal effect, although variables at higher or lower scales may provide contextual information.⁸⁶ A horizontal strategy (Quadrant III) seeks causal effects at a single scale. In studies that deploy a horizontal strategy, processes of diffusion and contagion across units located at the same scale often play a key role in explaining subnational outcomes.⁸⁷ When levels of analysis are seen not as freestanding but as causally connected, multilevel strategies can be used to explore the causal effects of variables on outcomes at lower and higher scales. The top-down strategy (Quadrant IV) focuses on causal effects of variables at higher scales on outcomes at lower scales.⁸⁸ Conversely, the bottom-up strategy (Quadrant V) explores the causal impact of variables at lower scales on outcomes at higher scales. Studies that employ a bottom-up strategy often highlight how actors, interests, and institutions have causal consequences far beyond the formal or informal borders of the subnational units in which they are located.⁸⁹ Finally, reciprocal causality can be studied among variables at the same scale, with a reciprocal horizontal strategy (Quadrant VI), or among variables at different scales with a reciprocal vertical strategy (Quadrant VII). The former approach often focuses on reciprocal causation across neighboring subnational units, for example through diffusion.⁹⁰

None of these seven strategies is inherently superior. Each has strengths and weaknesses, and researchers should be aware of the trade-offs involved when choosing one strategy over another. To illustrate these trade-offs, we compare

⁸⁵ Recent works that employ a freestanding units strategy include Alves (2015), Ingram (2014, 2015), and Pribble (2015), among others. When multiple units are compared, this kind of research could be called *cross-subnational analysis*, in line with the conventional label *cross-national analysis*. See Slater and Ziblatt (2013, p. 1306) for a discussion of how a cross-subnational approach can provide stronger external validity than a subnational approach limited to a single country.

⁸⁶ Research on civil wars, for example, commonly employs a freestanding levels strategy, treating national-level conflicts as a contextual backdrop for subnational groups, whose actions are understood to be driven by preexisting local cleavages that are often far removed from the “master cleavage” that defines the national conflict (Kalyvas, 2003, 2006).

⁸⁷ For a study that deploys a horizontal strategy to explain patterns of homicides at the municipal level in Brazil, see Ingram and da Costa (2016). See Sugiyama (2008) for a study that uses a horizontal strategy to explain the subnational diffusion of social policies in Brazil.

⁸⁸ Examples of top-down strategies include studies of subnational authoritarian regimes (Gibson, 2013; Gervasoni, 2010a, 2010b; Giraudy, 2015) and subnational patterns of drug-related violence (Phillips 2015).

⁸⁹ Examples of bottom-up strategies include Gibson and Calvo (2000), Herrigel (1996), and Pogrebinschi and Samuels (2014). See also Schiller’s (1999) analysis of how subnational political geography affects national trade policy in the United States.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Sugiyama’s (2012) study of the implementation of conditional cash transfers (CCTs) in Brazil during the 1990s and 2000s.

two strategies located in opposite quadrants in Table 1.2: the freestanding units (Quadrant I) and reciprocal vertical (Quadrant VII) strategies. Because the freestanding units strategy treats subnational units as self-contained entities in which outcomes are driven fully by variables inside each unit, it offers advantages for making causal inferences. Most notably, this strategy attenuates the threats that spatial dependence among units of analysis can pose to causal inference, especially when studying outcomes in spatially proximate units. Still, as Harbers and Ingram caution in Chapter 2, subnational units are often highly permeable to external forces, which produces a strong potential both for structural dependence among observations and unobserved spatial correlation among units. Researchers employing a freestanding units strategy will thus need to give a convincing justification, ideally supported by evidence showing the absence of spatial dependence, that the units are indeed self-contained.

