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Multi-level governance and subnational research: Similarities, differences, and knowledge accumulation in the study of territorial politics

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ABSTRACT

The Subnational Research (SNR) and Multilevel Governance (MLG) research programs have tackled some of the crucial questions in comparative politics. Despite their shared principle that actors and institutions located at one territorial level are shaped by and shape other levels of government, each tradition has developed its own set of concepts and theories without fully acknowledging the other. We believe that this has been detrimental for knowledge accumulation. We argue that more knowledge accumulation in the study of territorial politics is possible if (1) scholars engage with each tradition, and (2) they are attentive to differences, or blind spots, in each traditions' theories, concepts, and scope conditions. Drawing on two examples, the Regional Authority Index (RAI) and Kent Eaton's work (2021) we show the benefits of transcending the boundaries of each tradition. We conclude by proposing a unified framework for the study of territorial politics that incorporates both SNR and MLG.

Keywords Multilevel governance; subnational research; regional authority index; Latin America; comparative politics

Introduction

During the last three decades, two research programs, Multilevel Governance (MLG) and Subnational Research (SNR) have figured prominently in the study of comparative politics. These research traditions engage the territorial dynamics of political, economic, and institutional processes within and across countries and with international institutions. Together, these research programs have advanced theories and explanations for tackling big and important questions in comparative politics. How is power distributed across levels of government? What is the most efficient way to organize territorial governance? Why are some regions within countries more economically and institutionally developed than others, and why are some more

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influential than others in supranational institutions? Why does democracy trickle down unevenly within countries? Answers to these and other crucial questions attest to how MLG and SNR have advanced our knowledge of political conflict (Brancati 2006), territorial integration (Hooghe and Marks 2001), political regimes (Gibson 2013; Giraudy 2015), state institutions (Chhibber and Kollman 2004), policy making (Piattoni 2010), public goods provision (Borges Sugiyama 2013; Niedzwiecki 2018; Ostrom 1990), territorial identity (Rokkan and Urwin 1983), and economic development (Oates 2005; Weingast 2006), just to mention a few.

Both research traditions share the same object of study: territorial politics. They also share some basic and common postulates, such as (1) scales (or levels of government) are interconnected and entangled, (2) processes and outcomes of interest unfold in two types of subnational jurisdictions (formal vs. informal), (3) interactions across scales and levels of governments take place in both federal and unitary countries, and (4) interactions can be both vertical or horizontal. Yet, despite these important similarities, these research traditions have remained surprisingly unconnected and have, for the most part, not drawn on, nor built on each other's theoretical and empirical findings. This, we argue, has been detrimental for knowledge accumulation in the study of territorial politics.

Accumulation of knowledge, as Mahoney (2003) explains, exists when new knowledge grows out of pre-existing knowledge. Pre-existing knowledge comprises at a minimum descriptive findings, causal findings, methodologies, and/or meta-theories. Mahoney (2003) introduces some of the forms that knowledge accumulation can take. When social scientists accumulate knowledge about causal findings, they systematically draw on prior findings in their causal analysis. The goal of iterated hypothesis testing, for instance, is to scrutinize a pre-existing hypothesis in order to increase confidence in its validity. Similarly, when engaging in hypothesis building, scholars use a pre-existing causal hypothesis as a springboard for the development and testing of a new theory. They might introduce new independent variables that were missing in previous studies, or they might identify or refine more precisely the scope conditions that govern a hypothesis. When any of this happens, the resulting study will yield additional information about causal patterns. It is this conscious exercise of building on pre-existing work that leads to accumulation of knowledge and, in turn, to scientific progress (Mahoney 2003).

This article makes the case that more knowledge accumulation in the study of territorial politics is possible and desirable. To achieve this, a first key step is that scholars be more aware of the shared main theories, concepts, and empirical findings in the two main traditions that study territorial politics: SNR and MLG. While the starting point towards greater knowledge accumulation should be based on the commonalities in both research traditions, a

second crucial step is that scholars be attentive to the *differences* among traditions, in particular, what we call the ‘blind spots.’ These include scope conditions, variables, theories, and concepts commonly analyzed in one tradition but largely overlooked in the other. It is by looking at and drawing on these differences that scholars can refine existing concepts, theories, explanatory variables, and scope conditions. This process of building on pre-existing works from a different research tradition can lead to new empirical discoveries and theory refinement and ultimately contribute to knowledge cumulation and scientific progress.

