

# Multilevel governance: Identity, political contestation, and policy

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## Abstract

This commentary takes stock of how *Multi-level Governance and European Integration* has helped scholars frame empirical research agendas. It focuses on three specific research programmes emanating from the book: (1) the role of identity in multi-level governance, (2) political contestation in multi-level systems, and (3) the effect of multi-level governance on policy outcomes. It aims to highlight existing knowledge in these lines of research whilst offering several critical reflections and directions for future research.

The commentary argues that the book's observation that governance structures are ultimately shaped by identities rather than by efficiency considerations has proved almost prophetic given recent backlash against the EU. The book expertly shows that there is an inherent tension in sharing authority across multiple levels of government, and that multi-level systems require constant recalibration and renegotiation of how authority is shared.

## Keywords

European integration, federalism and decentralisation, multi-level governance, policy, political contestation, territorial identity

In *Multi-level Governance and European Integration*, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks examine the fundamental shift of authority away from national governments that occurred during the post-war period. The ambitious goal of the book is to offer an integrated explanation for the upward shift of authority towards supranational organisations as well as the downward shift of authority to subnational governments. When it was first published, almost 20 years ago, the book radically changed the theoretical debate about the nature of European integration. In contrast to neofunctionalists and intergovernmentalists (Haas, 1958; Moravcsik, 1998) who focused on the role of national governments in relation to the European Union (EU), Hooghe and Marks called into question the prevalent methodological nationalism and expanded the set of relevant actors to include subnational governments (Schakel and Jeffery, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, they argued that actor's economic interests are only one of many considerations driving the EU integration process, with identity considerations being equally as important.

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The term multi-level governance (MLG) struck a chord with policy makers and scholars alike because it described what had become the day-to-day reality of EU policy-making: actors at multiple levels sharing competencies. As Schmitter has cogently put it, 'MLG has become the most omnipresent and acceptable label that one can stick on the contemporary EU. Even its own politicians use it!' (Schmitter, 2004: 49). The type of shared decision-making across multiple layers of government described in the book is perhaps most apparent in the realm of EU cohesion policy, which makes up more than one-third of the EU's expenditures (Hooghe and Keating, 1994; Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Yet, with the EU budget being relatively small in comparison with national budgets, the MLG framework became more relevant when scholars discovered its usefulness in analysing EU regulatory activities, ranging from environmental regulation (Fairbrass and Jordan, 2004), to energy regulation (Rangoni, 2019) and social policy (Ferrera, 2005).

This contribution provides an overview of the three research programmes emanating from the book: (1) the role of identity in MLG, (2) political contestation in multi-level systems, and (3) the effect of MLG on policy outcomes. It seeks to highlight the different ways in which scholars have embraced the book and how the various lines of research feed into each other. The contribution therefore opts for breadth rather than providing a more in-depth review of specific aspects of MLG. It also offers some critical reflections on existing work and points towards directions for future research, especially in light of the recent crises that beset the EU. The issues that face the EU today – the rise of populism, party system collapse, the EU's inability to deal with the immigration crisis, or the threat of disintegration manifested by Brexit – are quite distinct from the challenges the EU was facing in the 1990s. Can the MLG framework be used to help us understand these developments? This contribution argues that the authors' observation that governance structures are ultimately shaped by identities rather than by efficiency considerations has proved almost prophetic given recent backlash against the EU. At the same time, these developments call into question the extent to which MLG – a system of shared authority – is achievable in the first place.

## **Territorial identity**

Perhaps the book's most important contribution is its discussion of territorial identities and their role in the development of governance structures. The observation that governance structures are 'an expression of community' and not just a means of efficiently delivering policy is at the core of what the authors have later termed postfunctionalist theory (Hooghe et al., 2016; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). The authors argue that identity considerations often trump efficiency considerations when it comes to the creation of governance structures. Postfunctionalist theory identifies the weakening of strong and exclusive national identities during the post-war period as crucial for the upward and downward shift in authority. Their weakening allowed for an overarching European identity and for subnational identities to develop and resurge, both of which supported the fundamental change in governance structures (Béland and Lecours, 2006; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Zuber, 2011; Brigevhich, 2012). Empirical studies in this tradition have shown that individuals often hold multiple territorial identities at the same time – regional, national, and European – and that these identities strongly influence support for governance structures. For instance, those who hold an exclusive national identity are indeed far less likely to support EU integration than individuals whose national identity is inclusive

and allows for an overarching European identity to be held at the same time (Carey, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2005).