The reciprocal vertical strategy of SNR, by contrast, highlights not the independence but the interdependence of units and variables at different scales. From this perspective, variables operate both as causes and effects. Moreover, reciprocal causation is understood to occur among variables at different scales. For example, a subnational policy innovation, perhaps resulting from factors internal to a specific subnational unit, can reshape national policy if the national government decides to emulate it. In turn, with the national government's endorsement and support, the policy innovation, possibly in a modified form, may propagate across subnational units, including back to the source unit where it originated.⁹¹ As this example suggests, effectively deploying the reciprocal vertical strategy requires careful attention to cross-level causal sequences. This strategy offers the advantage of fostering multilevel process tracing and holistic explanations that highlight causal relationships across variables at different scales, relationships that may be hidden when using other strategies of subnational analysis. Still, the broad compass of the reciprocal vertical strategy is a source of both strength and weakness, because the complex interdependence among variables at different scales can make it hard to manage threats to causal inference posed by endogeneity.⁹² Moreover, the reciprocal vertical strategy does not have a strong affinity with parsimonious research designs or theories.

The various strategies of subnational research can be productively combined, as illustrated by Beer's Chapter 5 on women's rights in Mexico, which draws on multiple strategies to explain contrasting outcomes across Mexico's states in legislation concerning both abortion and violence against women (VAW). With legislation prohibiting VAW, a pattern of policy convergence emerged in the 2000s, as similarly robust laws spread quickly across all Mexican states. With

⁹¹ For an example of this kind of multilevel policy diffusion, see Sugiyama (2012).

⁹² The logic of causation in the reciprocal vertical strategy resembles the principle of interconnectedness central to systems theory. See, for example, Jervis (1998).

abortion rights, however, the result was not policy convergence but divergence, with some states passing conservative restrictions on abortion whereas others moved to liberalize access. To explain these contrasting outcomes across the two policy areas, Beer combines several strategies of subnational research. First, she argues that understanding the subnational heterogeneity in abortion policy requires a dual focus that encompasses both the internal characteristics of Mexico's states, as highlighted by the freestanding units strategy, and cross-state influences, as emphasized by the horizontal strategy. States governed by the leftist *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) and where secular values dominated were likely to try to liberalize abortion whereas states governed by the right-wing *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) and with predominantly conservative Catholic populations were likely to restrict abortion. In addition to such factors internal to states, horizontal influences across states also help explain the divergence in abortion policies. For example, Mexico City's move to liberalize abortion in 2007 raised fears among conservatives across the country that legal abortion would soon spread to other jurisdictions. These fears, in turn, galvanized a preemptive backlash of restrictive legislation across many states. Beer thus concludes that, without the threat posed by liberalization of abortion in Mexico City, constitutional amendments restricting abortion would probably not have passed so quickly across so many states.

The subnational policy convergence in VAW legislation, on the other hand, cannot be explained by a unilevel focus on variables internal to states or on horizontal influences across them. Instead, a multilevel, reciprocal vertical strategy, attuned both to top-down and bottom-up interactions, is required to explain why similar VAW legislation resulted across all Mexican states. Beer shows that the subnational proliferation of VAW laws started in the 1990s with appeals by local activists and human rights advocates who mobilized to protest the murders and disappearances of a large number of young women in Ciudad Juárez, in the northern state of Chihuahua. When the government of Chihuahua failed to investigate seriously and prosecute the crimes, these activists appealed both to the national government and international organizations, specifically the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR). This "bottom-up" pressure from local activists resulted in new national legislation addressing violence against women in 2007 and a ruling by the IACHR in 2009 ordering the Mexican government to investigate the murders in Ciudad Juárez, improve its response to violence against women, and create a database to help find missing people and keep track of violence against women. The resulting "top-down" pressures on state governments from both the national government and the IACHR, in turn, drove a rapid replication of new VAW laws across all the Mexican states. Beer's chapter thus highlights the advantages of drawing on several strategies of SNR to build a multilevel theoretical framework that combines international, national, and subnational factors to provide a stronger explanation for humanly important outcomes.

In sum, by offering this new set of strategies for subnational research, we aim to make it easier for scholars to: (i) specify the kind of strategy they are employing, which, in turn, could aid the accumulation of knowledge by fostering focused and constructive dialogues both among subnational researchers deploying the same strategy and among researchers deploying different ones; (ii) evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their research strategies; and (iii) assess the trade-offs involved in choosing one strategy over another.

