Review: Europe and the Nation State: Who Gains, Who Loses?
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Europe and the Nation State: Who Gains, Who Loses?

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From the earliest days of West European integration, policymakers and political scientists have disagreed on its implications for the nation-state. Some hoped—and predicted—that the sovereign state would be undermined, yielding authority to a federal European Community above the state and to strengthened regional governments below. Ever since, the ideal of a “Europe of the regions” has played a part in political rhetoric and academic analysis.

In States and Regions in the European Union, Tanja Börzel attempts to move beyond the extensive literature that contests whether European integration has strengthened or weakened its member states. “We should focus” instead, she argues, “on the conditions in which the ‘state’ is strengthened, weakened or transformed” (p. 7). Börzel focuses her study on the impact that European integration has had on relations between central governments and regional authorities in two countries: Germany and Spain. She prefaces her case studies, however, with a much broader discussion of institutional adaptation within different European states. She highlights the distinctive elements within different state structures and traditions that have created divergent responses to the challenges of increasing Europeanization, a concept Börzel defines as a process by which domestic policy areas become increasingly subject to European policymaking. Börzel follows the tradition of historical institutionalism, noting the influence of established patterns of domestic politics. Yet, she also argues that political leadership—agency as well as structure—can shape state and regional responses to European policy.

Much of the recent literature on multilevel government has concentrated on the distribution of funds for regional development through the Community budget, and the opportunities this provides for regional and local governments to build direct links with the European Commission, bypassing national control (see, for example, Hooghe 1996). Börzel takes the more complex policy sector of environmental regulation, in which a different set of tensions between national and regional authorities arises. Most important, new regulations are negotiated by national governments at the Community level, but those regulations impose substantial implementation costs on subordinate levels of government.

Börzel chose Germany and Spain for her study because they have a similar regional decentralization of authority, but distinctive historical experiences that have led to very different patterns of relations between the two levels of government. In Germany, cooperative federalism grew out of the structure established after World War II. This cooperative federalism involves close links between regional administrations and the federal government. The Länder were, therefore, willing to negotiate with the federal government—accepting the unavoidable transfers of decision-making authority that European integration has involved, in return for gaining greater influence over federal policymaking and...
negotiations in Brussels. By contrast, the contested nature of the Spanish state after Franco has created a competitive regionalism in Spain. The stronger regions demanded greater autonomy in defending their interests, and the central government has defended its prerogatives as state negotiator and interpreter of Spanish national interests. The dispassionate style of Börzel's study, indeed, underplays the tensions in Spain, which have risen further since States and Regions in the European Union went to press. Today, the Madrid government seems determined to defend the sovereignty of Spain against internal erosion, and the Basque government is demanding rights of representation in Brussels that are significantly wider than those of other Spanish regions. It is the contested nature of the Spanish state that has made this such a symbolic issue.

Regions within Germany and the United Kingdom already have representative offices in Brussels, and they routinely participate in Community negotiations on issues that fall within their policy competencies. Moreover, they do so without arousing the passions and the background terrorist campaign that inflame Spanish politics.

Börzel's conclusions are careful and cautious. She sees little evidence that regions are successfully getting around the gate-keeping function of the state within the European Union. “Contrary to what is suggested by multi-level governance approaches, the central state is the main channel of influence in European policy-making” both in Germany and Spain (p. 212). Börzel identifies some limited convergence in institutional adaptation, as most Spanish regions have moved toward a more cooperative pattern of shared decision making and policy implementation with their national government. The most disturbing outcome is the increasing bureaucratization of policy. As officials at three or more different levels consult each other, parliaments at all levels find policy processes more difficult to follow, let alone hold accountable. “The integration of the regional level into the European system of governance is no longer a problem. The major challenge for the European Union is the weak role of legislatures at all levels of government” (p. 233).

References