

Divide to rule: deconcentration and coalition bargaining

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Abstract

Why do countries create new subnational units of government? Recent studies argue that deconcentration is the product of politicians pursuing patronage opportunities and electoral gain. Yet this perspective leaves unresolved what the constraints on deconcentration are, and the why patterns of contestation over deconcentration fail to map onto existing partisan cleavages. I argue that deconcentration can be understood more generally as the result of politicians' attempts to manipulate coalitions such as parties or factions. A key implication of the theory is that shocks to coalition bargaining can precipitate deconcentration by destabilizing existing coalition structures. I test this prediction with sudden leadership deaths, using new data on deconcentration worldwide from 1960 through 2010. I find that such deaths significantly increase the probability of deconcentration. Besides informing theories of the architecture of government, my results demonstrate how coalitional considerations can motivate political actors to give away power to others.

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In 1963, Nigeria created the Mid-West Region by carving it out of the Western Region. While this reform was unsurprising to contemporaries—local demands for autonomy had been voiced since the British established Nigeria as a tripartite federation in 1954—the identity of its architects was unexpected. The Northern People’s Congress (NPC) was dominant within the Northern Region, and it was the major power in the national coalition with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). Just six years earlier, the leader of the NPC, Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, had told the British: “I am all against additional Regions.”¹ Should the Mid-West side with the opposition (as seemed likely; Brand 1965), the new regional government would enjoy substantial power: control over the region’s education, health, and agriculture policies, and the ability to block the creation of more regions. The dominant NPC-NCNC alliance seemed to risk empowering an opponent, with no apparent upside.

Creating the Mid-West Region could only serve one purpose: to break up the coalition of opposition interests, the Action Group (AG), controlling the West. While the AG leadership opposed mid-West separatism, a loud minority faction were willing to defect from the party in pursuit of their new region. Even though the NPC could not expect to win the Mid-West’s support, it forced the AG to oppose the new region, thereby splintering the AG as a political party. As Suberu (2001, 83) explains, creating the Mid-West was a deliberate attempt to “annihilate the AG and decimate its base.”

This process of creating new subnational units of government, what I call deconcentration, is not uniquely Nigerian. Grossman and Lewis (2014) document at least 25 episodes in sub-Saharan Africa since 1990.² Malesky (2009) describes “gerrymandering, Vietnamese style” as the creation of new provinces to generate a national coalition in favor of economic reform, and Arjomand (2009) traces the rise of Iran’s New Right through the strategic placement of hardliners in executive positions in newly-created

1. The remark was recorded during a private meeting with Sir Henry Willink, Chairman of the Minorities Commission of the United Kingdom, on 26 November 1957 (The National Archives, [CO 957/1](#), 11).

2. They focus on “administrative unit proliferation,” a special case of deconcentration in which “a large number of local governments [split] into two or more units over a relatively short period” (Grossman and Lewis 2014, 198).

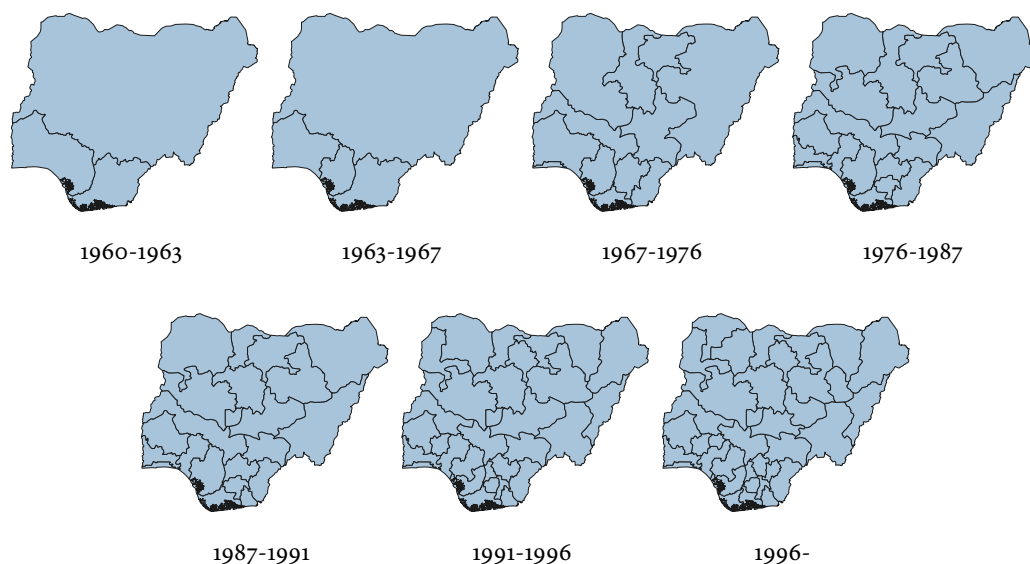


Figure 1: Deconcentration in independent Nigeria. Each panel is a map of Nigeria’s top-level administrative units (regions until 1967 and states thereafter) following an episode of deconcentration.