Combining Subnational and Cross-National Strategies

The strategies of SNR can also be combined fruitfully with cross-national research (Sellers, in press; Riedel, 2017).⁹³ One advantage of this approach is that subnational units in different countries may match each other more closely across variables of interest than would the two countries as a whole. Closer matching, in turn, can mitigate the risk that causal inferences will be biased by confounding variables. For example, Juan J. Linz and Amando de Miguel (1966, p. 269) argue that a comparison between “advanced and backward” regions of Italy and Spain, with similar cultural and socioeconomic profiles, is an effective way to assess how different political institutions in the two countries affect participation in voluntary organizations. Similarly, O’Donnell (1973, p. 21) proposes a “cross-modern areas” comparison that juxtaposes the most developed regions of Brazil and Argentina.

Adjacent subnational units located on opposite sides of a national border can offer especially strong opportunities for matching. In his seminal article on the comparative method, Arend Lijphart (1971, pp. 689–690) thus proposes that in order to study the effects of presidential and parliamentary systems, rather than comparing the United States and Great Britain, it may be more fruitful to compare North Dakota and Manitoba, because this comparison would minimize variation in potentially confounding factors like levels of economic development and education.⁹⁴ Along similar lines, in his study of agrarian radicalism in the North American wheat belt, Lipset (1950, p. 215) compares North Dakota and Saskatchewan, which he describes as near replicas in economic, demographic, and ecological terms. The close matching of the cases across these variables increases confidence in Lipset’s argument that cross-national differences in federal social policy explain the divergent fortunes of agrarian radicalism: In the wheat belt of the United States, the New Deal weakened rural socialist movements, whereas in Canada the absence of robust federal social policies during the Great Depression favored such

⁹³ Sellers (in press) uses the label “transnational subnational” to refer to strategies that combine subnational and cross-national perspectives.

⁹⁴ Lijphart acknowledges Naroll (1966) as the source of this recommendation.

movements.⁹⁵ More recently, scholars have carried out subnational cross-national studies of adjacent units to explore how different kinds of colonialism influenced contemporary African politics. William Miles (1994) and Kathryn Firmin-Sellers (2001), for example, look at villages and regions located across an international border separating a former French from a former British colony (see also Laitin, 1986).

In addition to improving causal inference through closer matching, subnational cross-national research can further strengthen causal inference through natural experiments. To understand why cultural differences become politically salient, Daniel N. Posner (2004) takes advantage of a natural experiment produced by the division of the Chewa and Tumbuka ethnic groups by the border between Zambia and Malawi. Despite identical objective cultural differences, such as language and appearance, between Chewas and Tumbukas on both sides of the border, intergroup relations differ sharply in each country, with Chewas and Tumbukas treating each other as political allies in Zambia and as rivals in Malawi. Posner argues that the division of the Chewa and Tumbuka ethnic groups by the Zambia–Malawi border “provides a laboratory-like setting” for studying the salience of an identical cultural cleavage in different settings. Posner (2004, p. 530) further notes that “like many African borders, the one that separates Zambia and Malawi was drawn purely for administrative purposes, with no attention to the distribution of groups on the ground.” According to Posner, the resulting “as-if random” sorting of Chewa and Tumbuka people into Zambia and Malawi helps control for confounding factors, thereby increasing confidence that observed differences in intergroup relations result from his preferred explanation, that is, the different sizes of each group relative to each country’s national political arena. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) make a similar claim that the international border separating two cities, Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico, offers a natural experiment that rules out local sociocultural, political, or ecological factors as credible explanations for their sharply divergent trajectories of development, security, and equity.

Still, spatial proximity offers a double-edged sword for causal inference. On the one hand, focusing on contiguous subnational units separated by a border can help strengthen causal inference through closer matching and natural experiments. On the other, the very proximity of the units can hinder causal inference by producing spatial dependence, spillovers, and other forms of “interference” among units. At first glance, subnational units divided by an international border may seem less prone to spatial dependence than units located in the same country, because, *ceteris paribus*, international borders should be less porous than administrative and other boundaries inside countries. Yet international borders may actually be highly permeable, either

⁹⁵ Similarly, to study ethnic conflict, Linz (1986, pp. 372–398) focuses on the adjacent Spanish and French Basque regions.

by design, as among the European Union countries, or by default, because of weak state capacity, as in many developing countries. Porous international borders, in turn, weaken claims, such as Posner's (2004), that borders serve as plausible sources of natural experiments because they assign subjects in an as-if random way to mutually insulated "treatment" and "control" groups.⁹⁶

