

# Scaling Down: The Subnational Comparative Method\*

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Subnational units of analysis play an increasingly important role in comparative politics. Although many recent studies of topics such as ethnic conflict, economic policy reform, and democratization rely on comparisons across subnational political units, insufficient attention has been devoted to the methodological issues that arise in the comparative analysis of these units. To help fill this gap, this article explores how subnational comparisons can expand and strengthen the methodological repertoire available to social science researchers. First, because a focus on subnational units is an important tool for increasing the number of observations and for making controlled comparisons, it helps mitigate some of the characteristic limitations of a small-N research design. Second, a focus on subnational units strengthens the capacity of comparativists to accurately code cases and thus make valid causal inferences. Finally, subnational comparisons better equip researchers to handle the spatially uneven nature of major processes of political and economic transformation.

**W**e live in an age of decentralization. The economic and political megatrends that are the hallmarks of the last two decades—free-market reforms and democratization—have unleashed powerful centrifugal forces. In the advanced industrial countries, for example, free-market policy reforms were implemented in conjunction with a “devolution revolution” that transferred authority and resources from central to local governments. Guided by the doctrine of “fiscal federalism,” the World Bank and other development NGOs exported the devolution revolution to poor countries by fervently promoting the decentralization of policy making and government services. Combined with the worldwide move toward deregulated, open economies, these decentralizing reforms undercut the capacity of many central governments to coordinate economic activity.

The Third Wave of democratization that swept the globe during the last quarter century also generated powerful decentralizing pressures. The democrati-

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zation of what were once only nominally federal systems in cases such as Russia and Mexico shifted the distribution of power between national and subnational governments in ways that greatly strengthened the latter. Moreover, democratization was associated with both the “federalization” of formerly unitary systems (e.g., Spain) and the breakup of federal systems (e.g., Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Soviet Union). An extreme form of decentralization is seen in cases where a change of political regime resulted in the collapse of the central state and the emergence of anarchical warlord politics (e.g., Congo/Zaire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Somalia).

In response to major centrifugal trends such as these, comparativists have focused increasing attention on subnational units of analysis. Thus many recent studies of topics such as economic policy reform, democratization, and ethnic conflict rely on comparisons across subnational political units.<sup>1</sup> Despite the proliferation of works that employ subnational comparisons, insufficient attention has been devoted to the methodological issues that arise in the comparative analysis of subnational units.<sup>2</sup> To help fill this gap, this article explores how the subnational comparative method can expand and strengthen the methodological repertoire available to comparative researchers.

I argue that the subnational comparative method offer three key advantages. First, it can help better manage some of the characteristic limitations of a small-N research design. The use of subnational units is an especially effective strategy for increasing the number of observations and thus mitigating the problem of “many variables, small N.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, a focus on subnational units can make it easier to construct controlled comparisons that increase the probability of obtaining valid causal inferences in small-N research.

Second, subnational comparisons strengthen the capacity of comparativists to accurately code their cases. Comparativists too often rely on national-level means and aggregate data when studying countries with high degrees of internal heterogeneity. This tendency to unreflectively gravitate toward national-level data and national units of analysis—a tendency that Stein Rokkan (1970) some time ago called “whole-nation bias”—has contributed to a *miscoding* of cases that can distort causal inferences and skew efforts at theory building.<sup>4</sup> A greater sensitivity to within-nation variation and complexity can help comparativists avoid these pitfalls.

Third, a focus on comparing subnational units better equips us to handle the spatially uneven nature of major processes of political and economic transformation. Processes such as democratization and economic reform often have varied effects across the territorially-defined subunits of a political system.<sup>5</sup> Because the subnational comparative method makes it easier to see this within-nation variation, it contributes to a more adequate description of complex processes of change. In addition to providing a salutary increase in our ability to accurately *describe* complex processes, a focus on subnational units has important implications for how we *theorize* such processes. Disaggregating countries along territorial lines makes it possible to explore the dynamic linkages among the distinct regions and levels of a political system. Analyzing these

linkages is an indispensable step for understanding and explaining fundamental processes of political and economic change.

### **The Subnational Comparative Method and Research Design**

The subnational comparative method has two key strengths with regard to research design: (1) it can serve as a powerful tool for increasing the number of observations, and (2) it makes it easier to construct controlled comparisons.

#### *Increasing the Number of Observations*

Focusing on subnational units can provide an efficient way to increase the number of observations in the context of a small-N research design. As emphasized by Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba (1994: 208, see also 30–31), our theories usually have observable implications at many levels of analysis and “what may appear to be a single-case study, or a study of only a few cases, may indeed contain many potential observations, at different levels of analysis, that are relevant to the theory being evaluated.”<sup>6</sup> Thus a theory originally focused on a national case can potentially be tested in subunits of that case: such as states, counties, cities, regions, or economic sectors (King et al. 1994: 219).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, moving down to a subnational level of observation has the additional advantage of not requiring travel to learn about another country.

