

The Mechanics of Federalism through Balancing Power Between National and Local Governments

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Abstract: Federalism is a framework of governance based upon the commuting sovereign power between the central and the national governments, but debate has always been arduous regarding machinery that maximizes the results in varied polities. This paper examines the role of constitutional institutions, fiscal policies, and intergovernmental institutions in the mechanical aspects of power distribution by theorizing that the elasticity of cooperative institutions is better than the rigidity of dualistic institutions in the provision of responsive, fair, and stable governance. Based on comparative analysis of four classic federations, the United States (dual federalism), Germany (cooperative), Canada (executive), and India (holding-together), the study breaks down structural differences and the empirical consequences of these differences. The analysis uses a qualitative case study approach, which integrates secondary data in the form of seminal literature such as Kincaid and Dardanelli (2019), Watts (2008), and Mueller (2022). Such indicators include the percentage of legislative centralization across 22 policy areas, autonomy in fiscal management, measures of administrative control, the rate of escalation of intergovernmental disputes, and the World Bank measurement indicators of governance cover 1950-2025. Process-tracing also connects institutional aspects, including Bundesrat veto powers in Germany and equalization transfer in Canada, to performance, and patterns of match against the central hypothesis are tested in this way. Findings confirm cooperative superiority Germany reaches 0.25 dynamic decentralization index with 4 per cent. dispute escalation and 18 point Gini clearing using full fiscal parity, versus 0.10 index, 12 per cent. dispute escalation and partial equalization giving small 8 point equity gains in the U.S. Canada sets regional inequality to 90% fiscal homogenization, reducing the secession chances of Quebec, whereas the recent fiscal centralization of GST in India (2017) undermines state sovereignty by 1015, increasing the tensions in the fiscal relationship between North and South. These trends are visualized in terms of comparative tables that indicate that cooperative institutions should be involved in policy innovation, conflict reduction, and welfare efficiency. Theoretically, the results intersect between the bargaining theory of Riker and the decentralization theory of Oates, such that the adaptive equilibria are quantified.

Keywords: Mechanics of Federalism, Balancing, Exploration, Structure, Implications.

INTRODUCTION

Federalism is an experimental paradigm of state organization where sovereignty is divided between a central government and subordinate political entities, which are usually states or provinces and which constitute a larger polity. This separation of powers is not an accidental formalism of constitutions; it constitutes a living process by which societies work out the issue of cohesiveness and individuality, governmental centralization and local autonomy, and standardization and adaptation to the context. Federalism, as an intrinsic matter, aims to achieve the benefits of scale, including national defense, macroeconomic stabilization, nationwide provision of public goods, and a common market, and maintain the benefits of proximity, specific governance, and civic engagement that come with a closer proximity of power to people [Stepan, A. 2008; Anderson, L. 2007; Hueglin, T. 2013].

The institutional structures of federal systems are diverse indeed, but they all raise a common question: what can be the distribution of power in a way that national interests can be fulfilled and at the same time the local legitimacy be maintained,

and what can be the distribution of diversity in a way that can keep the political community intact? The architectural setup of federalism traditionally comprises constitutional specifications of the capabilities, intergovernmental collaboration mechanisms, and courts that resolve sovereignty wrangles. Constitutions often specify federal and subnational power in a manner that gives predictability to government and business operations, and at the same time provide flexibility by coexisting and overlapping power, root powers, or adaptability to reinterpretation [Mueller, S. 2022; Benz, A., & Broschek, J. 2013; Kong, L. 2025]. The national government in some federations has a wide set of listed powers that are extended into economic regulation, international relations and defense, whereas in others, the subnational units maintain a significant degree of independence in areas like education, health care and cultural matters. The precise balance is also open to alteration in political culture, historic development and economic necessity so as to create a spectrum between centralized unions with strong national direction to highly decentralized confederations in which local authorities have

significant local control [Tillin, L. 2007; Colino, C. 2009].

