

Reflection

Subnational Governments in Latin America: An Opportunity for Advancing Theory Building and Generalization

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Abstract: Subnational (intermediate and local) governments have been the source of great advancements in the literature of public administration and public management in the last few decades. However, most of these studies focus on cases in the United States, the United Kingdom, and a few other European countries. By sidelining the experiences of other regions of the world, the public administration field misses the opportunity to study institutional arrangements and contextual environments that are not salient among industrialized developed nations. Particularly, subnational governments in Latin America can serve as cases of study to understand fundamental political, organizational, and managerial challenges in the provision of public services. Latin American countries are characterized by a deeply uneven distribution of national state capacity across their territories. Moreover, the region has experienced a rise of decentralization countered by national efforts

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to recentralize power and resources. In this context, Latin American subnational governments face issues of lacking capacity, threats of elite capture, and constant bargaining with national governments to achieve acceptable levels of service provision and policy implementation. This article will review recent public administration literature that leverages subnational governments in Latin America and will briefly outline key institutional factors for a research agenda.

The Study of Subnational Governments in Public Administration

The rise of decentralization since the 1980s (Rondinelli, Nellis and Cheema 1983, Hooghe and Marks 2016) has increased the salience of subnational governments, both at the intermediate and local level, as a subject of study in political science, public economics, and other social sciences. While decentralization is traditionally understood to comprise an economic, political, and administrative dimension (Schneider 2003), not all these aspects have received the same attention from social scientists. Scholars have studied the arrangements for fiscal distribution and redistribution, as well as their consequences for service provision (Bahl and Linn 1994, Bird and Vaillanourt 1998, Brosio and Jimenez, 2012). Moreover, the process of decentralization itself, with its political and economic causes, and the reshaping of the governance landscape have also become key subjects of study (Falleti 2010, Oxhorn, Tulchin and Selee 2004). Meanwhile, administrative aspects of decentralization such as local governments' capacity building and intergovernmental / collaborative management have received less attention in the decentralization literature.

The field of public administration has taken on subnational and local governments as an important subject of study, particularly during the last 20 years when the field has experienced an emergence of large-N quantitative analysis. Indeed, several advancements in studying key aspects of public management have used subnational governments as unit of analysis. For instance, English local governments (Andrews and Boyne 2010, Andrews et al 2012), Texas school districts in the United States (O'Toole and Meier 2003, Meier and O'Toole 2002) and US state governments (Ingraham, Joyce and Donahue 2003, Carley, Nicholson-Crotty and Fisher 2015) have frequently served to explore the role of management, organizational capacity, environmental context and other drivers on performance.

Subnational entities range from villages with some hundred inhabitants to states with dozens of millions of people such as Uttar Pradesh in India, California in the US, and Sao Paulo in Brazil. As such subnational governments can take the form of small organizations with heavy reliance on the top executive and of multi-organizational complex entities with thousands of public employees and plenty of policy responsibilities. Yet, in the scale from micro to macro levels of analysis in public administration (Jilke et al. 2019), subnational governments belong to the meso level.

Each subnational government is, in any case, a group of individuals, teams, or organizations, that operates in a jurisdiction and a policy space determined by an overall institutional framework. This is, precisely, a key advantage of subnational governments as units of analysis. In a given country, a common national institutional framework constraints subnational government, and these are often

responsible for similar functional roles. As a result, researchers can focus on understanding the role of certain administrative, managerial, or environmental features while “holding institutions constant”. However, by restricting the survey to analyzing subnational and local governments in a handful of national contexts in the Western developed world, the field misses the opportunity to explore other institutional contexts and experiences that can enrich the field. The following section addresses these possibilities in detail.

The Need to Look at the Global South

In recent years, several voices have called for a more central place for comparative and international studies in the public administration field (Guljarani and Moloney 2012, Milward et al. 2016, Beagles, Schnell and Gerard 2019), particularly for greater attention to the developing world (Bertelli et al. 2020). By incorporating a more international and diverse perspective, the field could gain a better understanding of institutional contexts that do not play a significant role in the Western developed world. For instance, even with the current phenomenon of democratic backsliding facing several industrialized countries, they remain almost fully democratic systems while most of the partially democratic and authoritarian regimes correspond to middle- and low-income countries. Also, while Western developed countries tend to have consolidated party systems, there are plenty of cases in the Global South where political competition is more individualized and allegiances are fluid.

The extent to which societies uphold rule of law is also widely varying around the world. Thus, explaining administrative and citizen-government interactions require an understanding of social norms and informal

institutions that may play a heavier role than formal regulations. Finally, hiring systems and career paths for public personnel also have substantial differences in terms of their formal examination requirements and meritocratic components. Each and all of these institutional differences shape the accountability mechanisms for public managers and public officials, creating unique settings of incentives and challenges for them to perform their functions.