Although the strategy of increasing the number of observations by shifting to a lower level of aggregation has considerable merits, it should be used with caution. First, when making cross-level inferences, the researcher must be careful to choose lower-level units that are appropriate for replicating the hypothesis under consideration. That is, the lower-level units should be ones in which “the process entailed by the hypothesis can take place” (King et al. 1994: 221).<sup>8</sup> Thus, it would be inappropriate to study subnational political units to test a theory about macroeconomic policy making. Second, observations at the subnational level do not necessarily provide *independent* tests of the theory, because states, counties, and other subunits within a political system are often interconnected, not freestanding. Such potential interconnections among cases can lead to “Galton’s problem” and thus require caution against overstating the certainty of conclusions based on tests using subunits drawn from the same political system (King et al. 1994: 222).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it is a good practice to analyze the sources of interconnections among subunits (e.g., policy diffusion, borrowing, migration) in an effort to discover potentially confounding omitted variables.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Making Controlled Comparisons: Strategies of Subnational Analysis*

A focus on subnational units can greatly strengthen the ability of comparativists to establish control over potential explanatory variables (Linz and de Miguel 1966; Lijphart 1971: 689–90). In this regard, two strategies of subnational analysis can be distinguished: (1) *within-nation* comparisons that

focus on subnational cases within a single country; and (2) *between-nation* comparisons that focus on subnational cases across countries. Moreover, these two strategies can be fruitfully combined in a single study.

*Within-Nation Comparisons.* Subnational units within a single country can often be more easily matched on cultural, historical, ecological, and socioeconomic dimensions than can national units. For example, my own work on the politics of economic policy reform in Mexico employs what I call a “one sector, many places” strategy that focuses on four of Mexico’s most important coffee-producing states (Snyder 1999a, 2001).<sup>11</sup> Because the four states—Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas, and Puebla—are all located in southern Mexico, have large indigenous populations, and are among the poorest in the country, I am able to control for ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions to a far greater extent than is usually possible in studies that compare national units. By making it easier to establish control over such non-political factors, a focus on subnational units helps pinpoint how variation in political institutions shapes economic performance and policy choice.

It should be emphasized that within-nation comparisons do not *necessarily* improve our ability to hold constant cultural, historical, ecological, and socioeconomic conditions: there may be as much, if not more, variation within countries as between them. For example, states in southern Mexico may have more in common with subnational units in neighboring Guatemala than with states in northern Mexico. Thus, as B. Guy Peters (1998: 35) cautions, comparativists should be careful to avoid being lulled into a “false sense of security” simply because they are using subnational units within a single country.<sup>12</sup>

*Between-Nation Comparisons.* Comparing similar subnational units across distinct national units may be a more powerful strategy for making valid causal inferences than comparing national units. For example, Linz and de Miguel (1966: 269) argue that a comparison between “advanced and backward sections” of Spain and Italy with similar cultural and socioeconomic features is an especially effective way to explore how the different political institutions of the two countries influence membership in voluntary associations. Similarly, O’Donnell (1973: 21) proposes a “cross-modern areas” comparison that juxtaposes the most developed regions and sectors of Brazil and Argentina.<sup>13</sup>

By analyzing *contiguous* subnational units across nations, scholars may be able to design between-nation comparisons that achieve an especially strong degree of control over cultural, historical, and ecological conditions. For example, studies of the impact of colonialism in Africa have focused on adjacent villages or regions located on opposite sides of an international border separating a former French from a former British colony (Miles 1994; Firmin-Sellers 2000). In his classic article on the comparative method, Arend Lijphart (1971) endorses Raoul Naroll’s (1966) suggestion that in order to study the effects of presidential and parliamentary systems, rather than comparing the United States and Britain, it may be a more fruitful strategy to compare North Dakota and Manitoba. Such a comparison would minimize variation in factors such as levels of economic development and education. In his

analysis of agrarian radicalism in the North American wheat belt, Lipset (1950) compares the cases of Saskatchewan and North Dakota, which he (1950: 215) describes as near replicas in economic and geographic terms.<sup>14</sup> This between-nation comparison highlights how the New Deal undermined agrarian socialist movements in the wheat belt of the United States, whereas the absence of a reformist federal government program in Canada during the depression provided a more favorable context for agrarian radicalism (Lipset 1950: 17, 119–20). In his study of political conflict in the Basque country, Linz (1986: 372–98) also uses between-nation comparisons by analyzing the Spanish and French Basque regions. This research design allows him to explore how individuals belonging to a common ethnic group (i.e., Basque) yet living in different countries can have sharply contrasting understandings of their ethnic and national identities.<sup>15</sup>

