



The Subnationalists:

Why small is better in comparative politics

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As Richard Snyder tells the story of his doctoral research he pauses intermittently to sip his cappuccino. He was working in Mexico, he tells me, looking at the effects of liberalization on the country's agricultural sector. One of his dissertation's foci was, fittingly, coffee.

For most of the 20th century, Mexico and many countries in the Global South had large, homogeneous national governments. However with the waves of liberalization throughout Latin America and Asia in the early 1990s, government policies and their effects became more convoluted as formerly large, centralized governments were decentralized, deregulated, and localized.

It was during this period that Snyder sought to analyze the effects of deregulation and privatization on Mexico's national coffee industry. His approach was based on cross-national comparison: he would contrast the Mexican coffee industry to the experiences in other countries, such as Argentina or Guatemala. But when he arrived in Mexico he realized creating a model for the entire Mexican coffee industry was no longer unrealistic.

"It's pretty complicated," explains Snyder. "Coffee is produced across eight or nine states, although really only five states in southern Mexico have it as one of the major agricultural products. [Mexico] used to have this huge National Mexican Coffee Institute, Instituto Mexicano del Café, and then over the course of the early 90s, state coffee councils began forming. These institutions varied in some

very interesting ways." The Institute had created and implemented national coffee policies in order to provide government support to small farms trying to access the market, but over a decade of decentralization, the state councils began assuming this responsibility. The various individual state councils functioned very differently from each other, making it impossible to distill an accurate, holistic national policy. Frustrated with trying to craft an accurate cross-national comparison, Snyder decided instead to contrast the individual states within Mexico. As Snyder began visiting these state-run councils, the differences in policy were reflected in the institutions themselves. The first office he

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visited was a sophisticated, fully staffed government building in Oaxaca. In contrast, Snyder's initial attempts to locate the council in Puebla failed. And when he did find it, the office was deserted, with only a yellowed piece of computer paper in the window to mark its existence.

"The big insight," says Snyder, "was that with big, abstract processes like liberalization or

democratization, these global waves could be really territorially uneven, even at the level of subnational units within countries.” Government policies, which are effectively implemented in one region, could be practically non-existent in other areas of the same country, leading to uneven institutional development. One region might even be a democracy while another might function as a de facto dictatorship. This variation creates a challenge for scholars looking to compare national political systems. By looking subnationally, however, researchers have the opportunity to delve deeper into these uneven phenomena.

Snyder’s work on liberalization helped to put interstate research within Mexico on the map, and also sparked a growing awareness in the research

community about subnational divisions and regional inequalities. Along with his colleagues, Snyder has worked over the past decade to develop a more robust methodology for comparing regions within a national boundary. Today, political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists around the world are applying the subnational method to study a broad array of political issues, and are continually finding new advantages of going subnational.

In May, Snyder, who is now professor of political science and director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Brown University, hosted a conference at the Watson Institute on Subnational Research in Comparative Politics. The conference featured nineteen young



Photo Karen Philippi

researchers presenting unpublished papers on subjects ranging from health care in Brazil to primary education in the Indian Himalayas. Most of the papers dealt with pressing policy issues in the rapidly developing Global South.

For Professor Caroline Beer from the University of Vermont, subnational research presents an opportunity to look at global attitudes to gender policy, which manifest differently in different geographic regions. For example, while gender discrimination is a global phenomenon, instances of genital mutilation are mostly focused in North Africa and cases of sex selective abortion in East Asia. This variation leads to difficulties in cross-national comparisons: which data should be used? By what metrics does one judge gender inequality?

Beer argues that by looking sub-nationally, researchers can better control for these uneven phenomena. Religion, for example, is treated simplistically in most cross-national models, while regional differences in religious institutions within the same country can be modeled with greater nuance. Beer also discussed the urban bias of comparative politics: people often think the policies of the major cities are representative of an entire nation. Beer's own research found that gender equality within Mexican states rarely aligns with national policy, but rather is a factor of small variations on the local level. "It often happens that there is, by chance, a woman within the local legislature with a feminist agenda," says Beer, "but it might not actually reflect the strength of the women's movement. Or another common factor is whether the local university in the state happens to have a gender studies department." These "idiosyncrasies" lead to uneven gender rights across different Mexican states. Her research showed that the localities only align with national policy after a highly visible media conversation on a national scale, and then soon after public attention subsides, the state policies once again diverge. This bottom-up process presents an important challenge to the

top-down view of rights expansions within nations.

The advantages of subnational research extend beyond tracking uneven growth. On a technical level, researchers looking into a certain phenomenon are often only able to find or to access a limited number of cases—this research with a small N-value (Small N research usually pertains to a project using fewer than 12 cases). However, the ability to go subnational can give the opportunity to increase the sample size. Up-scaling small N research by looking regionally within a country enables a deeper understanding of a problem by exploring the small subtleties and variations within a particular case, which would often be lost in a project using a large number of data points. As one researcher described it, subnational research tends to be "thick"—telling stories, using proper nouns, and dealing with the nuances of multifaceted theories. In contrast to big data research, small N gives the who, what, where, and why.

