Introduction—Authority Migration: Defining an Emerging Research Agenda

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In every modern political system, power is shared to a greater or lesser extent between levels of government. These power sharing arrangements are perhaps most explicit in formal federal systems like the United States and Canada, where federal constitutions define the relative powers of central and sub-national governments. They may be no less important, however, in unitary democracies and even authoritarian regimes where central governments require local actors to implement policy on the ground and often delegate significant authority to them. Indeed, in any large and complex modern society, effective governance requires some sharing of power between higher levels of government, capable of coordinating many disparate actors and interests, and lower levels of government, capable of responding to local conditions.

In many parts of the world, power sharing relationships are in flux. Nation-states in Europe, North America, Latin America, Africa, and Asia are devolving authority over diverse governmental policies to sub-national levels of government. For example, according to Dillinger (1994), 63 of 75 developing countries with populations above five million have undergone reforms in recent decades that transferred significant political authority from national to local governments. Meanwhile, governments in these same regions and elsewhere, especially in the European Union, are together forming supra-national institutions that can often override national laws and regulations. In many nations, devolution and centralization occur simultaneously, with some authority shifting to higher levels of government and some shifting to lower levels.

We refer to such changes as authority migration. By authority migration, we mean the movement of power within a political system—both upwards (i.e., centralization) and downwards (i.e., decentralization or provincialization). In the political science literature, these movements are typically treated as distinct and separate phenomena. Considerations of centralization dominate studies of international organizations or regionalism, where political actors at a relatively low level of government cede some authority or sovereignty to higher level entities. These studies often focus on the collective action problems inherent in creating and maintaining centralized institutions, and the governance problems created by domestic and international constituencies. Considerations of decentralization, by contrast, dominate studies of policy implementation and federalism. Here the focus tends to be on principle-agent relationships between the center and the periphery. Research in both of these traditions has generated important insights into the causes and consequences of authority migration, though rarely have scholars sought to link explicitly what we know about how and why power is centralized and how and why power is decentralized.

Upward and downward movements of political authority may share important commonalities. Perhaps most importantly, both imply that political actors may regard the structure of political authority as fluid and uncertain, deliberately and strategically seeking to shift authority as a political strategy. If so, a whole set of theoretical, methodological, and practical questions become relevant: what factors lead government actors to shift authority over government decision-making to higher or lower levels? Are some institutions or political arrangements more or less resistant to such changes? Are some policy areas more or less resistant? What are the consequences of these migrations of political authority? What kinds of actors win and lose and in what ways? How do political actors incorporate future authority migrations into their decision-making? What methodologies allow researchers to measure, model, and analyze the dynamics of authority migration? These questions cut across traditional disciplinary, substantive, and methodological boundaries and represent some of the most vexing questions in modern political science.

By understanding better the causes and consequences of authority migration, political scientists can begin to develop a unified framework for understanding dynamic power sharing within political systems. To this end, we, as directors of the University of Michigan's European Union Center (Kollman) and Center

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for Local, State, and Urban Policy (Gerber) hosted a research conference in Ann Arbor in May, 2003.[1] The conference brought together scholars of law, political science, public policy, and economics. We invited participants to present research at various stages of development. We organized presentations into two sections: those concerned primarily with upward migrations of authority, including studies of international organizations, shared or pooled sovereignty, and regionalization; and those concerned primarily with downward migrations of authority, including studies of devolution, decentralization, and localization. The essays represented a wide range of research methodologies, including formal theory, normative theory, comparative case studies, and large-n quantitative analysis, and employed a wide range of data sources including case studies, citizen surveys, elite surveys, historical examples, and textual analysis.

The purpose of this symposium is to synthesize some of the insights generated by the essays and discussions covered at the conference. In this introductory essay, we present preliminary ideas about the causes and consequences of authority migration that emerged from the conference in Ann Arbor. In subsequent essays, some of the conference participants discuss their thoughts or research findings and offer more specific directions for future research.

Causes of Authority Migration

It is useful to maintain two distinctions in characterizing past and future research on authority migration. First, some research questions concern the causes of authority migration while others concern the consequences of authority migration. Any particular study, including those described in this symposium, may seek to understand both the causes and consequences of a given instance of authority migration. In this section, we focus on those aspects of studies that focus most directly on questions of causation; in the following section, we focus on how researchers have thought about consequences.

A second useful distinction differentiates, within the broad category of causes, between the most immediate or proximate causes of authority migration (what we shall call "mechanisms") and the more basic or foundational causes (what we shall call "sources"). For example, the sources of increasing European economic integration in the 1980s and 1990s include the need by smaller European countries to solve their collective action problems in coordinating economic and policy responses to German economic and political resurgence. The mechanisms of authority migration include the European Council unanimously granting new powers to the European Commission, or creating new European-level agencies to enforce or decide common rules.

