

Prof. Dr. Michael W. Bauer  
Jean Monnet Professor  
Chair of Comparative Public Administration and Policy Analysis  
michael.bauer@uni-speyer.de

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**MICHAEL W. BAUER**

**DIANA PITSCHEL**

**PHILIPP STUDINGER**

**REGIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE SUBNATIONAL  
DIMENSION OF MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE**

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## **Introduction**

In the aftermaths of the 1988 structural funds reform issues of regional participation in EU policy-making have received increasing attention. The role subnational authorities should play has also been a topic in the ongoing debate about the reform of the “constitutional order” of the Union. One important issue in the debate about regional involvement in supranational politics concerns the question how much importance subnational administrative elites attach to the institutionalization of regional access opportunities to the European policy making arena.

## **Modes of regional participation in EU policy-making**

In this section we dealt with subnational administrative elites’ preferences on questions of subnational governance, i.e. modes of regional participation in EU policy-making. First we addressed aspects of institutionalized competences. Thereby we assessed the interviewees’ preferences concerning appropriate channels of access to European policy making. The overall majority of respondents are strongly in favor of an intensification of the institutional nexus of the regions with the EU (e.g. right to file an action at the European Court of Justice). The national mean values are not significantly deviating from each other. Interestingly, the German interviewees as top officials working in regional administration with probably the highest institutional autonomy to bypass the nation state gave the least positive responses. However, interpreting this result one has to keep in mind that the German Länder already have in place reliable channels of representation and access to EU policy-making in the

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Prof. Dr. Michael W. Bauer, Chair of Public Policy and Public Administration, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6 - 10099 Berlin - Email [mw.bauer@sowi.hu-berlin.de](mailto:mw.bauer@sowi.hu-berlin.de).

domestic arena. Another important feature of regional participation concerns the material policy competences of regions. The modest claims of subnational administrative elites as regards regional involvement in distinct policies indicate a very realistic assessment of regions' actual (read limited) policy-making capacities. Our interviewees select very carefully in which policies areas regions should reasonably be involved. In general, we detect considerable differences between the countries. Whereas Spanish respondents claim regional competences (in nine of twelve policies), the French (four policies) and Polish (five policies) respondents are located in the middle range. The least demanding interviewees are the Hungarians (one policy). Surprisingly, German interviewees named only three policies in which regions should have competences. We expected them to claim far more policy-making competences.

The second part of the analysis was concerned with subnational administrative elites' preferences on the allocation of competences between distinct levels of government. Our data revealed that the Spanish—and to a lesser degree also the French—interviewees prefer a reduction in the number of involved government levels. As regards the current setting of competence allocation, we can state that by and large our respondents seem to be satisfied. However, on average respondents want to strengthen the exclusive competences of the subnational level in approximately two policies, but at the same time they name one policy in which regions should share their competences with more partners than they currently do (or even abandon it). Without overstating these results subnational administrative elites seem to prefer the bundling of competences on fewer levels to the idea of a broad constitutionalized version of multilevel governance, i.e. the allocation of competences on distinct levels of governance.

### **Allocation of Competences among Government Levels**

The general involvement of regions in a certain range of policies is one thing. Another, equally important one is the allocation of competences between distinct levels of government in a multilevel system. Based on a comparison between status quo and preferred distribution of competences over distinct government levels in twelve policies we developed three variables which capture crucial issues of competence allocation. With the first variable we measure top-bureaucrats preferences on the “reduction in the number of government levels” involved in the twelve specified policies. The second variable grasps individuals' stance on the “exclusivity of regional competences” whereas the third variable measures preferences in regard to the “(partial) transfer of regional competences” on higher levels of government.

First, we assess in how many of the twelve policies respondents favor a reduction in the number of government levels involved. On average our respondents favor a concentration on

fewer levels of governance in slightly more than one policy, i.e. they are satisfied with the current situation. Comparing the national mean values we find the French and especially the Spanish responses being outliers compared to the other national means. On average the French interviewee supports a concentration in about 2.2 policies and the Spanish even in 4.9 of the twelve policies!

As regards the “exclusivity of regional competences” in twelve specified policies our respondents want to strengthen the subnational level in about two policies. The national mean values, however, indicate that there is a considerable cross-country variance in the responses. Surprisingly, the largest differences in elite preferences can be observed between two states that have both very strong regions: Spain and Germany. Whereas German interviewees seem relatively satisfied with the current situation and abstain from claiming more exclusive competences for the regions (mean 0.5), the average Spanish respondent wants to see the exclusive competences of regions strengthened in six policies. Polish, Hungarian and French responses vary between 1.3 policies (Hungary) and 2.5 policies (France).

Further, we address whether regions should (partially) transfer their competences to other levels of government, i.e. the nation state or the EU or even want to abandon their competences completely. In general the respondents name less than one policy in which the regions should hand over competences. This indicates that the majority of respondents does see a necessity for regions to share (parts) of their competences with the EU or the nation state. To our surprise it was again the Spanish respondents that did not fit the overall scheme. On average they named four policies in which the regions should hand over competences. Apparently, the decisions of our respondents whether (and in which policy fields) region should have more exclusive competences or share its competences with more partners seem to be policy specific. Respondents are not pure power-seekers but consider rather carefully whether the region is the most appropriate level to regulate a certain policy.

### **Conclusion**

This paper analyzed governance preferences of subnational administrative elites in five EU member states. The aim was to collect original data, identify systematic patterns and to interpret observable variation. 347 high ranking subnational officials took part in our survey. On the basis of this sample we were able to describe the individual preference structures and look for similarities and differences in individual preference patterns.

We focused upon political exchange between subnational authorities and the supranational level. More precisely we asked our interviewees how they wanted subnational participation in EU matters to be organized. Our respondents want the institutional nexus of regions with the

EU to be strengthened. Furthermore, we found a broad consensus that regions should remain or even be further involved in policy making.

The results, however, indicate that subnational administrative elites very carefully select the policies for which they would like to see greater regional involvement. It depends on the concrete policy area whether subnational officials are in favor or do oppose to share responsibilities with other levels of government. With regard to the allocation of competences our data revealed two important aspects. First it seems that on the whole respondents are satisfied with the present distribution of competences among subnational, national and the EU level. They do not urge for comprehensive competence shifts. Second, subnational officials want to see competences “bundled” rather than shared with multiple government levels. This means subnational officials prefer a clear attribution of competences, they do not see the need that the regional level always have to have particular policy competences and they rather want the allocation of competences to fewer than to all three levels of government. In our view this does not mean that these elites oppose the emerging European multilevel system. Rather it indicates that interviewees have a problem solving notion of politics and subscribe to efficiency considerations as the major principle for policy making— instead of putting power maximizing strategies first and opposing the sharing of competences as a matter of principle.

Hence, our data suggests that the practice of multilevel governance – and the sub-national dimension therein – must be understood from a perspective of policy areas or fields. At the very least, policy-making across levels is and remains a dynamic undertaking. It is thus probably impossible to aim at conceiving a new institutional architecture which would encompass the enormous variety of sub-national constellations, needs and interests in a simple manner. Multilevel governance remains in our view an analytical device to help understand ongoing dynamics of government and societal relationships across state levels. It should however not be attributed ontological quality itself. As then the risk is that it is turned into a political ideology.