In this article, we discuss two examples of works that have made steps in the direction of knowledge accumulation by first acknowledging the existence of each tradition, and second, by building on each other’s blind spots. The first example is the Regional Authority Index (RAI), an instrument to measure levels of decentralization, which reveals the contributions of expanding the MLG tradition to the Global South. The second example is the work by Eaton (2021), which reveals the advantages of incorporating supranational actors and institutions into the study of SNR processes. These works move beyond the almost exclusive focus on the Global North in MLG and the lack of inclusion of subnational-supranational relations in SNR.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section, we elaborate on the commonalities and differences between SNR and MLG. We also show how their differences help illuminate blind spots. We argue that these blind spots, which for the most part comprise independent variables and scope conditions that have been largely studied by one tradition but not by the other, constitute a springboard for scholars of territorial politics to build on each other’s work, and in turn, expand knowledge cumulation. The following section zooms in two examples that illustrate the path towards moving beyond the original research program to achieve knowledge accumulation: the RAI and Eaton (2021). The last section proposes to merge SNR and MLG into a single research program on territorial politics.

MLG and SNR: Origins, similarities, and differences

Origins

With a focus on the interconnection of institutions and actors within and across territorial levels, MLG and SNR have become critical research traditions to understanding important processes unfolding in an increasingly global and more integrated world. Both research programs criticize the – at the time – prevalent focus on national processes and explanations and argued for the benefits of territorializing political science (Harbers et al. 2021). MLG originated in the 1990s with the initial goal of describing cohesion policy within the European Union that incorporated subnational governments

(Hooghe 1996; Hooghe and Marks 2001; Marks 1993). Writing against the backdrop of increasing shared rule and competencies among levels of government in European countries, proponents of MLG argued that it was imperative to develop a multi-level framework to address increasing shared interactions around issues of identity, territorial power struggles, and erosion of competencies at the national state.¹ Since its origins, MLG has mostly been used to analyze territorial dynamics in countries of the Global North, and Europe in particular, although it has also been applied elsewhere (Jeffery and Peterson 2020, 762).

SNR, albeit used in a myriad of long-established works in comparative politics, became a more defined and formal research program in the early 2000s, after the publication Snyder's (2001) article, 'Scaling Down.' In this article, Snyder pointed to the existence of a distinct and important subnational method of inquiry for comparative analysis that drew on the old tradition of comparative politics scholars that had studied processes within the nation-state (Dahl 1961; Skocpol 1992; Linz and Miguel 1966, to name a few). Writing against the backdrop of the wave of decentralization in the early 1990s in countries in the Global South, Snyder observed that studies of topics such as economic policy reform, democratization, and ethnic conflict were paying increased attention to subnational political units, meaning actors, institutions, and processes that operate inside countries. Yet, he claimed, insufficient attention had been devoted to the methodological issues that had arisen in the comparative analysis of units within countries. Snyder's seminal piece on the subnational method was later renamed after SNR (see Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019b), as it became clear that subnational inquiry, much like MLG, was not a method per se but rather an approach or framework to the study of political processes unfolding among or within levels of governments and scales inside countries.² Since it became known as a research program, the SNR framework has been used to analyze territorial dynamics across world regions, and in particular in countries of the Global South.

Definitions

MLG has been defined in multiple ways since its initial conception (Marks 1993), and one of these definitions is as '[a] set of general-purpose or functional jurisdictions that enjoy some degree of autonomy within a common governance arrangement and whose actors claim to engage in an enduring interaction in pursuit of a common good' (Enderlein, Wälti, and Zürn 2010, 4). The focus of this approach is on the interplay between autonomous entities that operate from the local to the supranational levels that share autonomy on single or multiple tasks. It includes territorial units with non-intersecting boundaries (such as cities and provinces),³ as well as task-specific and

flexible jurisdictions (such as neighbourhood or buyers associations), see discussion below (Hooghe and Marks 2003). The focus on governance, as opposed to government, represents the incorporation of societal actors and organizations outside of the state (Piattoni 2010).