One way to reduce spatial dependence, spillovers, and the associated threats they pose to causal inference is to select noncontiguous subnational units located in different countries.⁹⁷ For instance, Eleonora Pasotti (2010) studies the breakdown of urban clientelist machines by focusing on three cities located in distant and quite different countries: Bogota, Chicago, and Naples. Despite the contrasting national-level socioeconomic and political contexts in which these cities are located, Pasotti finds that the shift from clientelism to programmatic politics resulted from surprisingly similar patterns of local party building, urban fiscal autonomy, and municipal electoral institutions.⁹⁸ Another good example of subnational cross-national research focusing on spatially distant units can be seen in Angélica Durán-Martínez's (2018) study of drug violence in five cities across two countries, Colombia (Cali, Medellin) and Mexico (Culiacán, Ciudad Juárez, and Tijuana). This set of cases makes it possible to combine the methods of "most similar" and "most different" comparisons in creative ways.⁹⁹ By pairing cities in the same countries that experienced contrasting patterns of violence, as in Cali and Medellin in Colombia, or Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana in Mexico, Durán-Martínez gains inferential leverage from a most similar comparison. By contrast, pairing cities in different countries that experienced similar patterns of violence, such as Cali in Colombia and Culiacán in Mexico, provides a most different comparison. Durán-Martínez supplements these comparisons with a longitudinal analysis of periods of violence within each city, which offers an even stronger most similar systems design.

Although these examples of subnational cross-national research focus on cities, other kinds of subnational units can also be used. For example, Gibson's (2013) study of subnational authoritarianism compares states and provinces across three countries, Argentina, Mexico, and the United States. And Agustina Giraudy (2015) builds and tests a novel theoretical framework to explain the

⁹⁶ As Dunning (2012) notes in his assessment of Posner's research design, "subsequent migration and other factors could have mitigated the as-if randomness on one side of the border or the other." As Posner (2004, p. 531) himself notes, "Indeed, both pairs of villages are so close to each other that several respondents reported regularly visiting friends and relatives across the border in the other village."

⁹⁷ This approach essentially deploys the freestanding strategy of subnational research cross-nationally.

⁹⁸ Yue Zhang's (2013) study of policies for urban historic preservation in Beijing, Chicago, and Paris offers a similar example of subnational cross-national research focusing on spatially distant units. Zhang finds that sharp differences in these policies are driven by cross-national variation in the coherence of decision-making processes between levels of government.

⁹⁹ On "most similar" and "most different" systems designs, see Przeworski and Teune (1970).

maintenance of what she calls “subnational undemocratic regimes” (SURs) by combining within-country comparisons among states in Argentina and Mexico with cross-national comparisons.¹⁰⁰ Creative and carefully constructed combinations of subnational and cross-national strategies such as these can help researchers increase confidence in their causal inferences.

Methodological Challenges and Opportunities in Subnational Research

Whereas Snyder (2001a) focused on the advantages of combining the methodology of “small-N” comparisons with a focus on subnational units, the increasing popularity of “mixed methods,” new tools for analyzing spatial dependence, and experiments invites us to consider how these methodologies can be employed fruitfully in SNR. As seen in Table 1.3, which shows the set of methodological options in social science research, SNR offers a “crosscutting” strategy of inquiry that can be deployed in conjunction with a wide variety of methods, from qualitative case studies to small-N comparisons to large-N quantitative studies to field and natural experiments.

Mixed Methods

A clear affinity can be seen between SNR and the increasingly common use in comparative politics of “mixed methods,” that is, research designs that combine two or more methodologies to help bolster confidence in causal inferences.

TABLE 1.3 *Methodological Options in the Social Sciences: Subnational Research as a Crosscutting Strategy of Inquiry*

Observational Research		Experimental Research
SMALL-N/QUALITATIVE	LARGE-N/QUANTITATIVE	
Case Studies	Survey Research	Laboratory Experiments
Comparative Method (systematic analysis of a small number of cases)	Quantitative Cross-National Research (QCN)	Field Experiments
Subnational Comparative Method (systematic analysis of a small number of subnational cases)	Quantitative Subnational Research (QSN)	Natural and Quasi-Experiments

Note: Methodologies highlighted in boldface are routinely employed in SNR.

