Title: Muddling up political systems? When regionalization blurs democracy: decentralization and attribution of responsibility.

Abstract:

The rise of regional governments in Europe has been often espoused on democratic grounds. Yet the democratic promise of political decentralization should be evaluated in light of its potential undermining effects upon the essential mechanism to make accountability work: citizens’ capacity to assign responsibility for policy outcomes. People may get it wrong when assigning responsibility because they are not sure who is responsible for policy outcomes when powers are vertically fragmented between different levels of government and/or simply because their responsibility judgements are biased by political beliefs, which act as *lenses* through which attribution is filtered. How can we then make electoral accountability work in decentralized systems? This paper will explore this question by delving into the most important theoretical and empirical challenges in the study of attribution of responsibility and electoral accountability in decentralized contexts. At the theoretical level, there is still need of a better understanding of the relationship between federal institutional conditions and individuals’ use of cognitive bias to cope with institutional complexity when assigning responsibility. The empirical challenge is to overcome the lack of comparable individual-level data on responsibility attribution for a broad range of country cases.

Introduction

The rise of regional governments in Europe has been often espoused on democratic grounds. Yet one way in which the democratic promise of political decentralization could be challenged are its potential undermining effects upon the essential mechanism to make accountability work: citizens’ capacity to assign responsibility for policy outcomes. The study of the effects of decentralization upon accountability speaks to a more general debate on the democratic implications of the increasing migration of powers from national authorities (Tatham and Mbaye, 2017), not only due to ongoing decentralization but also as a result of European integration and globalization.

When we say that decentralization shapes accountability we are basically referring to the electoral mechanism whereby citizens hold governments to account. The accountability mechanism has been theoretically grounded on the classic electoral reward-punishment model in which voters give politicians credit for good policy outcomes and punish them at the ballot box for poor performance (Fiorina, 1981). This electoral threat disciplines incumbents and aligns their interests with those of voters: if politicians have incentives to be responsive it is because they anticipate the electoral costs they may incur if they ignore the electorate’s preferences.

The crucial question on the accountability mechanism is whether citizens can actually discern to what extent politicians are acting in their interest. Certainly, a necessary condition to hold governments accountable is that voters can accurately identify who is to blame or credit for policy outcomes responsibility (Ferejohn, 1986; Key, 1966; Powell, 2000; Royed, et al., 2000). If otherwise responsibility attribution is blurred, the accountability mechanism is undermined, wiping out the incentives of politicians to be responsive to the electorate’s preferences (Cheibub and Przeworski, 1999).

The rise of regions in Europe challenges the accountability mechanism by increasing the institutional complexity of national democracies as well as the contamination between electoral arenas (Schakel, 2017). As it is generally the case elsewhere, decentralization reforms in Europe have not taken the form of a “neat” and “clean” transfer of powers but of an intertwined allocation of legislative and executive powers between national and regional authorities (Rodden, 2006, p. 26). As a result, citizens have been left with a fragmented institutional setting in which they may struggle to assign responsibilities between different levels of government. If citizens cannot clearly distinguish spheres of authority between levels of government, their decisions at the ballot box may be weakly connected to incumbents’ past performance, which takes the model of electoral accountability to task.

In the next pages we explore the theoretical and empirical connections between decentralization and accountability through a critical mapping of the contributions in the area, highlighting areas of solid knowledge, areas where there are gaps, and avenues for further exploration. The discussion is organized around three sections. In the first one we focus on the relationship between decentralization and policies. We introduce the classic reward-punishment model of accountability that connects policies and vote and then discuss one of the main criticisms made to that model: that individuals will be able to attribute responsibility for outcomes to the influence of elected officials. Then we discuss how complex institutions, like federalism, may complicate responsibility assignments and review some of the evidence on individuals’ capacity to assign responsibility in federal states and its impact upon accountability.

In the second section we focus on the role between decentralization, accountability and politics. By politics we refer to blame-shifting strategies between different levels of government. From the perspective of political actors, decentralized institutions may create incentives for politicians to engage in blame-attribution, which may reinforce citizens’ confusion on who does what and in turn weaken accountability. The discussion also explores the politics of blame-shifting from the individual perspective. It does so by introducing the role of individual political attitudes (party alignments and identity) in moderating individuals’ responsibility judgements.