SNR, for its part, is defined 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’ (Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019b). Phenomena located within countries yet lacking a prominent territorial dimension, such as individuals, families and interest groups, sit outside the scope of the SNR definition. Like MLG, SNR focuses on a large and more diverse set of subnational units, ranging from formal units (i.e. a province) to informal areas (i.e. areas controlled by criminal organizations).

Similarities

As noted earlier, there are striking similarities between these two research traditions. A first similarity between MLG and SNR is the assumption of interconnectedness across units at different scales. As such, either intuitively or self-consciously, both research programs build on the classic and influential tradition of the territorial politics school within comparative politics, coined by Rokkan (1970), Rokkan and Urwin (1982, 1983), and Tarrow (1977). This strand of research draws on the premise that in large-scale systems of territorial governance, political institutions are entangled across space – and precisely for that reason, political action and political outcomes are not limited to a single arena. On the contrary, political outcomes at any territorial scale are routinely shaped by the regular interventions of institutions and actors in other (lower or higher) tiers. In other words, actors and institutions located at one level of government are shaped by and shape governments in other scales and levels. By acknowledging that multiple territorial levels are involved to produce outcomes, both of these theories have been unique in that they have offered and advanced the so-called multi-level theories.

A second commonality between both approaches is the acknowledgment that processes and outcomes of interest can unfold in different types of subnational jurisdictions. Hooghe and Marks (2003) refer to two types of jurisdictions, i.e. Type I Governance vs. Type II Governance; the former formal, general-purpose, and rigid, while the latter more flexible and task-specific. Analyzing SNR contributions, Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder (2019b), find that scholarship in this tradition classifies subnational units also in two types: formal/jurisdictional or informal/non-jurisdictional. By the former type, both research programs denote jurisdictions that are defined by durable boundaries that are non-intersecting at any particular level. They have clearly demarcated, legally-defined boundaries, and the

membership of jurisdictions at higher and lower tiers do not intersect (Hooghe and Marks 2003). The boundaries of these subnational units are durable and difficult to modify. Examples of these units are provinces, states, municipalities, counties, and departments. Type II Governance (Hooghe and Marks 2003) or what Giraudy et al. call informal/non-jurisdictional, territorial units, by contrast, typically lack crisp boundaries. Instead, they have intersecting territorial boundaries, and usually but not always, are designed to perform specific tasks, such as promoting economic development, or providing task-specific functions such as administering recreation, highways, electric power, gas supply, or public transit. Examples of these units are the United States and Switzerland's 'special districts,' which have intersecting territorial boundaries and perform specific tasks (Hooghe and Marks 2003) and global governance (Zürn, 2020). Yet, as Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder (2019b) note, these units can also include squatter settlements, shantytowns, areas controlled by gangs, rebels, criminal organizations and other non-state groups, and extralegal parcels of property. By acknowledging the existence of these two types of subnational units, MLG and SNR have offered scholars in these two traditions the possibility of studying a broad array of processes and outcomes that unfold below the central state, ranging from illegal trade, public goods' provision, identity and representation, and intergovernmental cooperation, to drug wars and citizen security.

A third commonality between MLG and SNR is that scholars within each research program are agnostic with regards to the type of territorial regimes in which processes unfold and to which theories can be applied to. The assumption is that interconnectedness between and within scales can take place in both unitary and federal countries. This is because both research traditions acknowledge that highly decentralized countries, where administrative, political, and fiscal competencies have been widely shared with subnational governments operate in practice like federal countries. As a result, studies in these two traditions have been able to elucidate similar phenomena and similar intergovernmental dynamics that are present in decentralized unitary countries such as Bolivia, Italy, or Colombia, as well as in federal countries (see Falleti 2005; Durán-Martínez 2018). By drawing on comparisons between federal and unitary systems and by leveraging those comparisons for causal inference, both research traditions have been able to move away from the rigid unitary versus federal divide in earlier studies of intergovernmental relations. By so doing, they have opened and pushed for a discussion about the (ir)relevance of territorial regimes for explaining political outcomes such as the unevenness of political or economic regimes within countries (Eaton 2017). As a general rule, these research programs can be applied to every single place in the world, irrespective of whether these countries are unitary or federal, decentralized or

centralized. As such, both traditions have become, or have the potential to become, truly cross-regional.