¹⁰⁰ Different kinds of subnational units can be combined in a single study. See, for example, Heller’s (2001) study of the politics of democratic decentralization, which compares the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, the Indian state of Kerala, and the country of South Africa.

Subnational researchers routinely combine in-depth qualitative case studies with quantitative analysis, often by implementing a “nested” research design that integrates small-N comparative case studies with large-N analysis of quantitative data drawn from the full universe of subnational political and administrative units in one or more countries.¹⁰¹ By situating subnational case studies within a larger “out-of-sample” population of subnational cases, nested designs can help scholars assess the external validity of their results. Nested subnational studies have shed light on a wide range of topics, including the provision of public goods (Tsai, 2007), the politics of regulation and privatization (Herrera, 2014; Post, 2014), ethnic politics and development (Lieberman, 2009), the “resource curse” (González, in press; González & Lodola, n.d.), clientelism (Weitz-Shapiro, 2014), and ethnic violence (Varshney, 2002). Still, as Harbers and Ingram caution in Chapter 2, the strong potential for spatial dependence among subnational units located in the same country poses challenges for such nested mixed-methods designs. Specifically, studies relying on estimation techniques, such as OLS, that treat subnational observations and units as independently distributed run a significant risk of getting incorrect estimates. Fortunately, as Harbers and Ingram also point out, new tools of spatial analysis offer effective ways to manage spatial dependence.

Spatial Dependence: Threat or Opportunity?

Spatial dependence among units and observations is conventionally viewed as a serious threat to causal inference, which is understood to require independent observations. To be sure, spatial dependence also occurs among national units, as cross-national research on diffusion (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006), international demonstration effects, and dependent development (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Evans, 1979) has long recognized. Still, *ceteris paribus*, spatial dependence will likely be stronger among subnational units located in the same country, because the boundaries between such units are probably more permeable than those between countries. Spatial dependence is thus seen as an especially vexing problem for SNR.¹⁰²

Recent advances in both qualitative and quantitative methods, however, give reason to view spatial dependence not as an insurmountable threat to causal inference but as a manageable challenge and even as a welcome

¹⁰¹ On nested research designs, see Lieberman (2005). See also Coppedge (2012, pp. 219–220; chapter 3) for a discussion of nested analysis and the potential to build “nested theories” in the study of democratization. See Pepinsky (2018) on the upsurge of quantitative single-country studies in comparative politics over the past 15 years; many of these studies are subnational.

¹⁰² This is also referred to as “Galton’s problem,” a reference to the objection raised by Francis Galton at the meeting of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1889 to a paper by Edward B. Tylor introducing the cross-cultural survey method. Galton pointed out that, because traits often spread by diffusion, borrowing or migration, observations of such traits across culture were not necessarily independent instances (Naroll, 1961, p. 15).

opportunity for building stronger theories. Recent research on qualitative methods emphasizes the value of case-based “causal process observations” (CPOs) both for testing and building theories (Collier et al., 2010, p. 2). And CPOs, in turn, are prone to spatial dependence by virtue of their location in the same case. The very contextual knowledge required to carry out effective CPOs can, in turn, make it easier to comprehend and disentangle spatial autocorrelation among the linked observations that form a causal process.¹⁰³

Moreover, as Ingram and Harbers show in Chapter 2, new spatial analytic estimation techniques offer powerful ways to model spatial dependence among subnational units. They thus emphasize the importance of testing empirically for spatial dependence in order to determine the appropriate statistical estimation technique that should be employed to assess causal relationships.¹⁰⁴ If subnational units are *not* spatially dependent, then OLS statistical models may very well be appropriate. By contrast, when dealing with spatially dependent units, estimation techniques capable of accounting for this dependence should be employed.

By making it easier to handle spatial dependence, these new qualitative and quantitative tools lower the methodological barriers to doing SNR. Moreover, instead of seeing spatial dependence as an unwelcome, if manageable, threat to causal inference, scholars increasingly view it as an exciting opportunity for theory building. Indeed, “horizontal” and especially “reciprocal horizontal” strategies of SNR, as discussed, are premised on spatial dependence, and scholars have effectively used these strategies to propose new theories of policy diffusion (Sugiyama, 2008) and violence (Ingram & da Costa, 2016).