The within-nation and between-nation strategies of subnational analysis can be combined in a single study. For example, in addition to comparing Saskatchewan and North Dakota, Lipset (1950: 216–19, 121–4) also compares Saskatchewan with its neighboring provinces of Alberta and Manitoba. In Alberta, where the economy and social structure closely resembled Saskatchewan's, Lipset (1950: 216) found that "farmers, like those of Saskatchewan and North Dakota, are quick to react politically when a threat arises." By contrast, in Manitoba, which differed from Saskatchewan along many of the key dimensions that Lipset hypothesized would influence levels of political activism, the agrarian political movement was weak.<sup>16</sup> Thus these subnational comparisons serve to strengthen Lipset's overall argument about the causes of agrarian radicalism.

Although these various strategies of subnational analysis serve as powerful tools for making controlled comparisons, they share a limitation: the potential for diffusion and borrowing among subnational units in a single country and among contiguous subnational units in neighboring countries can make it difficult to achieve independent observations and tests.<sup>17</sup> One technique for mitigating the trade off between (1) the ability to establish control over potential explanatory factors and (2) the ability to achieve independence among the cases is to combine within-nation comparisons and between-nation comparisons of *non-contiguous* subnational units in order to reduce the potential effects of diffusion (along the lines of comparing "advanced and backward" sections of Spain and Italy, as proposed by Linz and de Miguel (1966: 269), and the "cross-modern areas" comparison proposed by O'Donnell (1973: 21)).<sup>18</sup> Such a dual strategy could help maximize both control over potential explanatory factors and independence among the cases.

### **The Subnational Comparative Method and Measurement: Coding Cases**

All comparative research faces the challenge of coding cases: the analyst must employ implicit or explicit indicators for categorizing the cases included in the study. Subnational comparative analysis can help mitigate two forms of bias that affect how *national* cases are coded. The first involves the inappropriate use of national-level averages in studying countries with a high degree of

internal heterogeneity. The second kind of bias results when the attributes of a well-studied or especially salient subunit are improperly used to characterize the national case as a whole.

*Mean-Spirited Analysis: Inappropriate Uses of National Averages*

Cross-national research often relies on national-level means to code cases. The use of national means has played an especially prominent role in quantitative research.<sup>19</sup> However, national means are also commonly employed in qualitative research—for example, a country with a large developed sector and a large underdeveloped sector may be coded as “semi-developed.” Consequently, although they may not express national means in numerical terms, many qualitative studies rely on what could be called “mean-spirited” analysis.

The problems associated with mean-spirited analysis are suggested by Linz and de Miguel’s (1966: 271) observation that “many societies we call semi-developed on the basis of a number of national indices are really a mixture of developed and underdeveloped sectors.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in terms of such national indices, countries that are in fact “semi-developed” would potentially have the same mean as contrasting cases that are composites of developed and underdeveloped sectors. Consequently, the two types of cases are indistinguishable if one relies solely on national means.

O’Donnell (1973) made this point forcefully in his comparison of Argentina and Brazil, highlighting how the coding of cases based on aggregate, national-level averages masks important differences in the *form* of a distribution of traits (e.g., normal, bimodal, etc.) as well as in the degree of dispersion of such traits. O’Donnell shows that a focus on national-level means led many studies in the 1960s to code Brazil as an underdeveloped country. This categorization obscured the fact that Brazil’s modern sector was in fact quite comparable in size to Argentina’s, a case that lacked a large rural periphery and was thus frequently coded as semi-developed (rather than underdeveloped).

Linz and de Miguel’s (1966) pioneering study of regional differences in Spain illustrates how carefully-selected within-nation comparisons can help guard against the miscoding of a national case. Linz and de Miguel (1966: 314–15) used subnational comparisons to show that causal relationships between industrialization and religiosity that were established using aggregate, national data did not hold at the subnational level. By analyzing regional-level data on culture and economic structure in Spain, Linz and de Miguel showed that, contrary to standard versions of modernization theory, the *least* industrialized regions of Spain were very secular. Moreover, among Spain’s most industrialized regions they found a wide range of variation: Catalonia was quite secular, whereas the Basque Country was highly religious.