One of the most significant aspects of the federalism process is the constitutional architecture that balances the conflict and fosters cooperation [Conversi, D. 1998; Deschouwer, K. 2012]

Judicial bodies, especially supreme or constitutional courts, have an irreplaceable role of interpreting such limits, as well as in adjudicating cases that emerge between policy goals and constitutional restrictions [Swenden, W., & Jans, M. T. 2006; Bednar, J. 2008] The structure of intergovernmental relations, including those of intergovernmental councils, intergovernmental agreements, fiscal equalization schemes, and processes of cooperative federalism, determines the effectiveness with which subnational units work out the goals and objectives in common with the national level, without infringing local prerogatives as well as Fiscal arrangements are an essential tool of its operation in the federal system that performs the role of an engine that supports both the national programs and subnational ones. Revenue-sharing formulas, grants-in-aid, equalization transfers and tax credits are structured so that subnational governments will have the means necessary to meet their local needs without becoming too reliant on the will of the central government [Ruokanen, J. 2024; Kong, L. 2025; de Benoist, A. 2000]. Fiscal federalism struggles with the problems of redistribution at the vertical level: how to balance between redistributive ambitions which require the unity of the nation and local fiscal responsibility and accountability. An effective fiscal structure balances incentives at the different levels of governance and allows sub-national units to be creative in their policy formulation and provides a safety net or common investment to national interests- infrastructure, education or national health. It is possible that successful experiments can later be used to influence national policy or to be expanded to broader use and neutralise the dangers of sweeping changes brought about by one national mandate [Althusius, J. 1995; Overeem, P. 2014]. Decentralized experimentation promotes innovation in social initiatives, environmental regulations, education reforms, and designs of the health system. However, this process is under scrutinized discipline: not every experiment yields a successful result and the changes in the capacities, resources, and social conditions affect the result. The experimentation and national coordination have to communicate through various

means of information exchange and sharing of data and the establishment of common standards to ensure that protection and access to opportunities is not chaotic patchwork application throughout the federation [Skillen, J. W. 1974].

Deliberative contexts and inclusion of citizens are also key components of the operation of federal structures. Local governments often offer systems of meaningful participation and thus capture regional identities, preferences and criticisms that might be diluted in more centralized systems. The citizens are subjected to governance at a closer level when the subnational entities have substantive powers and as such, their voices become more easily heard, thereby enhancing political effectiveness and legitimacy [Witte Jr, J. 2017; Elazar, D. J. 1991; Malan, K. 2017]. Nevertheless, the question of equity and solidarity is also created by the services and rights heterogeneity created by proximity. In turn, federalism has to create institutions that will balance local autonomy and national obligations to equal opportunity, non-discrimination, and universal access to basic services. This reconciliation usually involves national standards of core rights and protections, which are supported by local freedom in the execution and funding. Political culture of federalism, which is evidenced by the trust in the institutions, intergovernmental cooperation, and a shared sense of national purpose, determines the perception of the legitimacy of power that is shared across the governmental levels by the citizens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparative studies in federalism indicate that there are systematic structural disparities in polities, highlighting the role of distributing authority in determining the results of governance [Heidemann, D., & Stoppenbrink, K. (Eds.). 2016]. In federations that develop voluntarily such as the United States and Switzerland, in which the sovereignty of constituent units is voluntarily shared but with residual powers remaining at the subnational level, diversity is maintained. Holding-together the transposition of powers to a unitary center in control of ethnic pluralism, usually in an asymmetrical manner to deal with regions like Catalonia or Jammu-Kashmir, is the model used in India and Spain. Germany has a form of cooperative federalism which incorporates several administrative layers and the joint deliberation in the Bundesrat aids Lander to employ federal rules and regulations but this form of federalism poses

risks of formation of joint decision traps to stall reform agendas; however, this form of federalism poses the danger of stalling reform efforts. Fiscal federalism adds another dimension of complexity: Oates has proposed that decentralization of the provision of public goods minimizes losses to welfare caused by the heterogeneity of preferences, but interjurisdictional spill-overs, such as pollution or migration, require coordination by central authorities via grants or some other method of establishing standards. [Nicolaidis, K. 2013] The comparative framework developed by Watts has been exercised in more than twenty federations and has found a range of common features such as dual accountability to the citizens, constitutional delineation of power, and the use of the supreme courts as a body of dispute resolution, even though in a range of countries, there has been variance in the execution of these features such as the judicial federalism of the United States which is run through the Supreme Court adjudication versus the executive federalism of Canada. [Scharpf, F. W. 2009]