Experiments

The growing use of both field and natural experiments in comparative politics also opens new possibilities for SNR. Carrying out true experimentation, where the treatment, or intervention, is manipulated by the researcher, is rarely possible for national-level institutions or policies. Experiments in the social sciences thus typically focus on smaller subnational units, such as villages and municipalities, where manipulation of treatment variables by the researcher is feasible, making it possible to boost the internal validity of causal inference. Recent research in comparative politics uses field experiments to identify the causes of subnational variation in a wide range of outcomes, including political

¹⁰³ Moreover, a subnational perspective, by potentially allowing researchers to get “closer” to their cases, offers advantages with regard to acquiring valid contextual information in the first place.

¹⁰⁴ The same can be said for choices about the appropriate strategy of subnational research: An empirical test showing little or no spatial dependence among units would set a freestanding unit strategy on firm ground. Likewise, a test showing high levels of spatial dependence would call for horizontal or reciprocal horizontal strategies.

participation,¹⁰⁵ public goods provision,¹⁰⁶ dispute resolution and violence,¹⁰⁷ empowerment of women,¹⁰⁸ and ethnic voting.¹⁰⁹

Although they may not be suitable for true, “randomized controlled” experiments, national-level policy and institutional changes can serve as sources of natural experiments if a plausible case can be made that these changes are exogenous to subnational units and affect them in an “as-if random” manner.¹¹⁰ Opportunities for combining natural experiments with a focus on subnational units may be especially strong when national-level changes are implemented in a spatially uneven manner, leaving some subnational units unaffected, or with temporal lags that result in some units being affected earlier or later than others. The uneven implementation of national-level initiatives across subnational units, in addition to providing opportunities for what we call “top-down” strategies of research, can make it easier to sort these units into “treatment” and “control” groups.

Likewise, changes in administrative, jurisdictional, and even non-jurisdictional boundaries inside countries can also occur in an “as-if random” fashion with respect to subnational outcomes of interest and may thus provide a fruitful source of natural experiments. The division of ethnic groups by arbitrary national boundaries is implicitly employed as a natural experiment by Linz (1986) in his study of Catalans in France and Spain, by Miles (1994) in his study of Hausa-speaking people in Niger and Nigeria, and explicitly by Posner (2004) in his study of Chewas and Tumbukas in Zambia and Malawi.¹¹¹ *Ceteris paribus*, boundary changes inside countries should occur more frequently than boundary changes between countries, and natural experiments with boundaries as treatments should thus be plentiful at subnational levels. Still, researchers looking to use subnational or international borders as sources of natural experiments face several methodological challenges.

First, a plausible case needs to be made that the boundaries were indeed drawn in an “as-if random” manner and thus serve as exogenous treatments.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ Wantchekon (2003); Fujiwara and Wantchekon (2013); Chong et al. (2015). On field experiments in the social sciences more generally, see Gerber and Green (2012); and Druckman et al. (2011).

¹⁰⁶ Blair, Morse, and Tsai (2017); Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein (2009, 2015).

¹⁰⁷ Blattman, Hartman, and Blair (2014); Blair, Blattman, and Hartman (2017).

¹⁰⁸ Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov (2013). ¹⁰⁹ Dunning and Harrison (2010).

¹¹⁰ Natural experiments are distinguished from both laboratory and field experiments by the source of their data, which are produced not through the manipulation of a treatment by the researcher but by “naturally” occurring phenomena. Moreover, natural experiments may only partially share the attribute of random assignment of subjects to treatment and control groups that characterizes true, or “randomized controlled,” experiments. On natural experiments in the social sciences, see Dunning (2012) and Diamond and Robinson (2010).

¹¹¹ Other examples of studies that use borders as sources of natural experiments include Banerjee and Iyer (2005), Berger (2009), Laitin (1986), and Miguel (2004).