My own research on the politics of economic reform in contemporary Mexico provides a recent example of how disaggregating countries along territorial lines can improve the coding of national cases (Snyder 1999a, 2001). Based on highly aggregated national indicators of macro-economic policy, such as tariff levels and the overall size of the public sector, most scholars have coded Mexico as an instance of successful free-market, or neoliberal, policy reform.<sup>21</sup> This

reliance on national-level data obscured the fact that the implementation of neoliberal reforms in Mexico, rather than unleashing market forces, actually resulted in the construction of new regulatory institutions at the subnational level.<sup>22</sup> Looking below the national level made it easier to see that the implementation of neoliberal reforms triggered “reregulation” processes that resulted in different kinds of new institutions for market regulation, not in the triumph of free markets. Thus a focus on subnational units provided a basis for a more accurate description and coding of the Mexican case and challenged the conventional view that the implementation of free-market reforms at the national level results in deregulated, competitive markets across an entire country.<sup>23</sup>

*Misusing the Best Known Place: Invalid Part-to-Whole Mappings*<sup>24</sup>

Invalid part-to-whole mappings result when traits or processes specific to a well-studied region or other subnational unit are improperly elevated to the status of a national paradigm. Consequently, national cases are inappropriately coded as if the whole nation possessed the set of attributes characterizing a specific region or set of localities.<sup>25</sup> Such miscoding can distort causal inferences and skew efforts at theory building.

The literature on German industrialization provides an especially vivid example of the consequences of misusing the best known place. Building on the pioneering work of Alexander Gerschenkron (1962), most scholars have seen the German case as a paradigmatic instance of centralized industrialization dominated by large firms and big, national-level banks. A provocative recent book by Gary Herrigel (1996) challenges this conventional view by showing that the industrialization process that Gerschenkron and others attributed to Germany *as a whole* was, in fact, a *regionally-specific* form of industrialization. Herrigel shows that other, less-studied regions of Germany experienced a different kind of industrialization rooted in small-scale firms and banks. By situating the process of industrialization in a regionally-differentiated national framework, Herrigel is able to “recode” German industrialization as a bimodal phenomenon. What emerges is a reconstructed national composite characterized by two distinct modes of industrialization: centralized, “organized capitalism” in some regions and a “decentralized industrial order” in others.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to offering a more valid *description* of the German case, this reconstruction of the national composite has important implications for causal inference and theory building. In light of Herrigel’s analysis, it would be a mistake to conclude based on the German case that an entire country could follow the path of centralized, organized capitalism. Rather, Herrigel’s recoding of Germany suggests that organized capitalism is suited only for specific regions and kinds of enterprises, not entire countries. Moreover, to the degree that Germany’s centralized industrialization was not an independent, separately determined process, but was in fact causally connected to the decentralized industrial order examined by Herrigel, a failure to analyze the latter phenomenon could lead to a serious misunderstanding of the former. Thus a shift to a territorially-differentiated framework in analyzing a paradigmatic case serves both to call into question a longstanding model of industrialization and to open

a new theoretical agenda that focuses on the linkages between distinct modes of industrialization within a single national unit.

In sum, mean-spirited analysis and the misuse of the best known place pose important problems of measurement and description: mean-spirited analysis inappropriately employs highly aggregated data to code cases, whereas the misuse of the best known place inappropriately employs disaggregated data to make inferences about national units. As the earlier examples suggest, in heterogeneous societies the distortions associated with these two problems can lead to the invalid coding of national cases.

### **The Subnational Comparative Method and Theory Building: Taking Territory Seriously**

A final advantage of the subnational comparative method concerns how it can help us build theories that explain the dynamic interconnections among the levels and regions of a political system. Disaggregating countries along territorial lines makes it easier to see how the constituent parts of a political system interact.<sup>27</sup> This invites us to explore the causal connections among regions that experience divergent patterns of change. Analyzing these connections can help us gain a stronger understanding both of national politics and of major processes of political and economic transformation.

#### *Within-Nation Variation and National Regimes*

A regionally differentiated perspective that highlights variation across subnational units in a country can be essential for understanding how national political regimes work. Implementing their policy agendas—or simply staying in office—often requires national-level politicians to build coalitions with different types of subnational actors. Thus a “center-centered” approach that treats the national level as an autonomous, separate sphere and obscures the connections between actors in the periphery and the center may mischaracterize the strategic context in which national politicians labor.<sup>28</sup> A vivid example from the literature on political regimes in Latin America shows how a focus on subnational units can help avoid this problem and thus improve our understanding of politics at the national level.

*Populist Coalitions: The Missing Rural Dimension.* Populism in Latin America has typically been viewed as a “metropolitan” phenomenon rooted in the most urbanized and modern regions of the country. The standard interpretation regards populism as a political strategy favoring “urban-industrial interests” at the expense of a traditional oligarchy whose power is usually seen as anchored in rural, peripheral areas of a country (Di Tella 1965, 1968).

