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INTRODUCTION

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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	<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.	<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.
	<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).	<i>Informal Units:</i> Regional economies, Extralegal parcels of property, Ecological zones.

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).