A fourth commonality between both research traditions is that they share an interest in uni-level (i.e.: horizontal or single level) as well as multi-level (i.e. vertical) interactions. In other words, they both allow for the analysis of phenomena that take place at a single level of government or scale. SNR, in particular, has moved further in characterizing different types of causes that take place at a single level. As noted by Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder (2019b), two lines of research exist within the uni-level approach. For the first one, subnational units are conceived as ‘freestanding,’ with no connections to other levels of government or units within the same scale.⁴ In this first type of uni-level SNR, only factors internal to each subnational unit are responsible for the outcome of interest. Examples of these works include Pribble’s (2015) analysis of institutional building in Chile’s 346 municipalities, where only local factors are relevant for creating stronger institutions, or Ingram’s (2015) quantitative study of the effectiveness of subnational judicial institutions in Brazil and Mexico, where only state-level variables account for the functioning of state courts. A second type of uni-level SNR views subnational units, subnational institutions, and subnational actors located in one scale or level of government as having a causal effect on processes, actors, and institutions located at the same scale. Studies of diffusion across units located at the same level of government where, for instance, policy innovation in one subnational unit influences other contiguous or non-contiguous unit, through policy learning, backlash, or competition, are examples of this type of research (see Borges Sugiyama 2008; Beer 2019).⁵

Differences

Despite these commonalities, MLG and SNR differ in important ways. A first difference between MLG and SNR is the geographic focus and scope of each research program. MLG was born in Europe and OECD+ countries and has been rarely applied beyond this context, with noticeable exceptions (Jeffery and Peterson 2020, 762).⁶ By contrast, SNR’s geographic scope has been more encompassing. Works in this tradition span all regions of the world, from Asia to Africa and Latin America, and cover a myriad of countries, starting with Putnam’s (1993) work on Italian regions, Dahl’s (1961) study of local democracy in the US, Herrigel (1996) analysis of German (regional) industrialization, and Skocpol (1992) work on the origins of social policy in the US. As thoroughly documented by Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder (2019b) more recent SNR works span countries as diverse as Argentina, Colombia, China, Russia, Kenya, Brazil, and Kyrgyzstan, among others (Gibson 2019; Leiras, Tuñon, and Giraudy 2015; McMann 2006; Moncada 2016; Niedzwiecki 2018; Riedl 2017; Rithmire 2014).

A second difference between both research programs is that MLG has systematically incorporated the study of supranational actors and institutions while SNR has omitted this important level. Interactions across scales in the MLG research tradition are seen as unfolding in a supranational/international-national-subnational triad.⁷ This tradition, with its origins in the study of European integration and cohesion policy, continues to be shaped in very important ways by the role played by regional governments in supranational institutions, such as the Committee of the Regions, the EU's Council, the EU's Court of Justice, the European Commission, and the EU's Central Bank. Regions within countries shape and are shaped by the EU. Regions are involved in EU's Cohesion Policy and general EU affairs, and regional parliaments are engaged in subsidiarity monitoring (Schakel 2020). MLG has helped to describe and explain this process of 'Europe with the Regions' (Piattoni 2010). By contrast, SNR, as its name denotes, is largely focused on processes that unfold below the national state. Consequently, and with notably few exceptions (Bates 1997; Eaton 2021),⁸ the effects of supranational institutions on subnational institutions/actors and vice versa have been surprisingly absent in this tradition. As a result, an involuntary division of labour has emerged between MLG research, where supranational actors and institutions figure prominently in theories and analyses, versus SNR studies where international actors and institutions are almost absent. Such division of labour has prompted some scholars working within the MLG framework to transcend the Comparative Politics/International Relations subfield divide, while leaving SNR scholars mostly within the realms of Comparative Politics.

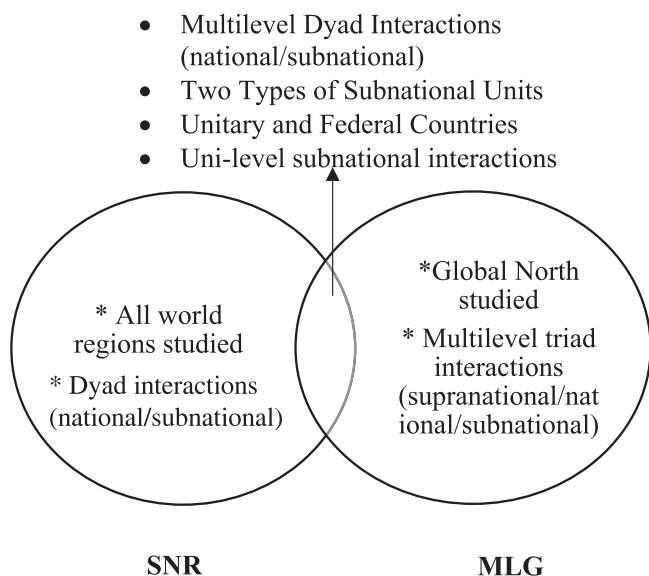


Figure 1. Similarities and differences between MLG and SNR.