This raises the question whether collective identities and legitimate authority can also be constructed. To understand the construction of collective identities, the authors compare the process of European integration to historical state-building processes. From a historical point of view, strong national identities that underpin authoritative nation-states appear to be more of a fiction than a reality, or at least a reality applicable to only certain points in time. Nation-states are the end point of a long consolidation process accelerated by periods of war, at the outset of which loyalties were very diffuse and often local (Tilly, 1985). Not able to draw on identity construction through war – ironically it was peace not war that helped create a European identity – the EU has to rely on other mechanisms to foster overarching loyalties, for instance, the experience of mobility and transnational social interactions (Deutsch, 1953; Fligstein, 2008).

The idea that identity rather than efficiency considerations dictate the shape of jurisdictions has been tremendously influential. Yet, despite a rich literature on the implications of territorial identities, we still know relatively little about how identities are formed in the first place. We do know that elites might play a role in constructing identities (Risse, 2010), but what are the micro-foundations of this process? For a long time, scholars have supported the idea that intense contact might enable otherwise different individuals to think of themselves as one larger community (Deutsch, 1957). Yet, empirical studies examining this hypothesis have produced mixed results (Kuhn, 2011; Sigalas, 2010; Stoeckel, 2016). Others have identified education as crucial in shaping territorial identities. Recent research, however, seems to suggest that additional years of education do not lead to a stronger European identity (Kuhn et al., 2017). Instead it appears that parental socialisation shapes territorial identities very early on in childhood. An interesting avenue for future research might be the examination of personality characteristics and how they interact with external factors to shape territorial identities (Bakker and De Vreese, 2016).

## **Political contestation**

A second important contribution of the book is the insight that territorial identities do not simply exist but have to be mobilised by political entrepreneurs. The connection between national identity and European integration, for instance, is not directly apparent but needs to be carefully constructed and made salient (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Work on territorial identity mobilisation by political actors is arguably the broadest and most prolific research programme emanating from the book. Much of this research has focused on the mobilisation of national identities in response to European integration, but recent research shows how territorial identities may also be mobilised at the regional level in opposition to the nation-state, as in Catalunya and Scotland (Brigeovich, 2012; Massetti and Schakel, 2016; Toubeau, 2011).

The idea that the mobilisation of national identities by domestic political actors has politicised European integration has created a broad research agenda (De Vries, 2007; De Wilde and Zürn, 2012; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). European integration is not the only challenge to national identity. It is part of a broader breakdown of national borders that encompasses mass immigration and increased economic competition, so it comes as no surprise that the combination of these challenges has emerged as a major mobilising issue for national political parties. This raises the question of how the political conflict over national boundaries, territorial identities, and European integration has influenced

political contestation in national political arenas. Hooghe and Marks show that alongside the traditional left–right dimension, there is now a distinctively European dimension of contestation which structures national political conflict. At one extreme of this dimension are those political actors who wish to preserve or strengthen the nation-state. Numerous studies show how successful these actors have been in mobilising the Eurosceptic vote (De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Hobolt et al., 2009). At the other extreme are those who wish to promote further European integration. In later works, the authors suggest that European integration seems to reinforce an already established non-economic social dimension of political contestation (Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

The two-dimensional space of political contestation has by now become widely accepted and emerged into an important research programme to which a large number of scholars have contributed (Kitschelt, 2004; Kriesi et al., 2006). Research in this line discusses the number and exact nature of dimensions of contestation (Bakker et al., 2012; Rovny, 2012). The two-dimensional framework has also been successfully extended to the study of political contestation in Eastern Europe (Vachudova and Hooghe, 2009). The broader debate, however, now goes beyond studying the behaviour of political parties and focuses on the forces that shape public opinion on European integration (Ezrow et al., 2011; Steenbergen et al., 2007)

While research on political contestation in Europe has become methodologically very sophisticated, supported by the expansion of data on party positions, there are a few remaining questions. It is, for instance, not entirely clear why the conflict over European integration maps on a non-economic dimension of contestation that also includes environmental issues, civil liberties, and immigration. Why do attitudes on these issues seem to be similarly structured? What are the precise psychological mechanisms of attitude formation that link them? And, what might explain why some individuals hold inconsistent attitudes on this dimension? It seems that immigration is usually far more salient for voters than the issue of European integration (Hoeglinger, 2016). For instance, campaigning for a country's departure from the EU is not very popular in continental Europe, even among voters of Eurosceptic parties. This raises the question whether conflict on the non-economic dimension necessarily touches on issues of European integration in the long run. It might well be possible that we will observe a politicisation of individual EU policies rather than a politicisation of European integration. Another set of unresolved questions relates to how the two dimensions of political contestation – the traditional left–right and the non-economic dimension – relate. Which issues are likely to engage both dimensions and which issues clearly map on only one? Recent research, for instance, suggest that both dimensions are relevant in helping us understand attitudes towards issues like EU solidarity and fiscal transfers (Kleider and Stoeckel, 2019).