provinces.³ Nor is deconcentration limited to non-democracies. In the Reconstruction-era United States, Democratic Senators helped create new territories and states expected to vote Republican, in the service of a larger Western caucus (Stewart and Weingast 1992). Over the period 1960-2010, nearly 400 cases of deconcentration occurred in 126 countries worldwide—and this count only includes *primary* administrative units (e.g., American states but not counties). More than 80% of all people live in countries that have created new subnational units of government in the last 60 years.⁴

Yet the vast literature on the architecture of government largely ignores deconcentration (e.g., Filippov, Ordeshook, and Shvetsova 2004; Riker 1964; Treisman 2007). Without a better understanding of why countries around the world have created new subnational units of government, scholars cannot fully explain how rulers organize governments spatially. This phenomenon is of vast consequence to people all over the world; for many, local and regional governments are the “face” of the state with which they most frequently interact (Ostrom 1990). This relationship is particularly

3. See also Okafor (1987) on “jurisdictional partitioning.”

4. Data sources and coding rules are discussed below.

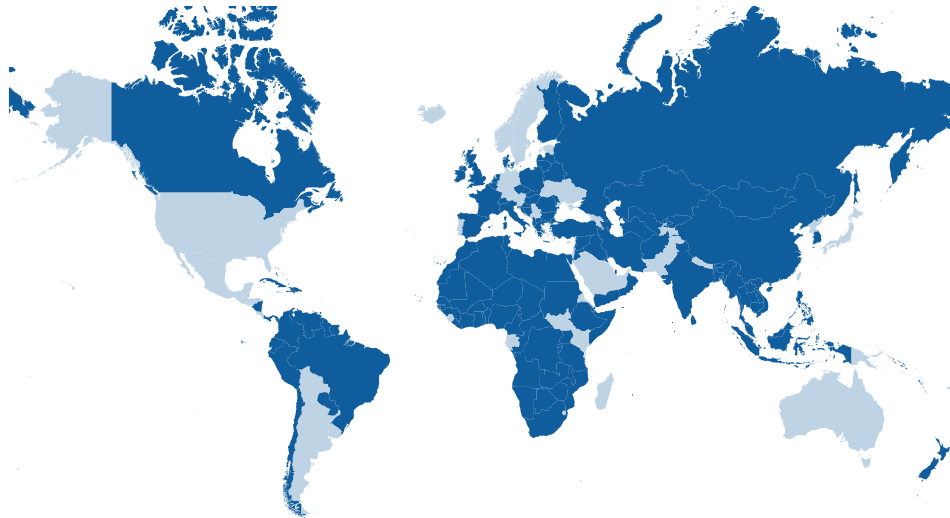


Figure 2: Deconcentration worldwide, 1960-2010. Countries that created new primary administrative units or new layers of government over the period 1960-2010 are plotted in dark blue. Only deconcentration that occurred after independence is included.

pronounced in the developing world, where structural adjustment programs and democratization assistance have frequently included provisions for strengthening subnational government (Manor 1999). Further, subnational governments also hold intrinsic meaning for citizens, providing a vehicle through which to express their social and political identities (Hooghe et al. 2016). And in democracies, subnational boundaries typically coincide with electoral constituencies, so that the quality of representation depends on the process producing such boundaries (Bhavnani 2015). In short, understanding how governments engage with the governed requires an understanding of the politics of deconcentration.

I argue that politicians pursue deconcentration to manipulate political coalitions, defined broadly as groups of agents who agree to behave cooperatively by choosing and implementing a joint course of action (Ray 2007). The key feature of deconcentration is that it invests new politicians with formal authority derived from holding office. This authority enables new politicians to enter the process of bargaining over political

coalitions within and across levels of government. Including these newly-empowered politicians in coalition bargaining can result in outcomes that substantially alter the going coalition structure, as with Nigeria's Mid-West Region. Thus, politicians' preferences over deconcentration are induced by their preferences over the coalition structures they expect to emerge with and without deconcentration.