The third section discusses some of the empirical gaps to advance the comparative study of the relationship between decentralization and accountability. It does so by providing recent empirical evidence on responsibility attribution in federal and non-federal states based on the European Election Study and discussing some of the limitation in the use of the existing data.

Decentralization, accountability and policies.

Does the rise of regions shape citizens’ capacity to hold governments to account? A way to answer this question is to explore how decentralization may alter the relationship between policies and vote. Let’s start with the classic reward-punishment model of accountability. This model expects individuals to evaluate policies retrospectively and then vote accordingly: bad policy outcomes will lead voters to punish the incumbent, whereas good policy outcomes will result in electoral reward (Fiorina, 1981). However, the assumption that individuals will be able to attribute responsibility, for bad or good things happening, to the influence of elected officials has been increasingly called into question (Tilley and Hobolt 2011:1). Voters may face informational difficulties to connect their well-being with incumbents’ performance, so politicians may get rewarded or punished randomly or for events beyond their control (Achen and Bartels, 2016, p. 116 and ff.).

Some scholars have suggested that institutional conditions are important to understand the ease with which voters can attribute responsibility for policy outcomes. These studies argue that where institutional “clarity of responsibility” is lower due to a high fragmentation of powers (because of federalism, minority or coalition governments or bicameral opposition) individuals are expected to be less capable to assign responsibilities and, in turn, less prone to hold incumbents accountable on the basis of policy outcomes. An extensive body of empirical work supports this hypothesis, showing that in complex institutional settings there is a weaker connection between policies and vote. Powell and Whitten (1993), (Anderson, 2000; de Vries, et al., 2011; Hobolt, et al., 2013; Whitten and Palmer, 1999).

The clarity of responsibility literature is right in including federalism as one of the institutional conditions that may blur clarity of responsibility. Certainly, if we have a look at the rise of regions in Europe, decentralization has usually taken the form of an intertwined distribution of powers that may complicate responsibility assignments, as different administrations are often involved in the finance, design and execution of policies. These federal conditions raise two questions, namely: a) how individuals cope with responsibility assignments under complex institutional settings; and b) whether that has an impact on accountability.

Regarding the first question, the accumulated evidence on how individuals cope with responsibility assignments shows mixed results. Some studies indicate that people struggle to allocate responsibilities between federal and regional authorities (Cutler, 2004; 2008), particularly where federal arrangements have followed a more intertwined design (León, 2011; León and Orriols, 2016a); whereas other works have found that people can assign responsibilities between levels of government relatively accurately (Johns, 2011; Rudolph, 2003a; b). Do responsibity assignments matter for voting decisions, after all? Rudolph and Grant (2002) show that responsibility assignments are a key moderator of individuals’ voting decisions.

As for the question on accountability, some comparative works based on aggregated data suggest that federal institutions make it more difficult for voters to hold governments to account. For instance, Anderson (2006; 2009) shows that in federal countries the link between how individuals evaluate the economy and how they vote is weaker than in non-federal ones, and assumes that this is because responsibility assignments are more difficult in federal countries. Yet in Anderson’s work, and more generally in the literature on clarity of responsibility, this assumption on individuals’ responsibility assignments is not empirically tested. It is simply inferred from the strength of the relationship between policy evaluations and vote at the aggregate level. As a result, although empirical evidence suggests that accountability may operate differently in federal states as compared to unitary countries, the exact responsibility attribution mechanisms whereby this may be so remains much of a black box.

Decentralization, accountability and politics.

The rise of regions may also have an impact on the relationship between politics and accountability. By politics we mean the politics of blame, which refers to political parties engaging in blame avoidance strategies to avoid electoral punishment for poor policy outcomes or unpopular policies (Maravall, 1999; Weaver, 1986). These strategies are more likely to take place in decentralized settings. First, because politicians may take advantage of an institutional context in which citizens struggle to know who does what. And second, because the fragmentation of powers between levels of government makes it easier for politicians at different levels of government to “pass the buck” to other authorities when poor results are at stake (Fiorina, 1981).