A path-breaking article by Edward Gibson (1997) challenges this view by showing that the prototypical populist regimes of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico were in fact based on two distinct subcoalitions: a *metropolitan* coalition centered in urban areas that gave support to the development strategies of the populist regime, and a *provincial* coalition centered in rural areas that was responsible for generating the electoral majorities

that kept the populist regime in power.<sup>29</sup> From this perspective, the standard interpretation of Latin American populism as a labor-based phenomenon was insufficiently attuned to the linkages between metropolitan and peripheral regions. Consequently, populism's metropolitan face was seen as its *only* face.

What is wrong with this understanding of populism? First, such a perspective potentially distorts the forces that kept populist governments in power: a focus limited to the metropolitan side of populism can obscure the fact that labor alone was electorally insufficient to sustain populist policies. Moreover, ignoring the provincial dimension of populist governments miscasts the relationship between these governments and the old, oligarchic order that preceded them. The lopsided view of populism as an urban, labor-based phenomenon either pits populist governments against peripheral, traditional elites or, more simplistically, relegates such elites to a marginal role in national politics. By contrast, a *balanced* understanding of populism as a composite of metropolitan and provincial coalitions provides a very different, less adversarial perspective on how populist governments interacted with rural elites: It highlights how populist governments accommodated and even depended on provincial oligarchs in order to "link populism to the traditional order, give it coherence as a national electoral force, and extend its reach throughout the national territory" (Gibson 1997: 341).<sup>30</sup>

### *Backwaters or Undercurrents? Illiberal Peripheries in Latin America*

Focusing on the dynamic linkages among the levels and regions of a political system provides a new way of looking at the relationship between contrasting political phenomena observed at the "center" (i.e., the national level) and at the "periphery" (i.e., the subnational level). In the study of political and economic liberalization in contemporary Latin America, a regionally differentiated framework highlights how illiberal political and policy regimes that persist, and even proliferate, in the peripheral areas of many countries may be *undercurrents* that are causally integral components of the process of liberalization seen at the center.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, studies that focus only on politics at the national level either do not "see" these illiberal peripheries, or, alternatively, inappropriately dismiss them as isolated *backwaters*, disconnected from and left behind by the processes of political transformation observed at the center. Such a center-centered perspective, which has tended to dominate recent research on political and economic liberalization in developing countries, can lead us to misunderstand these fundamental processes as far more uniform than they in fact are.

*The Spatial Unevenness of Democracy.* Guillermo O'Donnell's pioneering work on the shortcomings of contemporary democratic regimes in Latin America highlights how a focus on the interaction among the territorially defined components of a political system helps us better understand the process of democratization. O'Donnell argues that political liberalization and democratization are territorially uneven processes. Consequently, within a particular country, the rules and norms that define the national regime and state cannot be assumed to apply equally throughout the country. For

example, in many Latin American countries “blue areas” characterized by robust rule of law coexist with “green areas” where the rule of law is partially attenuated and “brown areas” where the rule of law is extremely attenuated (O’Donnell 1999: 139).

O’Donnell’s proposal that we disaggregate countries into blue, green, and brown areas promises a salutary increase in descriptive accuracy. Moreover, this proposal has profound implications for how we theorize about democratization. By rejecting the notion that political liberalization is a territorially uniform process, O’Donnell urges us to explore the potential causal relationships between places and units that experience divergent patterns of change in the context of a unified (but not uniform) political system.

The “bluing” of a national regime may have a direct causal relationship with “browning” in subnational units. For example, in countries with highly-malapportioned electoral systems that overrepresent rural areas—a pattern common across Latin America (Samuels and Snyder 2001; Snyder and Samuels 2001)—the ability of national-level politicians to implement and consolidate democratic reforms may ironically depend on winning the overvalued support of subnational authoritarian elites. At the same time, overrepresentation of subnational authoritarian enclaves at the national level can strengthen the ability of these subnational elites to fend off efforts by external groups who seek to reform local politics. A good example of this scenario is the role of so-called “Stalinist” vote reserves in southern Mexican states that helped the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) secure the political majorities that kept the liberalizing reformers of the Salinas and Zedillo administrations in power during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>32</sup> Hence, a dialectical process can result whereby democracy is simultaneously strengthened at the center and undermined on the periphery.<sup>33</sup>

*Patchwork Liberalization: Economic Reform in Contemporary Latin America.* Economic liberalization, like democratization, has also been a territorially uneven process in contemporary Latin America. Recent research (e.g., Snyder 1999a, 2001; Gibson and Calvo 2000; Remmer and Wibbels 2000), highlights how neoliberal economic reforms have contributed to the maintenance and even proliferation of illiberal policy regimes at the subnational (especially state and provincial) level. Understanding this patchwork pattern requires a focus on the interconnections among the levels and regions that comprise the political system.