A key empirical implication of my theory is that shocks to coalition bargaining make deconcentration more likely. Such shocks kick coalitions out of equilibrium, after which politicians use deconcentration to direct the bargaining to a more favorable new coalition structure. To test this prediction, I examine the effect of sudden leadership deaths on deconcentration. I assemble new data on deconcentration worldwide over the period 1960-2010, as well as data on sudden leadership deaths compiled from primary and secondary sources. I restrict attention to those deaths that are both exogenously timed and non-political, such as heart attacks and plane crashes. These deaths are orthogonal to the process of coalitional bargaining, allowing me to estimate the causal effect of these shocks on the probability of deconcentration. This identification strategy relies on the fact that the *timing* of leadership deaths does not depend on underlying social, political, and economic conditions.

I find that leadership deaths increase the likelihood of deconcentration significantly: the predicted probability of deconcentration within the two years following such a death increases by 3.3 percentage points, or 72%. These estimates suggest that if deconcentration always occurred as frequently as it does following a shock to coalitional bargaining, then we would expect an additional five cases per year. Further, these findings do not just reflect generalized instability following leadership death, as no other major institutional changes (e.g., enacting term limits or amending the constitution) become more likely. Finally, to test the coalition-manipulation mechanism, I show that death and deconcentration each ultimately lead to changes in the going coalition structure. Together, these results provide strong evidence that coalition manipulation is the causal force driving deconcentration around the world over the last 60 years.

This study makes three main contributions. First, to my knowledge, this is the first attempt to document and explain deconcentration as a global phenomenon. Previous studies have tended instead to provide explanations for individual cases, emphasizing

patronage and election-rigging (Grossman and Lewis 2014; Green 2010; Hassan and Sheely 2017). While my theory is not inconsistent with these accounts, the broader perspective adopted here helps shed light on deconcentration's "hard cases" for which these explanations are less helpful—such as Nigeria's repeated deconcentration since 1960 (see Figure 1), nearly all of which has occurred under military rule. Coalition bargaining occurs in virtually every political context, so focusing on how political actors can direct such bargaining provides a new way of thinking about deconcentration as a general phenomenon.

Second, I provide a rigorous account of how political coalitions and the structure of governing institutions evolve endogenously. Canonical theories of parties and party systems place their origins in politicians' strategic response to electoral institutions such as presidentialism and majoritarianism (Cox 1997; Duverger 1954). More recently, however, scholars have argued that such institutions are themselves the result of partisan competition (Boix 1999; Cusack, Iversen, and Soskice 2007; Robinson and Torvik 2015), particularly in non-democracies (Acemoğlu, Egorov, and Sonin 2008; Boix and Svolik 2013; Brancati 2014; Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2016). Comparatively few studies have provided a rigorous explanation for how parties and representative institutions can evolve endogenously. My theory highlights coalition bargaining as one mechanism that jointly produces new partisan alignments and new electoral institutions.

Finally, my theoretical framework provides one answer to a fundamental question in political economy: why political actors give away powers to others. My findings indicate that the changing structure of coalitional memberships can motivate politicians to prefer deconcentration, even if it diminishes their relative power. I show that trading off brute power for a better coalitional alignment can make sense for some actors even in the absence of credible commitments and with complete information. This finding has broad implications for fields such as post-conflict disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (Humphreys and Weinstein 2007); transition from military to civilian rule (Acemoğlu, Ticchi, and Vindigni 2010); party system organization (Boix 2007); and the emergence of representative institutions in non-democracies (Svolik 2012).

What do we know about deconcentration?

I define deconcentration as the creation of new subnational units of government. Typically, politicians create new units at existing “layers” of government, but they can also create entirely new “layers” of governing units. A layer (or “level,” “tier,” etc.) is a group of units with approximately equal rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the other units of government, and which do not overlap spatially. A unit is any unique jurisdiction within the national territory. I use “intergovernmental” to refer to relations between layers of government.