Some examples offer relatively straightforward instances to identify mechanisms of authority migration. Court decisions can force local governments to comply with centralized rules or laws, such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954. Military conquest from the outside can likewise impose authority migration in direct and easily observable ways, such as when East and West Germany were created following World War II (forcing decentralization), or when Reconstruction in the post-Civil War United States changed significantly, though temporarily, the locus of authority among the Southern states (imposing centralization).

More difficult to pinpoint, but often of greater interest to political scientists, are the fundamental or structural causes—the sources—of authority migration. Each of the essays in this symposium deals with one or more sources of authority migration. These include factors that exist at the international, national, and sub-national levels. As we discuss below, drawing heavily from this symposium's articles, each of these factors may result in upward or downward migration of authority, or both.

Exogenous Forces

Kahler and Lake consider how globalization—the increasing flow of traded goods, money, information, people, and cultural symbols across national and continental boundaries—has affected governance or authority relationships. They critique a range of arguments that link large-scale, exogenous forces like globalization to upward migrations of authority, arguing instead that the effects of rapid globalization on authority migration have been mixed. They explain how two recent eras of heightened globalization, pre-1914, and post-1945, experienced different patterns. During the former era, large, imperial political structures maintained relatively decentralized governance structures, whereas in the latter era, there was at first an emphasis on the nation-state (especially in the Third World), but later an emphasis on both regionalization within nation-states, and delegation to international organizations. Their main conclusion is that the effects of globalization on governmental authority have been highly contingent, and one cannot claim that globalization has clearly come at the expense of authority at the nation-state level. Instead, authority migration can be a strategic response to exogenous events by political elites trying to cement their positions.

Institutional or Structural Sources

Bednar discusses features of federal political institutions that engender authority migration. Bednar highlights three general problems in federations: shirking by units that are supposed to contribute to the common good of the federation, burden-shifting by any level of government (which can include shirking but also forms of abdication), and encroachment by one level of government into another level's realms of authority. All three imply authority migration with potentially longstanding consequences for the balances of power within federations. Bednar argues that, unchecked, these forms of authority migration are extremely dangerous as they undermine the basic functions of federal systems. Yet Bednar's troubling conclusion is that the temptation for actors to shift power through these actions will always be present in a federation. She argues that the sources of such authority migration are inherent and inescapable within federalism itself. As such, the best one can do is to design institutions within a federal system to manage, rather than prevent, the inevitable shifting of political power between levels of government.

Pressure from / Decisions by the Center

Andersson, Gibson, and Lehoucq examine the devolution of natural resource policy in developing countries to local political actors. The primary focus of their essay is on how local elites respond to the transfer of authority from central governments. They find that significant variation in the implementation of natural resource policy at the local level can be explained by features of the local political economy, the nature of ongoing interactions between the center and the periphery, and personal characteristics of local elites. In so doing, they make the important point that the impetus for devolution of natural resource policy often comes not from local governments, which may lack the capacity or incentives to take advantage of their newfound authority, but rather from the central government itself as it responds to its own political incentives.

Pressure from / Support by Citizens at the Periphery

Hooghe and Marks explore the influence of public opinion on support for upward authority migration in Europe. They find, after detailed analyses of survey data in Europe, that national identity, especially whether that identity is exclusive versus inclusive, shapes attitudes toward authority migration in

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different ways. The stronger people express ethnically-based (i.e., exclusive) identities, the less likely they are to support European integration, controlling for many other factors commonly found to affect such support. In contrast, the stronger people express inclusive, civically-based identity, the more likely they are to support European integration, once again, controlling for many other factors. Nationalism and pro-European preferences are not incompatible, they conclude, and thus strong national identities (on its face, a preference for downward authority migration) may co-exist with support and pressure for greater European integration (a form of upward authority migration).

Domestic Conditions

Rodden considers decentralization of fiscal authority. He describes authority migration as the outcome of a bargaining game of incomplete information between central and sub-national governments. Central governments delegate some element of fiscal sovereignty to the provinces; the response of the provinces, and hence the ultimate impact on fiscal performance, depends to some extent on beliefs about the center's commitment to fiscal discipline. Rodden's approach, like Bednar's, emphasizes an inherent instability in federal relationships. As long as there is some possibility of a bailout by the center, sub-national governments have some incentive to shirk, effectively shifting their power (or responsibility) back to the center. His essay then explores explanations for differences in the degree of fiscal decentralization across countries, emphasizing domestic factors such as regime type, civil wars, structure of political parties, and income inequality.

Consequences of Authority Migration

In the economics literature, one of the primary sources of authority migration is the desire for improved economic performance. Policies adopted at some levels of government may be better able to achieve certain economic outcomes than policies adopted at other levels. For example, when economic activities have important spill-over effects, political actors may have an incentive to shift authority upwards to internalize those externalities. When significant preference heterogeneity exists, actors may have an incentive to shift authority downwards to capture and reflect those diverse preferences in policy.[2] The essays in this symposium articulate a more nuanced view of the conditions under which these improvements in outcomes may or may not be captured, based largely on an appreciation of the political constraints actors face.