For example, to explain how the dismantling of a massive federal government enterprise in Mexico resulted in the formation of new regulatory institutions at the state level, I analyze the linkages between politicians at the state and federal levels (Snyder 2001). My research shows that state governors were able to take control of policy areas abandoned by the old federal government enterprise and reregulate what federal law had deregulated in part because the ruling PRI faced a growing threat from opposition parties at the national level. Thus president Carlos Salinas de Gortari had strong incentives to allow state governors to choose policies that helped maintain political stability and generate electoral majorities, whether or not these policies conformed to the orthodox neoliberal prescriptions that he endorsed. This permissive environment made it possible for governors to pursue regulatory policies that cut against

the agenda of neoliberal reform set at the national level by the president. In fact, Salinas did not merely tolerate such subnational deviations from his neoliberal line, he selectively promoted reregulation by vigorously supporting populist governors in certain states. Thus liberalizing economic reforms at the national level and the proliferation of illiberal policy enclaves at the subnational level were complementary and closely articulated components of a single process: the latter helped secure the political stability necessary for the former to proceed.

Gibson and Calvo (2000) also employ a subnational comparative method to explain the territorially uneven nature of economic reforms in Argentina. They show how electoral rules heavily overrepresented sparsely populated rural areas in the national legislature. This situation gave national politicians strong incentives to shield rural areas from neoliberal policy reforms in order to secure the legislative majorities needed to implement these reforms in underrepresented, urban areas.<sup>34</sup> Thus the persistent illiberal policy regimes in the Argentine periphery were not stagnant backwaters left behind by the process of economic reform in urban areas. Rather, they were causally integral components of the overarching economic reforms.

As these examples suggest, understanding economic transformation in contemporary Latin America requires that we explore the linkages between liberal and illiberal areas in the context of a single, unified system. The subnational comparative method is a key tool for achieving this goal.

## Conclusion

The subnational comparative method offers important advantages in three core areas of the research process: research design, measurement, and theory-building. By increasing the number of observations and making it easier to construct controlled comparisons, a focus on subnational units helps comparativists manage the problem of “many variables, small N.” Subnational comparative analysis also strengthens the capacity of comparativists to code cases accurately and thus make valid causal inferences. Finally, subnational comparisons provide a firm foundation for building theories that explain spatially uneven processes of political and economic transformation. In addition to these methodological benefits, subnational comparative analysis offers an indispensable tool for understanding the decentralizing political and economic trends of the contemporary era.

Although this article has highlighted the advantages of analyzing subnational units, it has also emphasized that, like all methodologies, the subnational comparative method has limitations. One limitation concerns generalizability. This problem emerges most clearly in the context of what I call the “within-nation” strategy of subnational comparative analysis that focuses on cases from a single country. Although within-nation comparisons can provide an especially powerful way to establish control over historical, ecological, and cultural conditions, this strategy often involves a trade-off between the ability to gain control and the ability to generalize.<sup>35</sup> One technique for mitigating this trade-off is to combine within-nation comparisons and between-nation comparisons of subnational units from *different* countries. Alternatively, subnational compari-

sons can be used in conjunction with cross-national comparisons. How distinct strategies of comparison can be combined to strengthen both the ability to establish control over conditions and the ability to generalize is an important question for future research.

The possibilities for generalizing from subnational cases can also be enhanced by improving our tools for making valid inferences from subnational to national levels of analysis. Recent work on quantitative methods provides new ways to manage the problems that arise in making cross-level inferences (e.g., Grofman 1995; King 1997; Katz and King 1999). Adapting such insights to qualitative, small-N research should provide better techniques for generalizing from subnational units.

A second limitation of the subnational comparative method concerns the problem of interdependence. Because of the possibility of diffusion and borrowing among subnational units in a single country, within-nation comparisons can involve a trade-off between the ability to establish control over potential explanatory factors and the ability to make independent observations and tests of hypotheses. Combining within-nation comparisons and comparisons of subnational units from different countries can reduce the effects of diffusion and could thus help mitigate this trade-off.

It bears emphasis that the problem of achieving independence among cases is by no means limited to subnational comparative analysis: cross-national research on diffusion, dependency, and international demonstration effects has long recognized the importance of interconnections among national units. The process of globalization and the recent growth of information technology have undoubtedly magnified the scope and density of interconnections among both national and subnational units. Thus freestanding political units that can be legitimately treated as isolated, experimental observations are probably harder to find at *any* level of analysis. Studies that address the methodological challenges posed by the trend toward more interconnectedness will provide a far stronger grounding for future comparative research.