Deconcentration thus defined is distinct from decentralization: while deconcentration transfers existing powers to new units, decentralization transfers new powers to existing units. There is no evidence that they necessarily occur together. In fact, many scholars have documented an empirical connection between deconcentration and *centralization*, the transfer of rights and responsibilities from subnational governments to the center (Dickovick 2011; Eaton and Dickovick 2004; Grossman and Lewis 2014; Tripp 2010). Lewis (2014) describes a number of mechanisms through which the two are linked: after deconcentration, each individual unit has less bargaining power, less technical capacity, less information about citizens, and greater dependence on patronage. Other scholars have argued that deconcentration alone has no effect on the intergovernmental balance of power and therefore “hardly warrants consideration” (Manor 1999, 6). Since theoretical expectations and empirical evidence are mixed, throughout the paper I remain agnostic on whether deconcentration occurs simultaneously with any general reforms that shift power toward or away from subnational units.⁵

Only recently has deconcentration received scholarly attention, albeit under the narrower rubric of administrative unit proliferation (AUP).⁶ The central claim of the AUP literature is that proliferation is the result of a temporary alliance struck

5. However, as discussed below, my theory suggests that deconcentration is much less likely in highly decentralized and federal systems, where subnational actors are better able to block deconcentrating reforms.

6. For example, neither of the two most prominent recent studies of the “architecture of government” mention deconcentration by any name (Filippov, Ordeshook, and Shvetsova 2004; Treisman 2007).

between citizens, activists, and rulers so that each can enhance their prospects in future distributive conflicts. Citizens demand local autonomy because creating new units formally recognizes minority groups and increases ethnic homogeneity within districts (Kasara 2006; Pierskalla 2016). It also requires infrastructure, which creates jobs and spurs investment in community facilities (O'Dwyer 2006). Once established, new units are guaranteed either some measure of national resources or control over local taxation and spending, allowing for more locally targeted public goods provision (Fitriani, Hofman, and Kaiser 2005; Kimura 2013; Hassan and Sheely 2017). Activists, typically marginalized elites, also lobby the center for new provinces: besides benefiting from increased local spending, they are also able to parlay their role in deconcentration into elected office, putting patronage resources at their disposal (Green 2010). Their career prospects are also propelled forward by residents' greater access to government services (Hassan 2016), the credit for which they are able to claim. Finally, rulers use AUP to extend their hold on power, whether by expanding patronage networks, appeasing vocal minorities, or rigging electoral majorities (Ayee 2012; Falleti 2005; Green 2010; Hassan 2014; Hassan and Sheely 2017; Kimura 2013; Mawdsley 2002; O'Dwyer 2006; Pierskalla 2016; Riedl and Dickovick 2014).

This theoretical framework goes a long way toward explaining the empirical variation in deconcentration, but it leaves a number of unanswered questions. First, it is unclear why politicians pursue deconcentration in particular. Local demands for patronage can be answered with envelopes full of cash, activists can be folded into the existing state apparatus, and last-minute electoral majorities can be rigged at the ballot box instead of determined in advance through unit creation. Since the relatively mundane goals of patronage distribution and self-preservation can be achieved through more direct (and less permanent) means, it is unclear why deconcentration is needed at all.

Second, these studies suggest that citizens and activists will always want new units for themselves (though possibly not for others), and that rulers will always want to manipulate the structure of government to suit their governing agendas. But none of these studies offers a compelling explanation for why demands for deconcentration are successful in one context and fail in another. Since demand for new units should

be near-universal, the empirical variation in deconcentration is likely to be a function of the *constraints* on those who seek new subnational units. The literature provides little guidance on what those constraints are or when they bind.

Third, this framework does not illuminate how deconcentration's proponents overcome one source of opposition: politicians holding subnational office, or representing subnational constituencies in national assemblies. In many countries, actors such as governors and senators have formal voice in any renegotiation of the structure of the state, through constitutional, legislative, or partisan channels. While it is possible to imagine a context in which rulers are able to deconcentrate without the consent of such elites, this would seem a poor reflection of the vertical constraints on executive power observed across regime types (Lijphart 1984; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes et al. 2014; Svobik 2012). Many studies of AUP have noted this constraining role anecdotally, but have typically chalked it up to the opposition's short-sightedness (e.g., Ayee 2012; Grossman and Lewis 2014; Malesky 2009). This explanation seems unlikely to hold more generally.