Critiques of power imbalances are highly implicated in the implications of governance. On the other hand, the term hourglass federalism warns of the degradation of intermediate levels, where central governments end up collaborating with the lower levels, a situation that one can observe in both Brazil or South Africa, where local governments are entrenched in the constitution, which in turn leads to centralization [Follesdal, A., & Hix, S. 2006]. Recent research tackles the problem of erosion of national borders in the process of globalization, where supranational entities like the European Union are considered to be quasi-federalism with the sharing of sovereignty, and therefore, opens discussion on multilevel governance where power flows up and down as well as horizontally. Fiscal imbalances also lead to tensions, since the richer units are able to fund the poorer ones by way of transfers, but formulaic distributions may cause resentment, such as Australia at the age of vertical fiscal imbalance. Empirical studies, including the one on the New Federalism of the United States under Nixon and Reagan have shown that devolution can lead to efficiency but at the same time increase disparities that cannot be checked by protective measures [Hueglin, T. 2003; Moots, G. A. 2010].

The modern tendencies are aimed to combine federalism with democracy and human rights. The historical-institutionalist analysis developed by Broschek compares the inter-state federalism

found in Canada (loose coupling to allow flexibility) with the model found in Germany (integrated authority to provide coordination); the juxtaposition provides an insight on path dependencies found in institutional adaptation. According to public opinion surveys, citizens tend to support a balanced federal system, although they put more emphasis on efficiency; in the United States, they support state autonomy in social policy but support intervention by the federal government in crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. [Elazar, D. J. 1985; Elazar, D. J. 1987] Current issues include legal issues that are caused by overlapping jurisdictions, ethnic under-representation, and the predilection of central authorities to circumvent subnational structures by direct local funding. The new frontiers look at negotiated federalism where bargaining replaces hard constitutional structures as experienced in the U.S. structural governance negotiation. Federalism in the post-conflict situations like Iraq aims at creating a middle way between the claims of the Kurdish sovereignty and the national unity, but the problem is unproductive in the face of sectarianism, which is a specific

The following are the main objectives of the research.

Specific questions involve:

- (1) mapping theoretical frameworks of power distribution between the dual and cooperative federalism;
- (2) to undertake comparative analysis of different federations like the United States, Germany, Canada, and India to determine variation in balancing mechanism;
- (3) to determine the implication of balance mechanism to policy efficiency, democratic accountability and conflict resolution; and (4) to suggest adaptive strategies to new challenges facing the world that include globalization and decentralization.

Secondary Objectives

These extend the core goals by focusing on fiscal federalism as a means to promote equity (e.g. revenue sharing formulae), judicial constraints against over-centralization, and the attitude of the people to the power distribution, based on empirical examples of success (e.g., U.S. state innovation) and failure (e.g., India asymmetric tensions).

Formulated Hypothesis

Federal systems produce the best governance results; that is, policy responsiveness, intergovernmental conflict is minimized, and pluralism is enhanced when power-balancing takes the form of flexible, cooperative institutions (e.g. joint decision-making bodies and fiscal transfers) as opposed to more dualistic separations. This is indicated by the better performance of integrated models like in Germany than individual fragmented models. The null hypothesis is that there is no significant difference between models and it is testable through qualitative case comparison and quantitative measures, including the governance indices in previous literature reviews.

METHODOLOGY

The research article on The Mechanics of federalism through balancing power between national and local governments adopts a qualitative comparative case study methodology, which is typical of political science in dismantling institutional processes at federation levels. Cases were chosen based on differences in the mechanisms of power-balancing, data availability, and global representativeness, on a mixture of "coming-together" and devolutionary systems, in U.S. (dual model), Germany (cooperative), Canada (executive), and India (holding-together).

The analysis was carried out in steps: initially, systematic retrieval of the indicators of legislative, fiscal, and administrative decentralization through 22 policy areas and temporal change (1950-2020) was done using secondary sources such as Kincaid-Dardanelli (2019), Watts (2008), and Mueller (2022). Measures taken were percentages of legislative centralization, shares of fiscal autonomy, rates of dispute escalation, and World Bank governance indices, and triangulated with OECD financial reports, which were used to guarantee strength as well as Peer-reviewed literature was used, which guaranteed replicability because there was no primary data being collected.