The blame-attribution game can become both the consequence and the driver of low clarity of responsibility, as “passing the buck” strategies may contribute to blur responsibility attribution and distort citizens’ perceptions on government performance (Ansolabehere, et al., 2012; Bartels, 2002; Duch and Stevenson, 2008), reinforcing the accountability gap. The implications of the politics of blame can actually be applied to any system of multilevel governance (including the role of supranational authorities): multilevel governance gives individuals further opportunities to exonerate or credit their preferred incumbent party as there is a higher *supply* of political actors to which blame and credit can be attributed.

The political bickering between levels of government may not only undermine individuals’ capacity to assign responsibility, but also *shape* to whom they actually assign responsibility to. What political parties say on responsibility attribution may be used by individuals as a guide for their own responsibility judgements, particularly in contexts where attribution of responsibility is more difficult. We may expect individuals in decentralized contexts to resort more frequently to informational shortcuts, such as what a preferred party says, to make responsibility judgements in an efficient way (León and Orriols 2016).

Party identity may also affect individuals’ assignment of responsibility through in-group favoritism. In-group bias refers to individuals’ tendency to give credit for the group with which they feel more closely identified and blame other groups (out-groups) for failures. The term comes from studies on social psychology (Taylor and Doria, 1981; Taylor and Jaggi, 1974), although the literature on political science provides evidence that politically-relevant group identities such as partisanship also operate as a cognitive bias in responsibility assignment in decentralized contexts[[1]](#footnote-2).

Certainly, when it comes to assign responsibility between different levels of government for the state of the economy, the state of health care or even natural disasters individuals do engage in what Tilley and Hobolt define as “selective attribution” (2011: 3): government partisans are more likely to deny their government’s responsibility for a bad outcome, while taking credit for a good one, and vice-versa for opposition partisans (Brown, 2010; Cutler, 2004; 2008; Gomez and Wilson, 2001; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014; Malhotra and Kuo, 2008; Peffley, 1984; Peffley and Williams, 1985; Rudolph, 2003a; b; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011; Tyler, 1982). Studies also show that political biases not only affect responsibility attribution, but also affect electoral accountability by moderating the impact of economic evaluations on vote choices (Marsh and Tilley, 2009; Rudolph, 2003a; b).

Still, there is an issue that calls for further theoretical and empirical work, namely whether the role of group-serving bias in responsibility attribution operates differently in multilevel democracies than in unitary ones, if at all. Research in the area has so far been predominantly case-specific, and mostly U.S. based, in part due to the lack of comparable cross-country individual data on responsibility attribution.

Recent works attempt to fill this theoretical gap by bridging the two literatures on responsibility attribution mapped above - the institutional clarity of responsibility approach and the social psychological approach - arguing that partisanship might be more intensely used in responsibility assignments under federal institutions (León, et al., 2017; León and Orriols, 2016b). This theoretical argument is grounded in two mechanisms: an informational challenge and an opportunity structure. On the one hand, decentralised governance involves an informational challenge because the vertical distribution of powers complicates attribution. In this context, individuals are expected to use cognitive shortcuts (heuristics), such as partisanship, to assign responsibilities for economic or social conditions in an efficient way[[2]](#footnote-3). For instance, if an individual is unsure about who is responsible for the economic conditions, she may rely on a simple shortcut such as what his preferred party says in order to assign responsibility. On the other hand, the vertical fragmentation of powers creates more opportunities for individuals to exonerate or credit their preferred incumbent party as there is a higher supply of political actors to which blame and credit can be attributed.

In essence, the arguments presented above state that: a) individuals are not neutral when they make responsibility judgements because their perceptions are affected by their partisanship; and b) that this partisan bias will more frequently operate in federal states. In the next section we explore the empirical limitations to explore these hypotheses with available data.

The empirical challenge

As stated above, one of the reasons why there is scant cross-country evidence on the relationship between decentralization, responsibility attribution and accountability is the lack of comparable individual-level data on responsibility attribution. To our knowledge, the only dataset that provides comparable data on attribution of responsibility for a representative sample of various countries[[3]](#footnote-4) and for various years is the European Election Survey (EES). In the EES survey respondents are first requested to state which is the most important problem (MIP) that their countries faceand then they are subsequently asked to attribute responsibility for the MIP to either regional, national, or European authorities[[4]](#footnote-5),[[5]](#footnote-6).

