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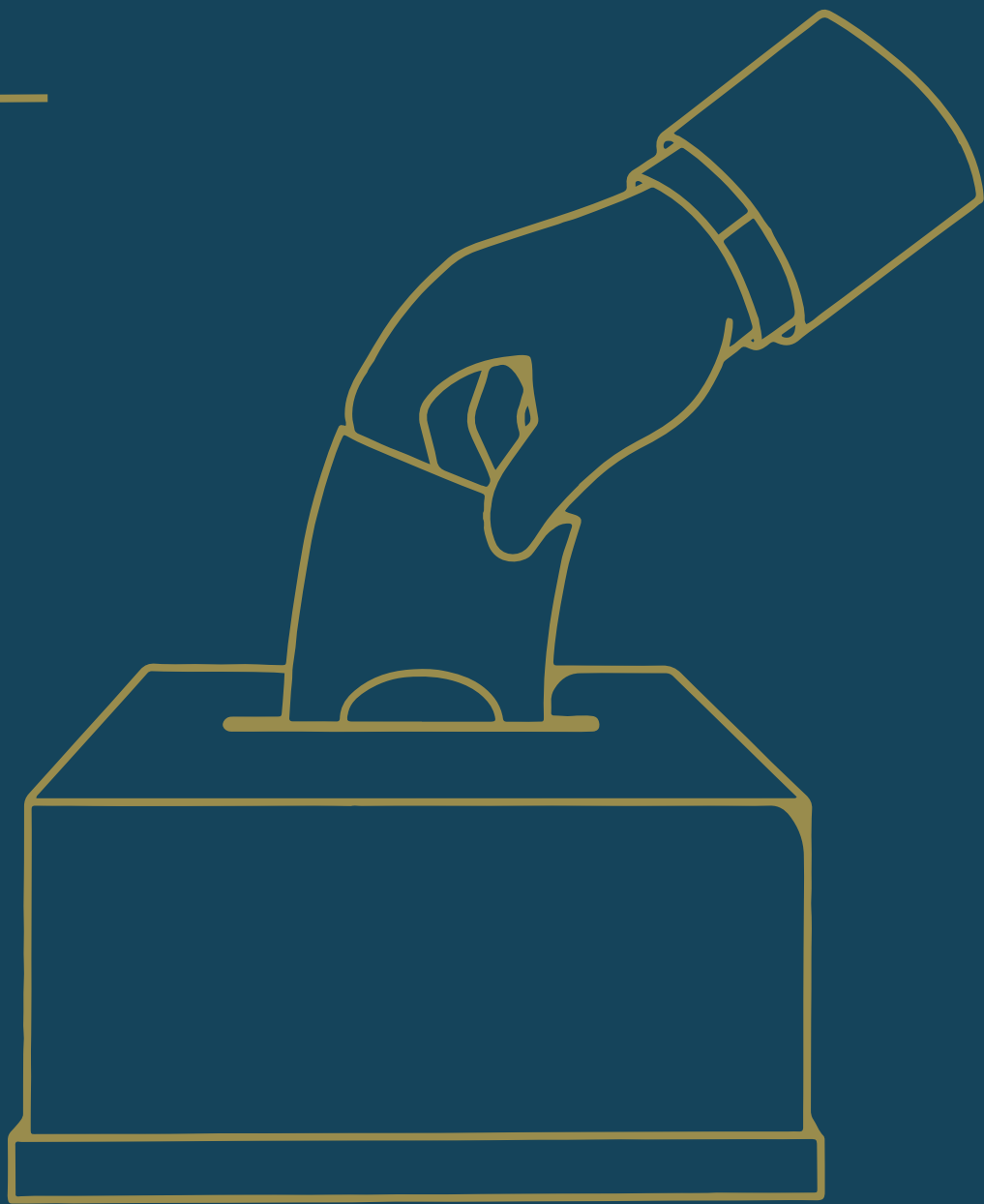
Voter Turnout: Does Federalism Make a Difference?

Policy Brief

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The Forum of Federations is an international organization that works with partners to develop practical solutions to multilevel governance challenges. The Forum publishes a range of information and educational materials on topics of federalism and multilevel governance. Active on six continents, the Forum of Federations runs programs in over 20 countries including established federations, as well as countries transitioning to devolved and decentralized governance options. It is supported by the following partner countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, Germany, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan and Switzerland.