## Notes

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1. See, for example, Kohli (1987, 1990); Fishman (1993); Fox (1993, 1996); Putnam (1993); Locke (1995); Hagopian (1996); Locke and Jacoby (1997); Rubin (1997); Stoner-Weiss (1997); Tandler (1997); Samuels (1998); Snyder (1999a, 2001); Firmin-Sellers (2000); Gibson and Calvo (2000); Heller (2000); Montero (2000); Remmer and Wibbels (2000); Varshney (2001); and Jones Luong (2002). Although subnational units command increasing attention, subnational political analysis is not an entirely new phenomenon in comparative politics: a number of earlier works focused on subnational cases (for example, Tilly 1964; Linz and de Miguel 1966; Kesselman and Rosenthal 1974; and Tarrow 1967, 1976).
  2. These issues do receive limited attention in Lijphart (1971); King, Keohane, and Verba (1994);

and Peters (1998). Linz and de Miguel (1966) is one of the few works that focuses primarily on methodological issues involved in comparing subnational units.

3. The classic discussion of this problem is Lijphart (1971). See also Collier (1993).
4. The problem of whole-nation bias is also discussed in Lijphart (1975:166-9).
5. See, for example, O'Donnell (1993); Fox (1994); Kurtz (1999); Snyder (1999a, 2001); Gibson and Calvo (2000); and Remmer and Wibbels (2000).
6. Collier (1993:112) also discusses the value of within-case, "internal comparisons" for increasing the number of observations.
7. In this context, King et al. discuss Atul Kohli's (1987) research on social policy in India. To test hypotheses about the effects of state-level political regimes on poverty policy, Kohli uses additional observations from the local, *panchayat* level (Kohli also looks at other countries to evaluate the observable implications of his hypotheses). Recent work on divided government at the state level in the United States provides another good illustration of how moving to a lower level of aggregation can help solve the small-N problem by increasing the number of observations. See, for example, Alt and Lowry (1998); and Lowry, Alt, and Ferree (1998).
8. Lieberman (1985: 108) adopts a quite different view of this issue, concluding that evidence at a lower level of aggregation "is irrelevant for determining the validity of a proposition about processes operating on the higher level" and that "no useful understanding of the higher-level structure can be obtained from lower-level analyses."
9. "Galton's problem" is so named because of the objection raised by Francis Galton at the meeting of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1889 to a pioneering paper by Edward B. Tylor introducing the cross-cultural survey method. Galton pointed out that because traits often spread by diffusion (for example, by borrowing or migration), observations of such traits across cultures were not necessarily independent instances (Naroll 1961: 15).
10. As discussed below, dynamic interactions among the subunits of a political system should not necessarily be seen as a troubling hindrance to making valid causal inferences. Rather, such interactions can be a fertile source of theoretical innovation and progress.
11. See Locke (1995) for an intriguing research design that combines the study of varied subnational units with an analysis of *multiple* sectors. Locke offers a subnational study of the Italian automobile and textile industries.
12. Rustow (1968: 45) made a related point when he argued that "mere geographic proximity does not necessarily furnish the best basis of comparison."
13. As O'Donnell himself observes (1973: 21), such a strategy overlooks the possibility that the presence or absence of a large, underdeveloped periphery may have a crucial impact on national politics. Hence, even though the modern sectors in Argentina and Brazil are similar in size, their effect on national politics may differ because of the different sizes of the agrarian sectors in the two cases.
14. This between-nation comparison thus enables Lipset to employ a "most similar" systems design. On "most similar" and "most different" systems designs see Przeworski and Teune (1970).
15. Another commonly-employed strategy of between-nation subnational comparison involves focusing on the same economic sector across distinct countries (see, for example, Evans 1995; Bates 1997; Karl 1997; and Paige 1997). Because of cross-country differences on a wide range of other variables, such an approach may be less effective than within-country comparisons for exploring how variation in political factors shapes economic outcomes.
16. In the context of the Saskatchewan-Alberta-Manitoba juxtaposition, Lipset (1950: 217) makes an intriguing cross-temporal comparison, noting that "during the period between the 1890's and the early twentieth century, when economic and ecological conditions in Manitoba approximated those of Saskatchewan and Alberta today [1950], the Manitoba agrarian political movement was strong."
17. This difficulty of achieving independent observations among spatially proximate units is discussed in the econometric literature on "spatial autocorrelation" (e.g., Anselin 1988). The spatial autocorrelation problem is in many ways analogous to the "temporal autocorrelation" problem in time-series analysis (Eagles 1995: 7; King 1997: 166).
18. The value of between-nation comparisons of non-contiguous units for increasing the independence among cases is suggested by Waldo Tobler's "first law of geography" which posits that

“everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant ones” (Eagles 1995: 7).