In order to explore the relationship between decentralization and responsibility attribution, we display in Table 1 the distribution of assignments of responsibility for the MIP in federal and non-federal countries. Results show that despite regional authorities having a more prominent institutional role in federal entities, responsibility attribution to the regional level is virtually the same in federal than in non-federal countries. How can this be so?

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

León, Jurado and Garmendia (2017) use the EES data to show that although attribution of responsibility between levels of government might come out as very similar in federalvs non-federal systems, there are different causal configurations leading to the observed outcomes. Following upon the “information challenge” and “opportunity structure” arguments discussed above, they test whether the role of partisanship in responsibility attribution operates differently in federal than in non-federal states. To do so, they select the “most important problems” that relate to economic issues and then explore whether partisans of the national incumbent party who have negative economic evaluations exhibit a different attribution of responsibility pattern in federal than in non-federal states.

Their results are summarized in Figure 1. The right-hand side of the figure shows that in federal countries partisans of the national incumbent party with negative economic assessments are more likely to assign responsibility to regional governments than other individuals (non-partisans and partisans of other parties). The probability to attribute responsibility to the regional government increases in almost 50%. By contrast, in non-federal countries there are almost no differences in responsibility assignments between partisan voters and the rest.

In summary, these results would provide support to the “opportunity structure” argument, which suggests that in multilevel systems the exonerating logic in responsibility attribution may be more prominent because there is a number of potential “out-groups” to which individuals can attribute blame. These “out-groups” are essentially regional governments that hold significant competences over spending and legislation and, therefore, that can be credibly blamed by partisans to exonerate their more preferred level of government.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

What are the implications of these empirical analyses for the relationship between decentralization and accountability in multilevel systems? On the one hand, results suggest that decentralization may undermine accountability because the distortion in the connection between outcomes and responsibility assignments caused by partisanship is more prominent in federal countries.

On the other hand, however, we cannot conclude that the role of cognitive biases in responsibility attribution is *generally* higher in federal settings. Individuals in unitary systems may not be able or credible to blame regional governments to exonerate their preferred party, but they could blame other relevant actors in the political arena such as the European Union, the IMF or the Central Bank, as analysed by (Fernández-Albertos, et al., 2013). Further research is needed that explores the question on whether the blame-attribution game operates *generally* more intensenly in decentralised settings as compared to centralised contexts, or whether differences are simply contingent upon the available set of “blameable” political actors given to respondents.

Finally, any significant advancement in comparative empirical analyses with observational data would require generating further individual-level data on responsibility attribution that is comparable across countries. The limitations identified in the use of the MIP question to operationalize responsibility attribution (see León et. al 2017) provide a good guide on the list of arguable things to avoid in future survey designs. One is that in the MIP attribution responses of the ESS database causal and functional responsibilities are being conflated. Functional responsibilities are related to the formal (constitutional) allocation of powers for different policy areas between levels of government, whereas causal responsibility is related to the retrospective assignment of blame or credit for the changes, good or bad, in a particular policy area (Rudolph 2006 and Hobolt and Tilley 2014:10). Survey questions on responsibility attribution should try to capture these different types of responsibility. Second, the MIP question asks to identify a “problem” (negative outcome), which may bias the individual attribution responses towards blame assignments. Surveys should clearly measure individuals’ evaluation of outcomes for different policies to allow for a separate analysis of the assignment of credit and blame.

Although most of the empirical works that explore the role of in-group bias in responsibility judgements use cross-sectional data, experimental designs have been increasingly used to explore the connection between partisanship and attribution of responsibility on economic policies (Rudolph, 2006), natural disasters (Malhotra and Kuo, 2008) or health care policy (Tilley and Hobolt 2011). These experimental methods may complement observational data, as they are better suited to explore the causal mechanisms that connect evaluations of outcomes, attribution and vote (see Rico and Liñeira (2017) for a combination of observational and experimental data).