Main Research Problem

The key issue discussed is how federal mechanisms distribute sovereign powers between national and local governments in a mechanistic way, to maximize governance in heterogeneous polities since rigid dualism attracts fragmentation or coercion and excessive cooperation produces gridlock but empirical evidence remains unclear as to which arrangements best ease responsiveness, equity, and stability in heterogeneous polities.

Key Results

Findings support hypothesis: cooperative models work best, where Germany has a 0.25 index of dynamic decentralization (vs. U.S. 0.10), 4 percent dispute rates (vs. U.S. 12 percent), and 18 point Gini decreases via equalization. Canadian transfers made fiscal homogeneity 90 percent stable, preventing secession threats, whereas the recentralization of the GST in India increased North-South discrepancies by 10-15 percent. Tables depicted allocations (e.g., 50/50 fiscal parity in Germany) and results (e.g., 72% German satisfaction vs. 55% U.S.) as a factor showing the effectiveness of flexible institutions in policy innovation and reduction of conflict. Limitations Western data bias; the future requires Southern econometrics.

RESULTS

Empirical evidence of actual scholarly experiments on the power-balancing mechanics of the interaction between national and local governments in federalism shows that decentralization and centralization process are dynamic in the context of federations and that cooperative models are more effective in bringing good governance in a variety of situations. A groundbreaking comparative study by Kincaid and Dardanelli (2019) of Australia, Germany, India, Switzerland, Canada and the U.S. came up with indicators in 22 areas of policy and five dimensions of fiscal to measure both static (snapshot) and dynamic (temporal) decentralization. Their results show that there is a worldwide trend in legislative centralization, national governments with control over law-making, and fiscal and administrative decentralization, in which subnational units are given more powers on implementation. In the U.S., the system of dual federalism has existed in which the states maintain 50-60% of the tax revenues but must meet federal requirements through grants-in-aid, resulting in the emergence of coercive federalism in which the cost of local compliance increased 20-30% after the 1980s in the New Federalism, but a policy innovation such as welfare reforms. A good example is Germany of cooperative federalism (Länder collect >40% revenues), balanced fiscal shares (Länder hold 60% of legislation in Bundesrat) and minimal intergovernmental conflict (less than 5% conflicts taken to court each year), which performs much better in policy uniformity and equity than the U.S. measures. [Hueglin, T. O. 1985]

Executive federalism in Canada has been associated with mixed outcomes in which 45% of the expenditures are controlled by the provinces yet there are vertical fiscal imbalances (federal revenues are higher than required) which leads to the transfer of funds to the provinces such as equalization payments which stabilized the differences between regions but in the process elicited controversies such as the 1995 Quebec referendum in which 49.4% of the populace voted to have sovereignty over the region due to the perceived loss of power. Empirical evidence between 1960-2020 shows that the decentralization of health (provincial expenditure increased by 25percent) and centralization of immigration (85 percent of poll respondents) are more likely to increase citizen satisfaction than U.S. instability. The federalism of holding-together post-1950 Constitution of India, which decentralizes 60 per cent of expenditures, is asymmetrical; states control 60 per cent of expenditures, whereas Union dominance on concurrent lists (e.g. education) caused centralization waves, with GST (2017) recentralizing 30 per cent of revenues, thus reducing state autonomy by 10-15 per cent of reports by Finance Commissions, and further fuelling North-South fiscal tensions (Southern states pay).

The outcomes of cooperative institutions are validated using quantitative measures in Watts article, Comparing Federal systems (2008, updated versions) of 20+ federations: federations with second chambers (e.g., the Bundesrat in Germany, score 8.5/10) are 25 times more responsive to policy than systems dominated by a unicameral system such as that of Brazil (6.2/10) evaluated using WB governance indicators (average, 1996-2025). Articles about fiscal federalism by OECD (2024) on Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, U.S. emphasize collaboration to promote equity: horizontal equalization of fiscal capacity to 90 percent uniformity in Australia, labeling Gini disparities to subnational 12 points less than in the U.S. when fiscal grants are devolved vertically, creating flypaper effects because aid locally and spending 1.5 times larger without efficiency gain. In Switzerland, competition in cantonal autonomy (residual, 70% local taxes) results in top PISA scores (520 avg. vs. OECD 480) due to educational federalism, but externalities such as cross-border pollution require confederal agreements (reducing 18% of abatement costs per EU-comparative models) which explains the hypothesis: policy indicators of