The environmental context surrounding governments and public organizations also differs substantially between high-income countries and the rest. From a resource-dependent perspective, organizations might be highly sensitive to environmental conditions such as munificence, turbulence, and complexity (Boyne and Meier 2009). For instance, public organizations in middle and low-income countries cannot always rely on a job market with enough qualified candidates to satisfy their personnel demands. This potential lack of properly trained human capital may also be compounded with scarcity of financial or technical resources, thus directly impacting organizations' capacity and thus their ability to implement policy and provide services adequately. Meanwhile, industrialized nations seldom experience certain sources of turbulence and complexity that are more common in the Global South such as ethnic conflict, civil war, and socio-economic crises. This variety of settings necessarily questions the external validity of research findings in public administration. One alternative to address this need for generalization is focusing on the macro (national) level of analysis which has been often neglected in the contemporary study of public administration (Roberts 2020a). This approach requires a deep understanding of the institutional and environmental frameworks facing policy makers to identify prominent macro-strategies at the governance

level (Roberts 2020b). Similarly, others have highlighted the importance to identify the role of path dependence and tradition within governance and administrative systems (Painter and Peters, 2010).

Another alternative for expanding the scope and depth of theories in public administration is exploiting the meso level of analysis with subnational governments as a unit. Subnational analysis allows for theory building that incorporates different levels of explanation (Giraudy, Moncada and Snyder 2019). Moreover, countries in the Global South tend to present greater levels of subnational inequality in terms of state capacity and policy outcomes (O'Donnell 1993, Soifer 2008). Therefore, the study of subnational governments in the Global South can allow to explore the interaction between understudied national-level institutions with a wide range of levels of organizational capacity, expertise, and environmental conditions at the subnational and local level.

Why Study Latin American Subnational Governments?

Among the many possibilities for the study of subnational governments, this final section develops three arguments for the study of Latin American subnational governments:

First, Latin America is the world region that experienced the most dramatic rise of decentralization and subnational autonomy during the 1990s (Falleti 2010). As a result, Latin American countries have served as case studies to expand the theories of federalism and intergovernmental relations. For instance, Meza et al. (2019) study how features of federalism affect metropolitan governance and interlocal cooperation using cases from Mexico and Brazil. Yet, others have used cases

from unitary but highly decentralized countries to explore managerial and organizational aspects often downplayed in the literature of intergovernmental relations (see for instance, Bello-Gomez and Avellaneda 2021, and Bello-Gomez 2021). Meanwhile, the Latin American region has also experienced national-led efforts to recentralize power and resources (Lopez-Murcia 2022). In this setting, scholars have used local government actors in countries seldom studied in public administration such as Honduras and Ecuador to study behavioral and organizational reactions to changes in governance patterns (Zarychta, Grillos and Andersson 2020, Zambrano-Gutierrez and Avellaneda 2021).

Secondly, Latin American countries exhibit profound territorial unevenness in state capacity and thus in the ability of governments to implement policy and provide services across the territory (Luna and Soifer 2017). These differences might exist even for providing arguably simple services such as trash collection. For instance, de la Riva-Agüero (2022) explores the relationship between service complexity, collaborative governance and administrative capacity using the case of waste management in Peruvian municipalities. Furthermore, capacity unevenness is reflected not only in the capacity of subnational and local governments, but also in the substantial differences in the presence of the central government across the country. For example, Bello-Gomez (2020) identifies those different levels of capacity and resource endowment of locally managed schools moderate the contribution that a national agency in charge of child protection services has over education provision in Colombia.

Third, Latin American subnational governments also face turbulent and complex environmental conditions. As such, scholars

have used these contexts to explore, for instance, the moderating role of political violence on the management-performance relationship (Avellaneda 2009), or the effect of municipal size on tax collection (Avellaneda and Gomes 2015). Similarly, these subnational governments are under constant threats of elite capture due to low levels of rule of law and pervasive corruption. As such, they become interesting cases of study for our scholarly understanding of corruption in the public sector. Pérez-Chiqués and Meza (2021), for instance, use a comparative analysis of two Mexican municipalities to study the influence of trust in the development of corrupt networks.

Conclusion

This brief review exemplifies the role that subnational analysis in Latin America is playing in advancing theory in diverse public administration topics. Subnational governments in the region hold a wide range of policy functions and degrees of autonomy. Moreover, they face distinct institutional and environmental conditions. Making use of available datasets and adding their own efforts to collect novel data, scholars are leveraging these characteristics of Latin American subnational governments to test, generalize and adjust theoretical models in public management. Achieving the internationalization and globalization of the public administration field demands the success of this and other regional initiatives that speak to the realities of governance in the Global South.

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