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THE ISSUE

Those working on federalism have long touted the federal model's connection to democracy. As both an idea and a system of governance, federalism is said to be characterized by self-rule, that is, the ability of a political community to make some of its own collective decisions (Elazar, 1987; Fenna and Schnabel, 2024). Constitutionally, self-rule involves a division of powers that specifies policy areas for the legislative authority exercised by constituent units. This principle and operationalization of self-rule inherent to federalism has meant that scholars typically associated it with democracy (Burgess, 2012; Benz and Sonnicksen, 2021). More specifically, federalism is viewed as favoring better democracy since it allows for multiple arenas for representation, deliberation, and collective decision-making, as self-rule translates into the presence of constituent units possessing autonomous political institutions, including elected parliaments (Watts, 2008; Benz and Sonnicksen, 2021).

The proposition that federalism favours democracy raises a key question:

What evidence do we have to support the idea that federalism is good for democracy?

This research aimed to address this question empirically through a comparative assessment of voter turnout at the regional level in federal and unitary states.

Background

The notion that federalism contributes positively to democracy is omnipresent. The origins of federations are typically connected to one of two political uses, both intrinsically linked to democracy:

01 To prevent authoritarianism by dividing political power territorially and, thus, creating a system of territorial checks and balances.

02 The democratic management of territorial diversity (Basta, McGarry, and Simeon, 2015). Territorially diverse states, especially multinational ones (Gagnon and Tully, 2001), typically must respond to claims for autonomy coming from minority groups. Federalism comes with constitutionally-protected autonomy and, from that perspective, promotes democratic life in deeply diverse societies.

If federalism is positively associated with democracy, it follows that federalism should stimulate electoral participation at the regional level. This is because federal systems have constituent units that have constitutional standing, are sovereign in their constitutionally-specified fields of jurisdiction, and possess legislative powers in those fields.

THE ISSUE

Federalism, Democracy and Political Engagement

Federalism can also be seen as potentially favouring democracy because of the idea that it is not merely a set of institutions, but a political idea that prizes autonomy, diversity, minority rights and non-hierarchy of governments. Therefore, both federal and constituent unit governments and parliaments should be equally valuable forums for democratic life, and citizens of federal states should have a higher degree of political engagement at the regional level than citizens of unitary states. Moreover, we could expect that electoral participation, measured through voter turnout, should be more significant in the constituent units of federal states than at the regional level of unitary states for three related reasons:

01 Federalism **guarantees the status of constituent units since their existence is written into the constitution.** Hence, citizens of a federal state can engage politically in a constituent unit knowing with almost total certainty that their political participation can keep going in time and build trust in the enduring nature of the constituent units' representative institutions. In unitary states, citizens may view the regional level as much more exposed to the vagaries of politics and, therefore, have less incentive to participate politically at that level.

02 Constituent units are able to tackle important policy questions because **federalism virtually guarantees their existence over time and offers protection to their legislative and executive powers**. In unitary states, there is no similar protection for the powers of regional governments since these powers can be unilaterally modified by the state's central institutions.

03 In a federation, **constituent units have potential to be more meaningful political communities** than regions of a unitary state because of their constitutional standing and protections, but also because of foundational principles such as autonomy, reciprocity, and self-determination.