Finally, perhaps most puzzling is why such politicians do not unanimously oppose deconcentration. Every new unit would seem to decrease their relative power within the polity as a whole, weaken their prospects for career advancement, expand the pool of political rivals, reduce transfers to their district, increase the costs of policy coordination, and exacerbate the collective action problem in resisting encroachments by the central government (Wibbels 2005; Rodden 2005; Weingast 1995; Lewis 2014). And while there may be offsetting electoral incentives in some contexts—some districts can be split to increase incumbents' probability of re-election—more favorable districts could instead be engineered through simple redistricting, without these negative side effects. Further, contrary to scholarly expectations, neither partisanship nor ethnic affinities can account for the observed variation in support for deconcentration. For example, in 1864, five Democratic Senators voted against admitting Nevada to the United States because Nevadans were widely expected to return Republican Senators (as indeed they did for the following 30 years), but four Democrats voted in favor of the bill. Republicans were similarly split, voting 18-7 (in favor). Deconcentration has similarly divided parties and generated unlikely alliances in Kenya, Nigeria, and

elsewhere (Suberu 2001; Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis 2016). Thus, our theories of deconcentration must grapple with why any subnational elites support deconcentration, and why their support does not map onto easily interpretable fault lines.

Deconcentration as coalition manipulation

To answer these questions, I begin from the observation that deconcentration invests new actors with political power. In even the most centralized polities, subnational administrative units require political officers to govern them. Deconcentration necessarily generates executive and/or legislative vacancies in new units which, in the aggregate, requires some offices to be filled with candidates who do not currently hold such positions. Thus, creating new government units increases the pool of officials who hold formal executive or legislative authority at any level of government within a country (whom I refer to as *politicians*).⁷

This “empowerment effect” has far-reaching implications because it changes who is able to engage in bargaining over coalitions. Following deconcentration, actors who were previously civilians or activists enter political office, where they ally with other politicians to fulfill their new duties. Empowerment via deconcentration is sufficient for participation in coalitional bargaining, since holding political office without engaging in coalitional politics is virtually “unthinkable” (Schattschneider 1942, 1). It is also necessary: although these new politicians are often important players before deconcentration, it is not until they have institutional access to legislative or executive power that they can take part in such bargaining. For example, in many political systems based on the Westminster model, the Prime Minister is chosen through a vote among Members of Parliament, so only by holding formal office can a local powerbroker have a say in executive selection. Thus, even if deconcentration just formalizes existing power relationships, this formalization is important in its own right because it changes who is included in coalition bargaining.⁸

7. To be clear, empowering new politicians is not the only effect of deconcentration; my argument is just that it is the most important for understanding variation in deconcentration worldwide.

8. The importance of formalization is apparent to deconcentration advocates themselves, as evidenced by the numerous, sustained statehood movements with very low chances of success (e.g., Puerto Rico).

The coalition structure that emerges from this bargaining determines a number of outcomes that matter to politicians. Most generally, coalitions generate “coalitional surplus” which is divided among members. This coalitional surplus can take many forms across regime types, including a share of party-controlled resources, the opportunity to have a voice in legislating, an electoral “brand,” better career prospects, intra-elite monitoring, and opportunities for patronage (Aldrich 1995; Cox 1987; Lupu 2016; Svolik 2012; Brancati 2014). Further, coalitional surplus is not limited to parties. Factions form within parties to influence policy positions and to direct pork-barrel spending (Ceron 2012; Persico, Pueblita, and Silverman 2011). Legislative member organizations generate social networks which then facilitate the exchange of policy-relevant information (Ringe and Victor 2013). Coalitions of parties emerge to form governments, giving party leaders greater influence on policy outcomes and private benefits such as ministerial posts (Laver 1998).

Politicians regularly try to direct coalition bargaining toward outcomes wherein they receive a bigger share of this “surplus.” However, they face a difficult problem: coalitional agreements are generally unenforceable. Negotiations are often conducted outside formal channels even in rigidly institutionalized and transparent political systems, through what Golder, Golder, and Siegel (2012, 428) refer to as “secretive backroom dealings.” Even widely-publicized contracts carry no mechanism for sanctioning coalition members who renege on their commitments, a difficulty which is only exaggerated in less democratic contexts (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Because coalitional contracts are known to be unenforceable, politicians cannot induce others to accept outcomes that depend on side payments after bargaining finishes. Their attempts to manipulate coalition structures must therefore be independent of such transfers if they are to be successful.

Deconcentration presents an attractive mechanism for manipulating coalitions that meets this criterion. Because equilibrium coalition structures depend on the identities of the specific individuals bargaining, empowering even one politician can generate enormous effects that upend the existing coalition structure (Acemoğlu, Egorov, and

At Nigeria’s 1994-1995 Constitutional Conference, only six of 45 statehood proposals were accepted.