Small N researchers also have a greater advantage at the subnational level because within a single nation, one can control for more variables. "The idea is that the world is very complicated," explains Snyder, "and we want to design our research in a way which holds certain dimensions constant." Climate, culture, language, national political systems—by having all of these factors constant within a country, the researcher can focus on the differences between regions. "By having more common factors, you have less moving parts," argues Snyder. "It allows you to isolate more easily those factors which are causally linked with your research."

Development of small N research methods has wide-reaching implications: it's expanding the academic community by making robust research increasingly accessible to scholars from the Global South. Subnational research can fit within a tighter university budget. Rather than having to fly a researcher around the globe to collect hundreds of

data points, small N subnational projects require train tickets as opposed to flights. Simply by making expensive research proposals more feasible for under-resourced universities, the subnational method will continue to have a profound effect on inclusivity within the scholarly community, as quality research increasingly flows from institutions in the developing world.

Snyder refers to the influx of research originating in the Global South as the “Second Wave” of subnational research. The first wave was borne of the growing awareness within the research community of uneven phenomena at the dawn of democratization and liberalization movements in developing nations. However, subnational researchers acknowledge that it was comparative political analysis within the United States that inspired the move towards the subnational. The federal system means that the US contains 50 fairly autonomous sets of state institutions. Policy in New York can be wildly different from that in California, and government institutions in rural Montana provide a wholly different set of data from those in southern Florida.

Subnational research in the United States has helped, as Snyder puts it, “to destabilize or challenge cherished, feel-good national myths.” Robert Mickey, a conference participant from the University of Michigan, recently published a book titled *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America’s Deep South*. By looking at government institutions in Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina, Mickey challenges the idea that the United States in its entirety was a democracy for most of the 20th century. Mickey argues that from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights Era, the American South contained regions of exclusionary, authoritarian rule.

A subnational look at the women’s suffrage movement also challenges received notions of rights expansion. Edward Gibson, a Latin America

specialist from Northwestern University, asked the conference participants when women actually gained the right the vote. Was it in 1920, when the 19th Amendment was passed? “The reality is that statement is false, or at least inaccurate. Prior to 1920, in quite a few parts of the country, women had full suffrage. In the western states, women had full suffrage for years before that. In New York State women had the right to vote, but if they moved a few miles south to Pennsylvania, they lost all those rights.” To understand the issue, argues Gibson, one must change the question. The real issue is when women’s right to vote became nationalized. By instead asking this question, the focus changes to the patchwork expansion of rights on the regional level across a country, before local measures reached a critical mass and became national policy. Gibson asks, “At what point is the tipping point reached when [subnational movements] crystalize into a national movement and national policy?” By looking at the subnational level, the very process of the expansion of rights changes from a simple portrait of grand reform to a bottom-up mural of incremental progress.

If the first wave of subnational research uncovered the geographically uneven distribution of policy, and the second took those lessons and delved into institutional diversity within nations of the Global South, then what will the third wave bring?

Snyder is less sure about what it will look like than he is about the tools that researchers will use. “The GIS (Geographic Information Systems) Revolution, sophisticated spatial statistics, these things will have an impact. ... We will be able to accurately map inequality within countries, and begin looking at growth in a territorially disaggregated and nuanced way.” In the future, muses Snyder, assigning a single number such as GDP or unemployment to an entire nation could be obsolete. With detailed enough data, viewing phenomena subnationally has the potential to change the way governments implement policy in order to address uneven

development and unequal human rights.

The purpose of the May conference at the Watson Institute was not only to help present work using the subnational method, but also to help define what the third wave will bring. Most of the presenters were freshly minted PhDs, who are currently forming the new vanguard of subnational research. The conference presented an opportunity for experienced researchers within the field to give guidance to the next generation of subnationalists. In the fall there will be a follow-up conference at Harvard's Academy for International and Area Studies, and the organizers are also planning to publish a volume containing many of the presenters' research. They hope that this momentum within subnational methodology will ripple across the research community and provide insight into

uneven political phenomena around the world.

During the opening to the conference, Snyder reminded participants of subnational research's proud pedigree. He says that the subnational method stretches back before the first wave of the liberalization and democratization movements of the later 20th century. It goes all the way back to the founder of comparative politics, Aristotle. "In his work *Politics*, Aristotle was looking at and comparing Greek city-states. Comparative politics started subnational. Those are our roots, and we should be proud of that." From these roots it seems that the subnational method, and those researchers who use it, will continue to change the way we look at a nation: not as a homogenous unit, but as a patchwork of unique localities.