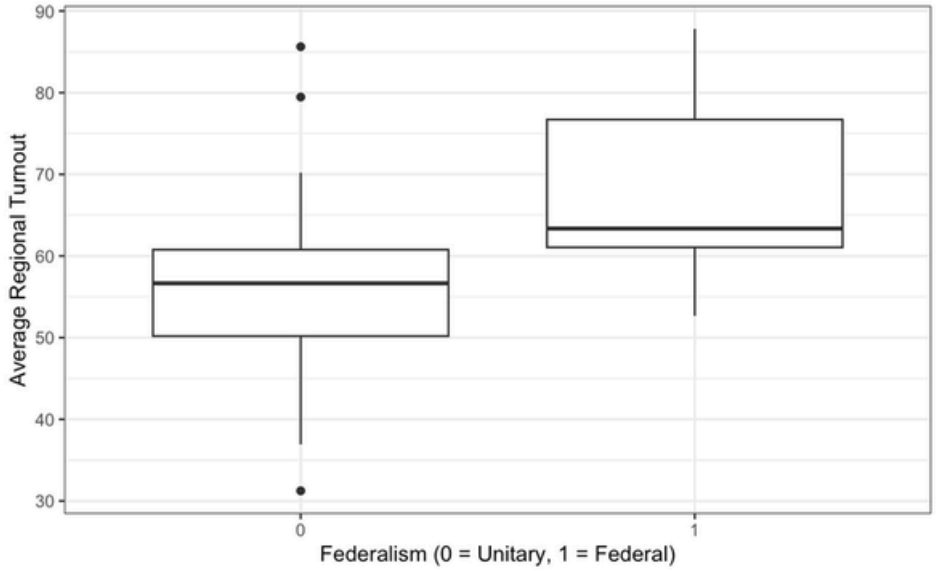
THE FINDINGS

The essential findings of our analysis is that voter turnout for elections for the assemblies of constituent units of federal states is significantly higher than turnout in the regional assemblies of unitary states. Importantly, this positive relationship between federalism and meso-level turnout remains relevant independent of the level of autonomy held by the regional governments. **In other words, the reason behind the higher voter turnout at the regional level in federal states is not the generally more significant powers of the constituent units compared to those of regional governments in unitary states. Rather, it could be found in the idea, the process, and the structures of federalism.**

An explanation for the relationship between high voter turnout for the regional assemblies elections and federal states is that because constituent units of federal states are genuine, full-fledged political communities, we can expect citizens to be fully invested in choosing the political decision-makers in and for this community.

As the figure below demonstrates, the median turnout rate is about 8 points higher in federal states than in unitary states. In federal states, regional elections do not have the same level of variation in turnout rates as in unitary states. While regional turnout fluctuates between slightly above 30 percent to 70 percent (with two outliers at 79 and 85 percent) in unitary states, variation is much smaller in federal states. In all federal states in our study , regional election turnout in federal states is always well above 50 percent and reaches 88 percent in some cases. Hence, federal states do not witness the extremely low turnout numbers in regional elections that we see in some unitary states.

Figure 1: Average Regional Turnout in Unitary and Federal States (Country Level)



THE FINDINGS

Viewing constituent units as genuine political communities which citizens are invested in shaping through electoral choices aligns with previous research on federalism that has assessed it as:



An Idea or Philosophy of Governance

Federalism brings together different political communities to live together yet apart, that is, operate both politically independently and interdependently to achieve unity in the context of diversity.



A Process

Political communities are agents of the federal system that negotiate on an ongoing basis the conditions for living together and reflecting the voices of the electorate in this process.



An Institutional Structure

Federal states operate divisions of power, territory, and sovereignty, thereby creating sets of autonomous political institutions and distinct political classes that reinforce, or altogether generate bonds between residents within each constituent unit.

Another important finding is that higher voter turnout in federal states than unitary states at the regional level does not come at the expense of turnout at the national level. In fact, **turnout at the national level is virtually identical in federal and unitary states, which means there are no trade-offs for the additional value that federal states bring on electoral participation.** Theories of federalism explain why such participation at the national level does not fall victim to political decentralization. Federal states are 'communities of communities,' (Elazar, 1980 and 1987; Burgess, 2012) that is, they construct nationhood and citizenship from the existence and singularity of political communities within the state.

Through a tolerance for diversity and the institutional architecture that operationalizes such value, federalism generates a degree of comfort for communities within the state, especially but not exclusively those that are historically and/or culturally in a minority position. This capacity of federalism to produce feelings of belonging through the apparently paradoxical approach of political decentralization has made it a staple of conflict management strategies.

POLICY LESSONS

Constituent Unit Elections in Federal States are an Important Part of the Democratic Process

Citizens of federal states vote more in regional elections than citizens of unitary states. At a minimum, this finding allows us to say that constituent unit elections in federal states are not less important elections than state-wide national elections. It further suggests that constituent unit elections in federal states take place in meaningful political communities and that they involve choosing a political class that will represent the singularity of each of these communities, exercise power on its behalf, and make policy for its members.

Federal Systems Do Not Involve Trade Offs in Electoral Participation Between the National and Constituent Unit Levels

Citizens of federal states turn out to vote as much as citizens of unitary states at the statewide national level. Therefore, federalism involves no trade off when it comes to electoral participation across constitutionally recognized levels of government.

Federalism Can Play a Positive Role in Electoral Participation and Democracy Consolidation

Our research indicates that federalism has a positive impact on a crucial aspect of the democratic process: electoral participation. For post-conflict countries seeking institutional models that can support democratic consolidation, our research provides evidence of federalism's potential to contribute to such an outcome through its effect on electoral participation at both the regional and national levels. Furthermore, our secondary finding that federalism does not sacrifice turnout at the national level for increased turnout at the regional level can help to address the traditional concern of policy-makers about the 'paradox of federalism.' This proposition suggests that by offering political communities political autonomy and decision-making capacity, federalism strengthens these communities to the point of creating or augmenting secessionism. Our research can help to ameliorate these concerns, as it indicates that the political decentralization inherent to federalism does not result in a loss of attachment to the statewide political community.

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