Economic Performance

Two essays emphasize the conditionality of the claim that political decentralization results in better economic performance. Andersson, Gibson, and Lehoucq argue that decentralizing natural resource policy may improve economic performance, in the sense of leading local officials to dedicate more staff and resources to conserving forest resources, but that this depends importantly on local actors' incentives and ongoing oversight by the center. Likewise, Rodden argues that decentralizing fiscal sovereignty can enhance fiscal performance; whether it does so depends on the center's commitment to that decentralization. Together, the common conclusion of these essays points to a more general issue, which is that the ongoing relationship between political actors after a migration of authority may be as important to its ultimate consequences as the original transfer of power itself.

Citizen Attitudes and Support

Hooghe and Marks suggest that there is reciprocal cause and effect between upward migration and public opinion change. The march of European integration over the past 50 years has deepened feelings of both nationalism and of being European among certain sectors of European populations. These attitudes, in turn, affect the pace of authority migration by influencing member governments' decisions to support or oppose increasing integration.

Stability

Bednar discusses the dangers of persistent encroachment and burden shifting among levels of government in a federation. When these shifts of authority become severe, the delicate federal balance is disrupted, federations break down, and the result may be extreme instability—secession or civil war or both. Fortunately, at least two sets of factors exist to counteract these potentially disruptive migrations of authority and hence ensure greater stability. First, federal institutions themselves, including court and political party systems, provide safeguards by which political actors can manage, mitigate, and circumvent these potential sources of instability. And second, actors at all levels may have incentives to tolerate some small-scale migrations of authority, allowing for adjustments in power-sharing relationships within a broadly stable system.

Governance

Kahler and Lake suggest that authority migration may diminish the ability of citizens to assign blame and responsibility across levels of government. With upward or downward movement, citizens and leaders can become confused over whether authority has been delegated or whether it has truly shifted. In the former case, the authority can be returned to the principal, whereas in the latter, there is no guarantee of going back to a previous arrangement. From the outside these two phenomena may be observationally equivalent, and the confusion can have important implications for election outcomes, public opinion, and even the possibilities of military conflict.

An Emerging Research Agenda

As Kahler and Lake discuss in their essay, economists typically focus on how efficient federal systems are in allocating resources; in a similar vein, public administration and policy scholars pay close attention to measurable consequences of changes in management structures within governments. Political scientists are more apt to place the incentives of political actors who are embedded in power sharing arrangements at the center of these processes. These political actors care deeply about who gets what under which kinds of authority allocations—in other words, they care about the distribution of resources. Political scientists also have a keen sense that exogenous shocks explain only part of the story of authority migration, and that the outcomes from bargaining taking place among actors at different levels of government, outcomes that are hard to predict, shape how power is allocated institutionally with lasting consequences for countries and regions.

In this spirit, we believe that future studies of authority migration will be well served by incorporating some of the key insights generated by the essays in this symposium:

1. Political actors seek to reallocate authority to achieve their political and policy objectives.

2. The consequences of authority migration are highly contingent upon the choices made by political actors, and citizens and leaders may be uncertain about the effects of these choices.

3. Authority migration does not happen mechanistically, but occurs in the context of bargaining among levels of government.

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4. Bargaining over authority migration takes place in situations where there are options to move authority up or down from its current level. In other words, the same factors can cause either upward or downward migration of authority, and which occurs can depend on interactions with other factors.

In taking stock of the ideas presented and discussed in our conference and in the essays included in this symposium, we find reasons to be optimistic about prospects for a unified research program on authority migration. At the same time, we are realistic about the limits of our present knowledge and of the current approach to the study of authority migration, which is to examine a small part of the puzzle and understand that part well. Integrative research on authority migration is rare. Some of the authors in this symposium have used a wide lens, working to link the causes and consequences of authority migration, and upward and downward migration, into a single study. We applaud these efforts and encourage more of the same.

Notes

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1. Materials from the conference, including the complete agenda and schedule, are available at www.closup.umich.edu.

2. See Kahler and Lake, this symposium, for a more extensive summary of this literature.

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Krister P. Andersson *is a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for the Study of Institutions, Population and Environmental Change (CIPEC) at Indiana University. He studies the institutional aspects of decentralized natural resource management, forest carbon sequestration activities, and international development cooperation. Andersson's research has appeared in* World Development, Journal of Environment and Development, *and* Climate Policy. *His work on decentralized forest governance in Bolivia is featured in his book* ¿Cómo hacer funcionar la gestión forestal descentralizada? *(Plural Editores 2004).*

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