Figure 1 summarizes the main similarities and differences between the MLG and SNR traditions. Whereas MLG has, until recently, been predominantly used for the study of processes in the Global North, SNR has been truly cross-regional. Second, MLG scholars have typically studied the multi-level interactions for the triad supranational/international-national-subnational scales, while SNR has devoted more attention to the dyad of national-subnational interactions, while paying little attention to how supranational/international actors and institutions affect and are affected by subnational processes. Finally, both research programs acknowledge that scales are interconnected/entangled, thus assuming interactions between the national and subnational dyad. They conceive of two types of subnational units whereby processes and outcomes unfold and claim that multi-level interactions transcend the federal-unitary divide, thus allowing scholars to build theories that can span both unitary and federal countries. And they include the possibility of both uni-level and multi-level interactions.

As noted earlier, knowledge accumulation only exists when scholars build on each other's pre-existing theories, concepts, and empirical findings. This has not been the general rule for MLG and SNR, as scholars of one tradition do not tend to engage with the work of scholars in the other. Much is to be gained if scholars of SNR and MLG build on each other's research. We argue that a promising step towards more knowledge cumulation is to first focus on the commonalities between the two research programs (Figure 1's intersection in the Venn diagram) and then leverage on their differences (i.e. the circles in Figure 1). The differences, in particular, denote independent variables, scope conditions, and concepts that are a common focus of study in one tradition but largely overlooked by the other. In the next section, we show two examples that have essentially built on the shared principles of both research traditions, while leveraging each research programs' blind spots (or differences). As a result, these works offer new and more sophisticated findings that improve previous understanding of processes and cases. The RAI is, in essence, an example and effort to transcend MLG's geographic scope conditions by applying a measurement instrument developed for OECD+ countries to Latin America and Asia. Eaton (2021) is an example of moving beyond SNR's common oversight of supranational institutions and actors. His work assesses the importance of the subnational-supranational relationship as a source of leverage for subnational governments' autonomy in Latin America.

Two examples that transcend the MLG and SNR divide

Beyond the Global North in MLG: The Regional Authority Index (RAI)

The RAI reveals how the MLG research program's expansion to the Global South can produce more refined concepts and theories and, in turn,

contribute to knowledge accumulation in the study of territorial politics. The RAI is a multi-dimensional measure of the level of autonomy of subnational territories (i.e.: regions are the unit of analysis) within countries.⁹ It brings together two research traditions that share the same starting point, i.e. actors and institutions located at one territorial level are shaped by and shape other levels of government. It also moves beyond one of MLG's blind spot, i.e. its limited geographical focus, by expanding it to countries beyond the Global North.

The RAI measures the authority that subnational units have in their own jurisdiction (self-rule) – such as the authority to elect its own representatives, design its own policies, or set the rates of its taxes – as well as their shared rule (Elazar 1987; Riker 1964). Shared rule is the authority of regions to influence decisions in the country as a whole, including constitutional change, policymaking, and tax distribution. Each domain – self-rule and shared rule – is further disaggregated into five dimensions that tap into legal authority over fiscal, administrative, and political matters (Falleti 2005; Montero and Samuels 2004).¹⁰

The original version of the RAI measured regional authority in Europe and OECD+ countries and became a crucial resource for scholars of the MLG research program (Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010). Specifically, the measurement and coding rules were initially developed for and applied to regions in 42 countries: 37 in Europe, plus the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. From these original relatively rich and democratic countries, more recently the RAI has been extended to 96 – poorer and less democratic – countries across Latin America & the Caribbean and Asia Pacific.

