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Devolution



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Devolution typically refers to processes concerning the vertical allocation of authority within a state, involving the transfer of *some* powers from a higher jurisdiction to other institutions that operate at a lower territorial level. In practice, this can take different forms: administrative devolution (where devolved bodies merely implement decisions taken by the center); executive devolution (where devolved elected executives are granted by the center the ability to take policy decision on a series of devolved matter but, typically, hold at best secondary-legislation powers); or full political devolution (where devolved elected bodies are granted primary legislation power on a set of specific matters, and have autonomy over these) (Torrance, 2022). In principle, devolved institutions are “creatures of the central government” and their powers are not constitutionally guaranteed (as in a federal system). Yet, depending on the degree and extent of the powers that are transferred, and on the mechanisms that regulate such distribution of authority, devolution can set in motion complex dynamics, because it

has the potential to challenge the principle of sovereignty and alter the territorial constitution of a state (Keating, 2021; McEwen & Petersohn, 2015).

Different countries across the world have adopted different forms of devolution based on their state-formation paths and administrative structures (Rokkan & Urwin, 1982), as well as the need to accommodate specific center-periphery dynamics, territorial representation demands, and socioeconomic needs that characterize their polity (Keating, 2021; Mackinnon, 2021; McEwen & Petersohn, 2015; Willett & Giovannini, 2014). Devolution, therefore, remains a fluid and malleable concept.

Understanding Devolution

The most cited political science literature on devolution draws on debates and developments in the UK—although this sometimes incorporates comparative accounts with other states. This focus on the UK reflects the complexity that characterizes the decentralization of political authority in a multinational country with an uncodified constitution, where issues of sovereignty (and its territorial allocation) remain fundamentally unresolved (Keating, 2021). Indeed, in the international context, the UK stands out as a *plurinational union* “without fundamental agreement on *demos* (the people), *telos* (the ultimate goal), the *locus* of sovereignty, or geographical scope” (Keating,

2021, p. 492). Thus, sovereignty assumes a relational and “fuzzy” connotation: it can be shared vertically (as it currently is, through devolution), but only by means of a series of ad hoc institutional compromises.

Against this background, the form of devolution adopted in the UK is asymmetric: each of the composing nations of the country is allowed specific territorial arrangements by the central state, within the broader aim of preserving the union (Andrews, 2021). This model of territorial accommodation recognizes territorial differences and allows incremental adjustments. Yet, it does not provide a “full solution” to the nationalities question, leaving foundational issues in abeyance (Keating, 2021).

Mapping Devolution Research

Reflecting persisting questions related to the territorial constitution of the UK, the literature on devolution deals with two—sometimes related or overlapping—themes. First, devolution responds to a particular crisis of democracy in a plurinational state, in which one of the constituents, England, has a much larger population than the others and has long been (re)presented as the core of the union (Mycock & Hayton, 2012). In Scotland and Northern Ireland, demands for devolution clearly reflect the existence of historical identities and associated democratic claims, which have been mobilized by each of them in different ways to make the case for political autonomy. In Scotland—the nation with the most substantial form of political devolution—research has highlighted how, rather than “taming nationalism” as hoped by their architects, devolved institutions have provided new political arenas for these actors and for their independence demands (McCrone, 2025; Keating, 2021; McEwen & Petersohn, 2015). Furthermore, while Scotland’s autonomy has increased over time, this has generated a growing interdependence between devolved and reserved matters that has exposed the problematic nature of intergovernmental relations—posing challenges to the sustainability of the devolution settlement (McEwen &

Petersohn, 2015). In Northern Ireland, devolution’s path has repeatedly intersected with the religious cleavage. The 1998 Belfast Agreement led to a “post-sovereignist compromise” that helped to mitigate the contested politics of religious belonging and led to a period of relative stability (Murphy & Evershed, 2021). Yet, as the constitutional makeup of the UK has continued to develop under devolution, a form of “Northern Ireland exceptionalism” has emerged, for example, in relation to contested policy areas like abortion (Thomson, 2016).

Second, devolution responds to the requirement for more efficient provision of (public) infrastructure and services, and to the needs and preferences of diverse places, improving economic development or human well-being (Mackinnon, 2021)—both of which, the literature suggests, are hindered by an overcentralized state (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016; Bailey & Wood, 2017). Research on this dimension tends to focus on Wales and England. While territorial identity and related autonomy claims are not irrelevant in these areas (Andrews, 2021; Mycock & Hayton, 2012; Willett & Giovannini, 2014), here devolution has been framed, for the most part, in terms of public service reform and as a means for “rescaling to address regional inequalities” (Bailey & Wood, 2017; Mackinnon, 2021; Tomaney, 2016). In Wales, research has stressed how devolution has evolved from an executive to a political form over time (Andrews, 2021), but this has added further complexity to multilevel governance dynamics between local, devolved, central, and EU institutions (Entwistle et al., 2012). In England, research has highlighted the paradoxical phenomena of a continued process of power-hoarding at the center within a purported project of “radical devolution” (Bailey & Wood, 2017; Tomaney, 2016)—showing the persistence of the centralizing “reflex” that characterizes the Westminster model. Studies have also demonstrated the tight link between English devolution and regional development goals in a context of austerity has generated issues of democratic representation and accountability (Prosser et al., 2017; Willett & Giovannini, 2014; Blunkett et al., 2016) as well as policy effectiveness (Ayres

et al., 2017), while keeping unaltered the intrinsically top-down nature of center-local relations (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016). Even if new decentralized bodies have been created, with the alleged aim of providing visible leadership (Kenealy, 2016), governance modes and structures remain compound and operate according to contractual, hierarchical mechanisms controlled by the center (Sandford, 2016; Tomaney, 2016)—while regional inequalities have persisted (Mackinnon, 2021; Warner et al., 2021).

The UK case suggests that asymmetric devolution can help address *some* issues related to the vertical distribution of power in multinational states. But its original “expansive approach” set in a context of constitutional fluidity (Andrews, 2021) can also instigate institutional and economic divergence across the UK (Lowndes & Lempriere, 2017; Sandford, 2016; Warner et al., 2021) as well as uncertainty about the future of the union, especially in times of crisis (McEwen, 2018; Murphy & Evershed, 2021). Indeed, events like Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have exposed the (re)opened old and new center-periphery fractures across and within the UK nations (Keating, 2021; Warner et al., 2021; McEwen, 2018; Murphy & Evershed, 2021), putting further strains on the system of devolution (Andrews, 2021) and prompting a profound reconsideration of the UK’s existing territorial setup (Murphy & Evershed, 2021; Keating, 2021) and territorial constitution.

Where Next

Devolution was intended to fix the chronic instability in the territorial politics of the UK but has produced a new “unstable” set of relationships within the Union (Keating, 2021; Andrews, 2021; McEwen & Petersohn, 2015). The wider lesson from the UK is that devolution is a process, not an event—and once set in motion, it cannot be fully controlled by the center. As such, devolution per se is not a panacea to the identity, governance, economic, and institutional challenges that often characterize multinational countries, and its study should be connected to the reconfiguration of the

state in all its key dimensions and at all levels, including the center.

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