## **Policy consequences**

Analysing the policy consequences of the dual shift of authority away from the nation-state constitutes a third and perhaps more diffuse research programme emanating from the book. Numerous studies have focused on the policy consequences of the upward shift of authority to the EU. Research in this line examines the extent to which member states comply with EU law and how they transpose it into national law. National governments not only adapt to policy decisions made in Brussels, they also try to shape EU policy in return (Börzel, 2001). Another set of studies has focused on the policy consequences of the downward shift of authority. Research in this line analyses how this downward shift

of authority affects the policy choices of subnational governments (Gallego and Subirats, 2012; McEwen, 2005), fiscal responsibility ((Braun et al., 2002; Rodden, 2003), and competition among subnational governments (Biela et al., 2012; Kleider, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2004).

There has been some interesting cross-fertilisation between the two different strands, with research on the downward shift of authority to subnational governments informing studies on EU policy-making and vice versa. A direct comparison between federal systems and the EU is perhaps of limited value, but a number of policy dynamics are comparable (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). For instance, research on federalism and decentralisation has long analysed the challenges that result from shared legislative competencies and a functional allocation of power, insights which are helpful in understanding the EU (Börzel and Hosli, 2003). By the same token, EU policy innovations designed to address high levels of interdependence can breathe new life into the study of federalism.

Notwithstanding areas of cross-fertilisation, the two literatures have largely remained distinct. To reduce complexity, most articles either focus on the relationship between the EU and national governments or alternatively on the relationship between national and subnational governments. Only very few studies take a true MLG perspective and trace policy across all three levels of government. Even fewer studies compare the policy consequences of MLG across different policy areas, which raises a number of questions. Do the tensions arising from interdependence affect some policy sectors more than others? Is fiscal policy more prone to conflict among multiple levels of governments than regulatory policy, given the added financing questions? Outcomes like increased competition, non-compliance with legal frameworks, or lacking fiscal accountability are likely not solely a consequence of multi-level systems but depend on the functional characteristics of different policy sectors. This begs for more research that explores the consequences of MLG across policy sectors.

## Conclusion

Each of these research programmes individually has helped advance knowledge on different aspects of MLG. As an integrated theory, however, research on the role of territorial identities, on political contestation, and on the policy consequences of MLG can help us understand the fundamental transformation of governance structures in the post-war period and the workings of what has become a European multi-level polity. When *Multi-level Governance and European Integration* was first published in 2001, it offered an explanation for processes and events that existing theories of European integration had difficulties making sense of: most importantly, the day-to-day reality of policy-making in the EU with competencies being shared by actors at multiple levels.

Is the concept of MLG still useful in helping us understand the challenges that face the EU today? The insight that MLG systems benefit from combining the economies of scale of providing public goods at a higher level with a delivery tailored to local demands is still relevant today. At the same time, the book shines a spotlight on the fragility of this governance type. It shows that there is an inherent tension in sharing authority across multiple levels of government, and that multi-level systems require constant recalibration and renegotiation of how authority is shared. The EU's fragility has become especially apparent with the rise of anti-EU populism that calls into question a number of fundamental principles of the EU, such as the freedom of movement, to the point that it

challenges the entire governance system, as evidenced by the United Kingdom's vote to leave the EU.

The book also offers a key to understanding these tensions and crises by highlighting that governance structures are often not shaped by economic rationality but by territorial identities which are mobilised by political entrepreneurs. The book helps us understand not only the mobilisation of national identities in response to European integration but also the mobilisation of regional identities in opposition to national governments, which has led to the brink of the recent constitutional crisis in Spain. If anything, recent developments seem to suggest that the expectations raised in the book with regard to the importance of identity considerations were not far-reaching enough, with some scholars suggesting that the non-economic dimension of contestation, which includes conflict over the level at which authority is exercised, now surpasses the traditional left–right dimension in importance.

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