The expansion of the RAI beyond the original 42 countries was a significant contribution to the MLG research program (Harbers et al. 2021, 9). By moving beyond the Global North, it arguably became the most comprehensive measurement instrument of decentralization, as most other indexes only include countries in Europe, North America, and Oceania (Harguindéguy, Cole, and Pasquier 2021, 10). More relevant for our argument, the expansion of the geographical scope refined both theories and concepts used in MLG. Theoretically, it refined the analysis of regional authority and decentralization processes in contexts of authoritarian regimes. Conceptually, the geographic expansion also refined the measurement instrument by incorporating a new dimension, i.e. subnational government's borrowing authority and control.

The RAI had been thought as an instrument to assess shared-authority and self-rule in countries with long-established democratic regimes. As a result, democracy was taken as a given, and little theorization had been done about the importance of political regimes for shared-authority and self-rule. However, as the geographic scope of the RAI was expanded, and countries

from the Global South were incorporated in the coding, the salience of political regimes became evident. Many of the newly incorporated countries have a history of authoritarian regimes and unstable democratic rule, and as such contrasted sharply with the intergovernmental dynamics observed in most countries of the Global North. By incorporating the political regime variable, the RAI has contributed to refine theories of decentralization by pointing that authoritarian leaders constrain but do not necessarily neutralize subnational authority (Niedzwiecki et al. 2021).¹¹ This generalized discovery is a clear example of cumulation of knowledge resulting from applying a measurement instrument beyond its geographical scope, and how it in turn, prompted scholars to think about the effect of previously omitted variables.

The geographical expansion of the RAI also led to knowledge accumulation through the refining of the concept of regional authority. This occurred through the addition of two new indicators, authority over subnational borrowing and over decisions of borrowing that affect the whole country. Both of these indicators had been absent when the RAI was applied to countries of the Global North. The authority of subnational units to accrue debt, in particular, and its political and fiscal implications for national-level politics, has figured prominently in studies of the Global South. Borrowing authority by subnational governments became particularly important in Latin America since the 1980s, when the region was hit by a debt crisis, and both national and subnational governments had to resort to international lending. This was notably emblematic in the case of Argentina's provinces, most of which had been borrowing money from national and international creditors since the 1930s. In the context of the 1980s debt crisis, this somehow reckless borrowing from subnational governments triggered massive bailouts from the federal government, which in turn worsened the debt crisis even more (Diaz-Cayeros 2006). By the 1980s provincial debt had amounted to around half of all public debt (Wibbels 2004, 214).

The focus on subnational borrowing authority and co-responsibility on borrowing rules that affect the country as a whole, omitted in the original RAI, was finally introduced as an important dimension in subsequent iterations of the RAI in the Global North. This inclusion significantly improved the conceptualization of regional authority and the measurement instrument. Additionally, it also helped to potentially refine theories of territorial politics and financial crisis for all world regions, not just for Latin America.¹²

Overall, by expanding the RAI to the Global South scholarship in the MLG tradition expanded and refined knowledge of territorial political processes by bringing more awareness to the relationship between authoritarianism and decentralization, and to the centrality of borrowing authority and its effect on national level politics.

Incorporating the supranational level to SNR: Eaton (2021)

Eaton's 2021 article, 'Multi-level governance and the external strategies of subnational governments in Latin America' (*Regional & Federal Studies*) is another important example illustrating the benefits for knowledge accumulation ensuing from focusing on the commonalities between the two research programs and then leveraging on their blind spots. In this study, Eaton focuses on the relationship between subnational governments and supranational institutions, which is largely overlooked in the SNR tradition. As Eaton (2021) eloquently explains, while the MLG literature has increasingly analyzed complex subnational-supranational interactions (e.g.: Hooghe 1996; Piattoni 2010) and paradiplomacy (e.g.: Tatham 2016; Tavares 2016), 'very little is yet known about the external strategies that subnational governments may be using in the Global South' (Eaton 2021, 3).¹³

In Eaton (2021), subnational governments engage in a number of strategies to protect their interests from the national government. These external strategies include: subnational-supranational, subnational-national (i.e.: a subnational government reaches out to a foreign country's national government), and subnational-subnational (i.e.: a subnational government partners with another country's subnational government). We only highlight the first strategy as it is the one that most clearly transcends the boundaries of SNR and incorporates a dynamic that has been crucial in the study of MLG but largely omitted by the SNR tradition. In particular, taking a subnational-national dispute to a supranational institution – i.e.: the subnational-supranational strategy – can protect the subnational government that initiated this recourse while at the same time be interpreted by the national government as a direct challenge to its authority. Eaton (2021) explains that the supranational institutions where the subnational governments can raise their demands include regional development banks, regional bodies like the Organization of African Unity, or a multi-lateral organization like the United Nations.