Summary and concluding remarks

Some of the democratic (and also economic) virtues of decentralization are grounded on the assumption that dual accountability works, meaning that citizens hold each level of government accountable for the policy outcomes that belong to their specific sphere of competences. In this paper we have explored a potential source of distortion of accountability in multilevel systems, namely the impact of decentralization on an essential mechanism to make accountability work: individuals’ assignment of responsibility for policy outcomes.

In section 2 we have explored whether the fragmentation of powers between levels of government may complicate responsibility assignment for policy outcomes and whether complex attribution may affect accountability. The evidence on the former is mixed, as individuals’ capacity to distinguish responsibility between different levels of government shows different results across federal countries. As for accountability, there is some evidence based on aggregated data that in federal countries economic voting is weaker than in non-federal ones. Yet how individual responsibility attributions mediate the relationship between economic outcomes and vote remains unclear.

In section 3 we have shown that decentralized institutions may create incentives for politicians to engage in the politics of blame-attribution. The political bickering between levels of government may not only undermine individuals’ capacity to assign responsibility, but also shape whom citizens assign responsibility to. Individuals may be attentive to what their preferred party says on responsibility attribution and use it as a guide for their own responsibility judgements. Empirical evidence shows that individuals’ assignment of responsibility between different levels of government for policy outcomes is biased by partisanship, as those identifying with the incumbent party are more likely to deny their government’s responsibility for a bad outcome, while giving it credit for a good one.

Finally, section 4 addressed the main empirical challenge in the study of accountability in decentralized systems: to provide further comparative evidence. It is not clear yet whether individuals assign responsibility attribution in a different way in decentralized states than in non-decentralized ones, nor whether those differences may be related to the role of in-group bias. Do individuals end up assigning responsibility in a more random way than in unitary states? Or are their responses more significantly driven by partisanship or other in-group identities? The latest empirical contributions in the area show that the role of partisanship in explaining blame-attribution is more prominent in federal states than in non-federal ones. However, given the limitations of current available data, no significant advancements can be achieved unless further individual-level data on responsibility assignments are collected for a broad range of country cases.

Table 1. Attribution of responsibility for the “most important problem” in federal and non-federal states\*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Federal countries** | **Non federal countries** |
| Regional authorities | 15.8 | 15.0 |
| National authorities | 61.2 | 54.7 |
| European authorities | 22.8 | 30.2 |

Source: European Election Study (2004, 2009, 2014)

\*Note: federal states are Austria, Belgium, Germany and Spain.

**Figure 1. Effect of Partisanship on Attribution of Responsibility in Federal and Non-Federal Countries**

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Source: León et al. (2018).

\*Note: Incumbent partisans are individuals who feel close to the national incumbent party or to any member of the national governing coalition. “Other” refers to any other mentioned political party or lack of identification with any party.

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1. Partisanship may also bias the evaluation of policy or economic outcomes Evans, G. and Andersen, R. (2006) 'The political conditioning of economic perceptions'. *Journal of Politics*, **Vol. 68**, **No. 1**, p.pp. 194--207., although Tilley and Hobolt (2011) show that that bias (what they define as selective evaluation) is less prominent than the bias on attribution of responsibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This argument is in line with the studies that point to ‘‘low information” contexts as the ones where informational shortcuts are more intensely employed by voters Lau, R.R. and Redlawsk, D.P. (2001) 'Advantages and disadvantages of cognitive heuristics in political decision making'. *American Journal of Political Science*, p.pp. 951-71, McDermott, M.L. (1997) 'Voting cues in low-information elections: Candidate gender as a social information variable in contemporary United States elections'. Ibid., p.pp. 270-83.. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Only few studies have cited the use of EES data, mainly for descriptive purposes focused on normative approaches to the role of the

European Union De Winter, L. and Swyngedouw, M. (1999) 'The scope of EU government'. *Political representation and legitimacy in the European Union*, p.pp. 47-73.. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The specific question wording namely is: *“As of today, is (the most important problem) mainly dealt with by regional, national, or European political authorities?”* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Note that asking respondents to choose a single level of authority to allocate responsibilities may be problematic given the intertwined nature of power allocation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)