Divide and rule: why decentralise?

Dr André Kaiser and Leonce Röth are trying to understand why decentralisation takes place, as well as the long-term consequences of such political decisions for people everywhere.

How has your interest in political science led you to your current role within the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics (CCCP)?

AK: I am interested in the fundamental questions underlying politics, and the CCCP – which I co-head with my colleague Professor Dr Christine Trampusch – is an ideal environment for research into questions of political economy and institutions.

LR: I have always been interested in what kind of political structures provide good conditions for people to develop. As my interest in the phenomena of political ideologies and its impacts grew during my studies, I decided to follow an offer to join the CCCP and apply my interest to the development of established democracies.

What is the difference between symmetrical and asymmetrical decentralisation?

AK&LR: Both types of decentralisation are rooted in very different research traditions, and it is only recently that they have been tentatively connected. Asymmetric decentralisation has been seen as highly political because it is a strategy to accommodate conflict between territorially concentrated (ethnic, language etc.) minorities and the rest of the country. Symmetrical decentralisation has been more or less seen as a matter of the efficient provision of public services.

How do these concepts relate to your research activities?

AK&LR: We highlight the fact that both kinds of decentralisation need to be understood as highly political processes where the political actors involved calculate the costs and benefits of a transfer of authority from the national to the regional level. In our project, we test the assumption that two different logics apply for the two kinds of decentralisation.

In the case of asymmetric reform, an authority transfer should be highly unlikely as long as central government and regional political elites have different ideological positions. Consequently, attempts to pacify multinational states in which regional minorities demand special rights should mostly fail.

Symmetric reforms – where the authority of every region is increased in the same way – occur in cases where central government perceives winning electoral majorities on the regional level as more likely in the long run than on the national level. Hence, it shifts authority to the level at which it assumes it is more likely that it will hold governmental office in future. Indeed, we find confirmation for both these logics in our empirical work.

The reality of decentralisation

Why would a ruling political party ever be willing to transfer power to another group, and what are the consequences of such transfers? A research group at the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics is asking this question, and it has come to intriguing conclusions about the process of and motivations underlying political decentralisation.

BY MOST ACCOUNTS, there are 196 countries in the world. Additionally, there are numerous semi-recognised states, autonomous regions, dependent areas and disputed territories. Within this confusion, there are also countless ethnic and political groups who do not recognise the currently established borders as being representative of them.

As the ruling party of any nation state – particularly a large one with a diverse population – it can be difficult to govern the population in its entirety. One way of overcoming this is to decentralise power. In reality, decentralisation is fairly rare, when a national party is in central government, it’s hard to see why it would want to give up some of its power and redistribute it among other players. Nevertheless, from Scotland to Greenland, decentralisation is an integral issue within many societies. As such, it is important to understand why decentralisation arises and how decentralised regions fare in the long term.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

At the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics, Professor Dr André Kaiser and Leonce Röth are undertaking research into decentralisation in its many forms, with the ultimate aim of analysing the development of decentralised political systems. The scope of their project is far larger than anything attempted in this area before. “Most studies on decentralisation reform are case studies that provide valuable details, but are not suitable for drawing general conclusions,” they explain.

Nevertheless, they started their research with the assumption that has been made by previous theories of decentralisation; namely, that governments are unwilling to disempower themselves voluntarily. However, they quickly found that this assumption was not entirely accurate. “We found that there is one combination of factors where decentralisation makes perfect sense,” they reveal. This combination is illustrated well by their case study of Turkey.

THE TURKISH CASE

In their work, the Cologne team make an important distinction between asymmetric and symmetric forms of decentralisation. In symmetric decentralisation, elements of a government’s power are decentralised with the driving motive being that of efficient resource sharing (e.g. provision of public services). In asymmetric decentralisation, however, certain
Upon finishing the first stage of your project, what motives did you find that drive the process of political decentralisation?

AK&LR: As simple as it may sound, parties’ motives to shift authority are mainly driven by the simple logic that they want to strengthen themselves or their close ideological friends and weaken their enemies.

What will the next stage of your project explore?

AK&LR: The first stage of the project assessed the motives of political parties undertaking decentralisation. The second stage of research will address the dynamic developments that are the consequence of such decisions. The other aim of our research is to explore the consequences for political systems in the long run. It is interesting to see how a rebalancing of political authority in the territorial state affects its governance – in terms of democratic quality, policy performance and political stability.

A HARMONIOUS WORLD

In the first stage of their project, Kaiser and Röth have begun to form some general conclusions about why decentralisation happens and what it means for the countries where it does. Looking ahead, they want to analyse the rationale underlying such dramatic political moves and understand the long-term dynamics of regions that are decentralised.

As citizens of Europe, the pair has only to look on their doorstep to see these debates taking place in the real world. In Spain, for example, the competing interests of large, powerful ethnic groups and their corresponding political parties have made majority support next to impossible for national parties.

Understanding these issues is important, as they can be the difference between harmonious societies and ones that are totally fractured – perhaps even violently. Ideally, this research should inform political decision makers and help them to make the right choices that benefit not just those in power, but everybody else as well.

In Turkey, a form of symmetric decentralisation reform was undertaken in the mid-2000s, but asymmetric reform still remains a remote dream for the country’s oppressed Kurdish minority. The reason the Turkish Government desired symmetric decentralisation reform has to do with the three different motivations for political action: vote seeking, office (or, more generally, power) seeking, and policy seeking.

“In general, our findings show that when the office and the policy seeking motives of parties that control central government coincide, when there is no tension between the two motives, there is an opportunity for decentralisation,” the researchers explain.

What this means in practice in the case of Turkey is that while the leftist Kurds will be unlikely to receive support from the ideologically opposed central government, an ideologically proximate region might have a chance of more autonomy. At the same time, as the ruling AKP party enacted symmetrical reform by installing thousands of their own offices across the country, this was a desirable form of decentralisation because far from loosening its grip on power, this path to decentralisation made them electorally stronger in the long term.

As simple as it may sound, parties’ motives to shift authority are mainly driven by the simple logic that they want to strengthen themselves or their close ideological friends and weaken their enemies.

This figure shows the party constellation in Turkey for both market liberalism and cultural homogeneity between 1987 and 2015.

OBJECTIVE

To analyse the motives of national parties in the processes of political decentralisation and to assess their explanatory power for the vertical transfer of authority.

FUNDING

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is Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Cologne and co-head of the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics (CCCP). One of his most recent publications is Policymaking in Multilevel Systems. Federalism, Decentralization, and Performance in the OECD Countries (ECPR Press 2013, with Jan Biela and Annika Hennl). He has also published articles in American Journal of Political Science, Comparative Political Studies, Electoral Studies, European Union Politics, Journal of Legislative Studies, Journal of Theoretical Politics, Party Politics, Political Studies and West European Politics, among others. His research focuses on the relevance of institutions for political action.

LEONCE RÖTH

studied economics and political science in Bielefeld and Cologne. He joined the Rheinisch-Westfälisches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung to evaluate development interventions. Afterwards, he joined the CCCP to write his dissertation on Parties and Market Liberalism. In addition, he works in a DFG-funded project on decentralisation and electoral geographies. He has been lecturing and presenting research in various countries.

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