The article exemplifies the subnational-supranational strategy through analyzing a conflict between Colombia's capital – Bogotá – and the national government. Gustavo Petro, Bogotá's former mayor, reached out to the Organization of American State's Inter-American Court of Human Rights (ICHR) to protect his political rights and, in doing so, may have contributed to protecting future mayors from removal from office.¹⁴ This case study suggests that much is to be gained from more systematically including subnational-supranational strategies in SNR studies. By incorporating the role of the Organization of American State's Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Colombia's conflict with Bogotá, Eaton (2021) reveals that supranational institutions so commonly studied in the MLG tradition can also play a key role in intergovernmental conflicts in Latin America (Colombia). Stated

differently, Eaton's work demonstrates how pre-existing causal hypothesis of MLG can be used as a springboard for the development and testing of new theories in SNR. By introducing a new independent variable to tackle intergovernmental conflicts in Latin America, Eaton's study yields additional information about causal patterns, leading in turn to knowledge cumulation and scientific progress.

Conclusion

This article has compared and contrasted SNR and MLG, two influential research traditions in Comparative Politics. We have argued that even though both research programs share the same object of study, along with some basic and common postulates, they have remained surprisingly unconnected. Partly for this reason, scholars of SNR and MLG have not, for the most part, drawn on, nor built on each other's theoretical and empirical findings. This, we have contended, has been detrimental for knowledge accumulation in the study of territorial politics. This article has shown that when scholars of SNR and MLG acknowledge each other, and, most fundamentally, when they draw on the blind spots of each tradition, they have the potential to refine existing theories and concepts, elucidate previously omitted variables, and expand the menu of scope conditions. In the process of building on pre-existing works from the other tradition, scholars can effectively contribute to knowledge cumulation and scientific progress in the study of territorial politics.

We have drawn on two key examples to show how this can be possible, the RAI's expansion to the Global South and Eaton's (2021) incorporation of supranational institutions. Transcending the mostly Global North focus of MLG, the RAI expanded its application from the original 42 OECD+ countries to 96 countries throughout the world. In doing so, the measure refined existing theories and concepts. Theoretically, this geographic expansion allowed for testing the relationship between authority below the state in contexts of national authoritarianism. Conceptually, the measurement instrument became more comprehensive as it was able to add previously omitted dimensions, such as subnational borrowing and co-decisions on borrowing. Transcending the national-subnational focus of SNR, Eaton's (2021) work highlights the benefits of building from one MLG's central tenets, i.e. the focus on the supranational level. As such, this work refines existing theories by adding new independent variables and causal hypothesis largely missing in the SNR tradition. Specifically, Eaton (2021) argues that the decision of Bogota's mayor to appeal to the Organization of American State's Inter-American Court of Human Rights may have set a precedent for future mayors in Colombia and in Latin America as a possible mechanism to protect local authority. In other words, as Eaton shows, much is to be

gained from incorporating subnational-supranational strategies in the menu of options available to mayors and governors when protecting their authority from the national government.

We would like to finish this article with a suggestion for a more unified research program in territorial politics. Rather than approaching the study of multi-level, territorial processes from two different approaches, i.e. SNR and MLG, scholars interested in political processes that transcend the national level (from the local to the supranational) should be part of one, overarching and unified research program on territorial politics. This (new) tradition, which would merge SNR and MLG, should be guided by the shared principles and postulates outlined earlier in this article, address multiple regions of the world in both federal and unitary countries, and study territorial processes at the intersection of national-subnational scales as well as the subnational-national-international levels of government.