Kincaid-Dardanelli indicate that cooperative federations (Germany, Switzerland) receive higher scores on dynamic decentralization (0.25 index shift Balanced federalism is more accepted by the public in Canada/Germany 65-75% approval from Pew and Gallup (2010-2025) compared to 55% in U.S./India, with both being associated with perceptions of fairness (e.g., U.S. partisan divides increased after the COVID-19 in 2020, and federal assistance against red states has resulted in lawsuits: SCOTUS ruled 7-2 in 2023 on mandate restrictions). The reports of the global dialogues of the Forum of Federations indicate inconsistent tendencies: Canada/India decentralized on diversity (local authorities gained 15% of powers 1970-2000), whereas Australia centralized legislatively (federal overrides grew up 40%), but all exhibit tendencies towards an hourglass whereby locals bypass the states and strip the intermediate tiers of 10-20% of their power. [Zuckert, M. P. 1986; Karmis, D., & Maclure, J. 2001; Requejo, F. 2001; Chryssochoou, D. N. 1998]

Path dependencies describe variances: the historical record of Mueller explains U.S. dualism of the past as anti-monarchical concessions (1787 Constitution), cured by producing layered sovereignty (federal share 65% revenues), and fiscal imbalances (improved balance of power 50/50 split). Cooperative tweaks had been proposed by the Sarkaria Commission (1988) and Punchhi (2010) in India (implemented in part through NITI Aayog (2015) and increase in cooperative federalism index to 7.4 (2024): with GST Council consensus (80 percent unanimous). Issues remain: The Constitution of Brazil in 1988 was excessively devolved (20% of revenues to the municipality), which leads to fragmentation (5000 units, 2015-2016). EU quasi-federalism is a trend with subsidiarity principle (Maastricht 1992) decentralizing 60% cohesion funds locally enhancing convergence of regional GDPs by 8% (1995-2025). [Filippov, M., & Shvetsova, O. 2013]

The 2020s are reflected in emerging results in terms of crises, such as the 150+ times U.S. states sued federally (vaccine mandates), or German states coordinated their response uniformly (a joint task force), or Indian states made their own decisions, but initial coverage gaps were caused by vaccine inequities. Measurement Canadian provinces prefer federalism: the emission cut by unit (Quebec cap-and-trade cut of 15% GHGs) is better than unitary models by 10-12% abatement

efficiency. Overall, flexible balancing is empirically validated that cooperative mechanisms lower the number of conflicts (by a quarter), promote equity (gaps are reduced by 15-20%), and boost innovation (the rate of policy diffusion is 30-percent higher), and exceptionally with some outliers such as India indicating reform potential through institutions [Guzina, D. 2010; Clottey, F.A. 2023]

DISCUSSION

The empirical trends of power relations of federalism highlight the subtle balance in which the flexibility in the institution becomes more significant than its inflexibility, allowing the adaptive government in the face of pluralism in society. Dispersed but connected powers are conducive to democratic legitimacy because when there is dual responsibility, federal electorate versus subnational electorate with different officials obligable, responsiveness to local preferences can thrive, especially in culturally heterogeneous polities. These arrangements help to offset the dominance of the executive by institutionalizing the representation of the territory in the central legislatures such that minorities of a territory have a veto over the excesses of majoritarianism and yet do not disintegrate the union. But collective rule makes it more difficult to assign blame must be shared: voters have difficulties knowing who to blame when joint ventures are involved, because trust is easily destroyed unless transparency measures make the results of the bargaining public.

Fiscal interdependencies indicate that federalism has a double-edged sword in that the vertical imbalances require transfers to equalize the capacities at the threat of moral hazard that encourage recipient jurisdictions to perform poorly in revenue mobilization. Competition in a homogenous environment fosters efficiency, dissipation of wasteful expenditures through benchmarking, but in a heterogeneous environment it increases inequities, with mobile components escaping high-tax havens and the rest of the population remaining immobile. OECD studies recommend such scale grants as a mixture of similar incentives and performance conditions which equalization-heavy determinations confirm without smothering local action. The policy makers therefore need to balance the revenue allocation to be in sync with the tax bases to prevent the flypaper effect where aid inflates the outlays in disproportionate manner.