¹¹² As Hillel Soifer notes in Chapter 3 of this volume, with the exception of the study of electoral institutions, where regression discontinuity designs (RDDs) are common, scholars looking for

This requires providing evidence about how the boundaries were created, including perhaps the motives, goals, and capabilities of the boundary makers (Kocher & Monteiro, 2016). Relatedly, researchers should consider the possibility of self-selection by individuals both into and out of border units, as occurred with Hindus and Muslims as a result of the partitioning of the British Indian empire into India and Pakistan in 1947. When such self-selection occurs, it weakens the credibility of the claim that subjects are assigned in an as-if random manner to treatment and control groups.

The effective use of boundaries as sources of natural experiments also requires an assessment of whether *spillover* occurs between treatment and control subjects and units. Spillover arises when one unit is affected by the treatment status of another unit, for example, when increased law enforcement in one area causes crime to increase in nearby areas, and it is especially likely where treatment and control subjects live in close proximity and can interact regularly. Spillover violates the “noninterference assumption,” also known as the “stable unit-treatment value assumption” (SUTVA), routinely invoked in causal inference. This violation, in turn, can result in significantly biased estimates of treatment effects. Techniques are available for detecting and estimating spillover effects, such as multilevel experiments, and also for avoiding spillovers in the first place, such as selecting noncontiguous units located far away from each other.¹¹³ The latter technique assumes that spillover occurs only through spatial proximity and not through nongeographic mechanisms, such as Internet, telephone, television, or radio.¹¹⁴

Lastly, subnational researchers looking for natural experiments likely face the challenge of “bundling,” also known as the “compound treatment problem.” This problem emerges when the treatment encompasses multiple explanatory factors, thus making it difficult to pinpoint which factor actually causes the effect. As Thad Dunning (2012, p. 300) notes, the problem of bundling can be especially vexing in natural experiments that exploit jurisdictional and other kinds of borders, because units on either side of the border may differ in many more ways than just their location in relation to the border. The treatment of being located on one side of a border or the other may

natural experiments have tended to avoid subnational administrative jurisdictions, focusing instead on subnational units divided by boundaries drawn arbitrarily and with little contemporary meaning. Soifer offers the example of Berger’s (2009) study of the contemporary effects of an obscure British colonial administrative boundary drawn in 1900 and erased permanently in 1914.

¹¹³ Sinclair, McConnell, and Green (2012). See also <http://egap.org/methods-guides/10-things-you-need-know-about-spillovers> (accessed on December 14, 2016).

¹¹⁴ This technique for mitigating spillover effects is sometimes described as relying on “buffer rows.” This refers to agricultural studies in which experimental crop rows were physically separated by non-experimental “buffer” rows to prevent interference from local changes in soil, water usage, or insect behavior.

thus entail so many different components that it becomes difficult to identify precisely which one actually does the causal work. One technique suggested by Dunning (2012, pp. 300–302) for potentially mitigating the compound treatment problem is to make “pre-tests” and “post-tests” in both treatment and control groups. For example, in their study of the impact of raising the minimum wage on employment in fast-food restaurants, David Card and Alan B. Krueger (1994) compare restaurants on either side of the border between the US states of New Jersey, which increased the minimum wage in 1992, and Pennsylvania, which did not make an increase. By drawing on time-series data, the authors are able to make pre- and post-comparisons of employment levels on either side of the border during a small temporal window around the date that New Jersey’s new minimum-wage law went into effect. This makes it possible to “unbundle” the treatment of “being in New Jersey” as opposed to “being in Pennsylvania,” thereby increasing confidence that the change in the minimum-wage law, not some other aspect of the compound treatment, explains the observed shifts in employment levels. By drawing on techniques such as these, subnational researchers will be better able to take advantage of opportunities opened by experimental methods for crafting stronger research designs.

1.4 CONCLUSION

SNR offers a long-standing and increasingly prominent option that contributes to substantive, theoretical, and methodological progress in comparative politics. The chapters that follow show how a subnational perspective produces knowledge across core substantive themes that define comparative politics, from regimes and representation to states, security, and public goods to social and economic development. The chapters also illustrate how SNR drives theoretical innovation, especially multilevel theory building that combines variables and causal processes at different scales. Lastly, SNR offers novel strategies for comparative research and, as highlighted in the next two chapters, provides exciting possibilities for strengthening research design and exploiting new methodological tools for spatial analysis. In the concluding chapter, Chapter 11, we consider the challenges and directions for future research opened by the substantive, theoretical, and methodological achievements of SNR.

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