19. See, for example, Lipset (1959) and the huge literature inspired by this study.
20. Peters (1998: 44) makes a related point when he observes that whole countries are often coded as outliers when only one part of the country has extreme values, whereas the rest of the country actually has “normal” values with respect to the cross-national distribution.
21. See, for example, Nelson (1990) and Córdoba (1994).
22. A similar reliance on easily available, national-level OECD data in much recent work on the comparative political economy of advanced industrial countries has also undoubtedly obscured important processes occurring below the national level.
23. Moving to the subnational level does not necessarily guarantee a correct coding of national cases because scholars can miscode the subnational units themselves. For example, Gaines (1999) shows that scholars miscoded province-level party systems in Canada as two-party systems and thus incorrectly concluded that Canada conformed to Duverger’s law at the provincial, if not at the national, level (Duverger’s law states that plurality rule elections result in two-party competition). By contrast, Gaines shows that province-level party systems in Canada actually have more than two parties. Thus Canada stands as a genuine counterexample to Duverger’s law.
24. On the rather different problem of “the misuse of the little known case,” see Kenworthy (1973). Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier’s inversion of Kenworthy’s formulation—“the misuse of the best known case”—has obviously influenced my formulation (Collier and Collier 1991: 14).
25. The problem of misusing the best known place might be characterized as the well-known ecological fallacy “in reverse” in that *disaggregated* data from subunits results in a biased inference about the aggregate level. The ecological fallacy refers to the biases that can result when using aggregate data to make inferences about individual-level behavior (Robinson 1950). A method for making unbiased inferences from aggregate data is presented in King (1997).
26. In its view of national political economies as complex composites of diverse subnational systems, Herrigel’s work exemplifies what might be called the “MIT school” of political economy associated with the work of scholars such as Suzanne Berger, Michael Piore, Charles Sabel, and Judith Tandler. Richard Locke’s research on Italy also exemplifies the MIT school. In his important book on the Italian case, Locke (1995) argues for a “micro-politics” approach to political economy rooted in the assumption that “national political economies are not coherent systems but rather incoherent composites of diverse subnational patterns that coexist (often uneasily) within the same national territory.” Locke (1995: 16-20) criticizes tendencies by some scholars to extrapolate the economic successes and dynamism of the so-called “Third Italy” based on small enterprises and flexible production to the national case as a whole. This tendency provides a good example of what I mean by misusing a well-known place.
27. In their critique of “dualist” perspectives on development that divided countries into a modern, capitalist economy and a backward, pre-capitalist one, dependency theorists often expressed a strong concern with describing and explaining the connections between contrasting regions of a country. See, for example, Stavenhagen (1968) and Portes (1983).
28. The term “center-centered” is from Rubin (1997: 12).
29. See Tandler (1999: 105-19) for an intriguing extension of Gibson’s argument that shows how “two-pronged” coalition-building strategies that marry modern and traditional constituencies have been implemented at the subnational level by contemporary Brazilian governors. Roberts (1995) makes a related argument about “neopopulism” as a coalition-building tool in the context of the implementation of free-market economic reforms in Peru during the 1990s. On neopopulism, see also Weyland (1996, 1999).
30. Hagopian’s important work on Brazil also shows that a keen sensitivity to variation at the subnational level can highlight how transformational national regimes accommodate, rather than marginalize, traditional elites. As in the literature on populism, work by political scientists on Brazil’s bureaucratic-authoritarian regime tended to focus exclusively on urban, metropolitan areas. In this respect, Hagopian (1996: xiii) notes, “Many country studies that identify themselves as national in scope are in fact analyses of the most advanced regions—Rio de

- Janeiro and especially São Paulo. As such, they have a collective blind spot and...have paid a price for their myopia." See also Migdal, Kohli, and Shue (1994) on the value of subnational analysis in the study of state-society relations.
31. By "illiberal" I mean non-democratic in the political sphere and non-free-market in the economic sphere.
  32. On subnational authoritarian regimes in Mexico, see Fox (1994) and Snyder (1999b). On the important, yet often overlooked, role of non-democratic rural elites in securing political and economic liberalization at the national level in Chile, see Kurtz (1999).
  33. We might want to consider how we should code such a case. Is a country characterized by the coexistence of a national democratic regime alongside subnational authoritarian regimes a full-fledged democracy?
  34. Remmer and Wibbels (2000) also analyze the divergent effects of neoliberal economic reforms across Argentine provinces. They argue that the persistence of illiberal policy regimes at the provincial level may jeopardize national economic performance and thus undermine the sustainability of reforms at the national level.
  35. On the related trade-off between generalizability and conceptual validity, see Sartori (1970; 1984); Collier and Mahon (1993); Collier and Levitsky (1997); Collier and Adcock (1999); and Munck (1998).

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