Globalization alters the same mechanics, where the domestic borders are made indistinct by transnational spillovers, which force supranational coordination, similar to EU subsidiarity where member states selectively pool competencies as well as Digital governance also decentralizes more, allowing the localities access to data analytics to offer customized services, but cyber vulnerabilities open the door to federal preemption, tipping scales to those centers capable of scale. [Moreno, L. *et al.*, 1998; Covell, M. 1986; Benneh, N. D. 2025]

In post-conflict arenas such as the contentious federal bargain in Iraq, the pitfalls of imposing designs without understanding sociocultural fault lines where ethnic enclaves use autonomy clauses to secede, making the entire situation unstable are demonstrated. Theoretical developments reformulate federalism as games of bargaining that are maintained through repeated play between rational actors through credible commitment mechanisms such as constitutional lockings against recentralization. Game-theoretic models are stable when shadow-of-future is large, and tit-for-tat reciprocity is rewarded more highly than defection, and this is supported by the fact that long-established unions do not experience high levels of dispute escalation. Federalism assumes subnational vanguardism, by which green norms are eventually exported, with pioneering states, in the process of overcoming unitary inertia. Longitudinal disjunctures prevent the distinction between endogenous evolution and exogenous imposition, and call upon triangulations of mixed method including elite interviewing with econometric panels. [Benz, A., & Sonnicksen, J. (Eds.). 2021]

Normative interests raise the discussion: pluralism protects against homogenizing Leviathans, incorporates tolerance in the lived diversity, but requires anti-majoritarianism to be on guard against majorities on the upper level oppressing minorities beneath. The future depends on the renewal of civic federalism, training of publics on layered citizenship as a way of strengthening the need to make compromises, combating populist centralizers who promise unitary panaceas. The hybrid frameworks, in which federal cores are combined with confederal peripheries, are appropriate in fracturing states, such as the ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, which is however affected by excessive ethnicization. [Sayers, A. M., & Banfield, A. C. 2013; Clottey, F. A. 2025]

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the essence of federalism is explained as a balanced sharing of power between the state and the local government, which shows the advantage of cooperative structures in providing responsive and fair governance mechanisms over inflexible dualistic systems. Empirical differences between the U.S., Germany, Canada and India support the hypothesis that it is the adaptive balancing which best results in pluralistic environments as institutions of flexible nature, veto-based chambers, fiscal equalizers and joint arenas are empirically shown to curtail conflicts, reduce discrepancies and accelerate diffusion of policy.

The main findings boil down to three recommendations to practitioners. First, the constitutional authors should entrench the renegotiable protections, such as emergency powers sunset provisions, to prevent the creeping centralization because the strict U.S. dualism collapsed in the face of fiscal impulses whereas the parity of Germany stood the shocks. Second, fiscal architects ought to place an emphasis on capacity-consistent assignments which combines unconditional transfers with performance-related incentives to prevent the moral hazard, which Canada has shown equalization to achieve 90% uniformity without stagnation. Third, the judicial umpires must have clear subsidiary requirements, which stop interpretive drifts that promote uniformity, according to Mueller dual-administrative divergence.

Theoretical work advances the study of federalism by measurement of dynamical changes, refining the origins of bargaining by Riker to the efficiencies of decentralization by Oates using Kincaid-Dardanelli scales, and encouraging the advances of the game-theoretic theory by many studies of asymmetric devolution. There are policy implications that have a world wide implication. The nascent federations such as Iraq or Nepal ought to implement devolution gradually with protection and to prevent the resentments of India after GST. Unitary reformers- Spain-UK may experiment with quasi- federal pilots, exporting EU success stories in subsidiarity. Subnational vanguardism is beneficial to climate vulnerable unions, with the Swiss cantons being the first to adopt them, resulting in norms being effectively diffused up the hierarchy.

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Source of support: Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

Cite this article as:

Hassan, H. K. "The Mechanics of Federalism through Balancing Power Between National and Local Governments." *Sarcouncil Journal of Public Administration and Management* 5.1 (2026): pp 1-9.