A new research program on territorial politics that incorporates both SNR and MLG would need to find common ground on issues that are at the core of any research program, chief among them issues of conceptualization. Basic consensus on definitions of core issues for the study of territorial politics, such as what constitutes a territorial unit should be at the center of this effort. For instance, as we note earlier, both SNR and MLG divide territorial units into two groups. This classification is currently built on different assumptions regarding the meaning and functions of units. A more unified research program on territorial politics should elucidate whether it makes sense to keep the Type I and Type II classical distinction in MLG studies, or whether the SNR formal/jurisdictional or informal/non-jurisdictional territorial units is more useful. Alternatively, there may be good reasons for keeping both labels for defining territorial units. At a more general level, a unified research program would generate a discussion about whether scholars are better off by producing new and common labels and typologies or it is better to keep the existent concepts. The Type I/II vs. formal/informal jurisdictions is just an example of the importance of having a more systematic discussion about key concepts and conceptual typologies, one that will ultimately be conducive to scholarly communication and awareness in the study of territorial politics.

Notes

1. For an analysis of the contributions of MLG, see: Enderlein, Wälti, and Zürn (2010), Kleider (2020).
2. For an analysis of the contributions of SNR, see: Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder (2019a), Sellers (2019), Dosek (2020).
3. Negotiations occur among nested governments at several territorial levels (Marks 1993, 391).

4. When multiple subnational units are compared, this kind of research could be called *cross-subnational analysis*, in line with the conventional label *cross-national analysis*. For an analysis of subnational case selection, see: Dosek (2020)
5. See also the classic policy learning diffusion model from studies of US federalism: Karch (2007), Gray (1973).
6. The contributors in a 2020 special issue in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, for example, analyze the origins and contributions of MLG and focus almost exclusively on Europe. In the next section, we study a noticeable exception to this trend: the RAI.
7. For a summary of MLG literature that incorporates the subnational-national-supranational levels, see: Hooghe et al. (2017), Piattoni (2010), Tatham (2016), Schakel (2020).
8. For the most part, SNR has omitted the supranational level. There are some noticeable exceptions that are worth mentioning. In the next section, we analyze a crucial exception: Eaton (2021). In addition, Bates (1997) 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).
9. For a detailed description of the RAI and scores across regions and countries, see: Hooghe et al. (2016). See RAI's most recent update in: <https://garymarks.web.unc.edu/data/regional-authority/>
10. A team of scholars code each of these dimensions through constitutions, laws, government documents, secondary literature, and (in the most difficult cases) consultations with country experts. The unit of analysis is the region between the national and local levels with an average population of 150,000 or more, with the exception of differentiated governance (such as capital cities or indigenous territories) that do not have a minimum population criteria.
11. After the military coup in 1964, for example, Brazilian military officers let states maintain fiscal and policy authority. In addition, denoting some subnational autonomy under military rule, subnational elections in Brazil occurred since 1982 despite the fact that the country remained a dictatorship until 1985.
12. Research has shown that subnational borrowing was a crucial trigger of the financial crisis in Europe in late 2009 (Hooghe et al. 2016, 25).
13. To be sure, previous scholars have shown how international forces matter for domestic politics. In particular, international actors supported –and even sometimes shaped—national decisions to decentralize authority in Latin America (e.g. Goldfrank and Schrank 2009; Dickovick 2003). In addition, the work of Kathryn Sikkink and co-authors (Keck and Sikkink 2020; Lutz and Sikkink 2001; Sikkink 2005) has been crucial for understanding how opposition government institutions and nongovernmental organizations bypass the national government and use transnational advocacy networks to advance human rights. They do so through both ‘boomerang’ (Keck and Sikkink 2020) and ‘spiral’ (Risse and Sikkink 1999) by shaming and denouncing national governments in transnational advocacy networks. However, none of these works focus on subnational governments’ appeals to supranational regional institutions, and thus would less clearly show the benefits of bringing MLG and SNR in conversation with each other.
14. The specific conflict between Bogotá’s mayor and Colombia’s national government was a policy dispute between a left-wing mayor and a right-wing

President. In particular, Petro's attempt to reverse the privatization of trash collection and the subsequent sabotage campaign by the national government produced the mayor's suspension from office by the national Inspector General. As a response, and after a local tribunal failed to reinstate Petro to office, the mayor appealed to the ICHR. Petro was ultimately reinstated in office, but probably more as part of an agreement that he would support the President in his reelection bid than as a response to the favourable ruling from the ICHR. However, Eaton (2021, 11) explains that the ruling from this supranational regional institution served to visibilize the conflict, restore the mayor's political rights, and to clarify that administrative sanctions are never enough to remove an individual's political rights.

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