Sonin 2008; Baron and Ferejohn 1989; Ray 2007; Ray and Vohra 1997).⁹ Not only does such a slight change alter the set of potential equilibrium coalitions, but also *all* of the payoffs to *all* of the politicians in each of these potential coalition structures.¹⁰ Further, the number of ways to partition politicians into coalitions grows with the Bell (1938) numbers. Thus, empowering new politicians not only changes the existing possibilities, but also expands the outcome space exponentially.¹¹

Since empowering new politicians can have such a strong effect on which coalitions form, politicians' preferences over deconcentration are induced by their preferences over alternative coalition structures. They form beliefs about who is likely to be empowered by deconcentration, and how these actors will impact coalition bargaining. They then support or oppose deconcentration according to their expectations about their welfare under the coalition structures they expect to emerge with and without deconcentration.

Whether deconcentration occurs in equilibrium is thus decided endogenously as part of a broader coalition bargaining game. The success of a deconcentration proposal depends on its impact on the coalition structure, and in particular, whether empowering new actors will change coalitions in a way that benefits enough politicians. "Enough" is in turn determined by the institutions that determine which actors' consent is necessary for deconcentration. Such institutions can take many forms. In the United States, this rule is Article IV, Section 3 of the US Constitution, which specifies the procedure for admitting new states to the Union. From the late 1920s until 1953, the Soviet equivalent was simply Stalin's approval (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956).

This theoretical framework can answer all of the puzzles highlighted above. First, politicians pursue deconcentration because it allows them to manipulate coalition structures. The tools that politicians can use to distribute patronage or rig majorities cannot fulfill this goal, since they do not provide a credible commitment of future coalitional payoffs to would-be partners. Second, the main constraint on deconcentration

9. See the formal vignette in the Appendix.

10. As Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin (2008, 1003) conclude, any change to the set of politicians bargaining "corresponds to a 'large' shock and may change the nature of the ruling coalition dramatically."

11. For instance, four politicians can organize into 15 different coalition structures, five into 52, and six into 203. With 20 politicians bargaining there are more than 50 trillion potential coalition structures.

tration are the institutions structuring coalition bargaining. A stricter bargaining protocol will permit less deconcentration, suggesting that unit creation should be less common in federations (consonant with the patterns in Figure 1). Third, deconcentration may be attractive to subnational politicians because improved coalitional payoffs can outweigh all of the negative impacts of unit creation. Finally, strange alliances emerge because deconcentration can impact co-partisans differently. Because coalitions themselves are under renegotiation, battles over deconcentration do not fall on existing coalitional fault lines.

All of these features of the model are evident in the story of Nigeria's Mid-West Region. The governing NPC's goal was to obliterate the AG, but it did not have the capacity to stuff ballot boxes or build patronage networks in the opposition-controlled West (The National Archives, [CO 879/159](#)). In order to reduce the AG to comparative insignificance, the NPC needed reshape political alliances in the Western Region, and deconcentration was the only tool it had that could do so. Moreover, while the NPC and NCNC had long been unable to split the West due to an effective British veto,¹² the arrival of independence (and a crisis in the Western Region) presented an eighteen-month window during which the bargaining protocol became suddenly much looser.¹³ It was during this period that the NPC and NCNC pushed deconcentration through. And while the AG proper remained vehemently opposed to the creation of the Mid-West, the Mid-Western faction of the AG lauded the move. By 1965, this faction had switched sides to the NCNC, the AG had disappeared as a national power, the NPC-NCNC partnership fell apart, and Nigeria's three parties morphed into a two-party coalition structure. This evolution is reflected in Nigeria's Effective Number of Parties (Laakso and Taagepera [1979](#)), which fell from 3.09 to 1.90 following deconcentration.

This example highlights two important implications of the theory. The first is

12. From the unification of Nigeria under British colonial rule until independence in 1960, the tripartite federal structure of Nigerian government was consistently strengthened through successive constitutions. In 1958, the Willink Commission expressly investigated the "fears of minorities" and dismissed region creation as a threat to national stability after independence (Sklar [1963](#); Colonial Office [1958](#)).

13. This crisis erupted when an interpersonal battle within the AG sparked a fistfight on the floor of the Western Region's House of Assembly (The National Archives, [PREM 11/3893](#)).

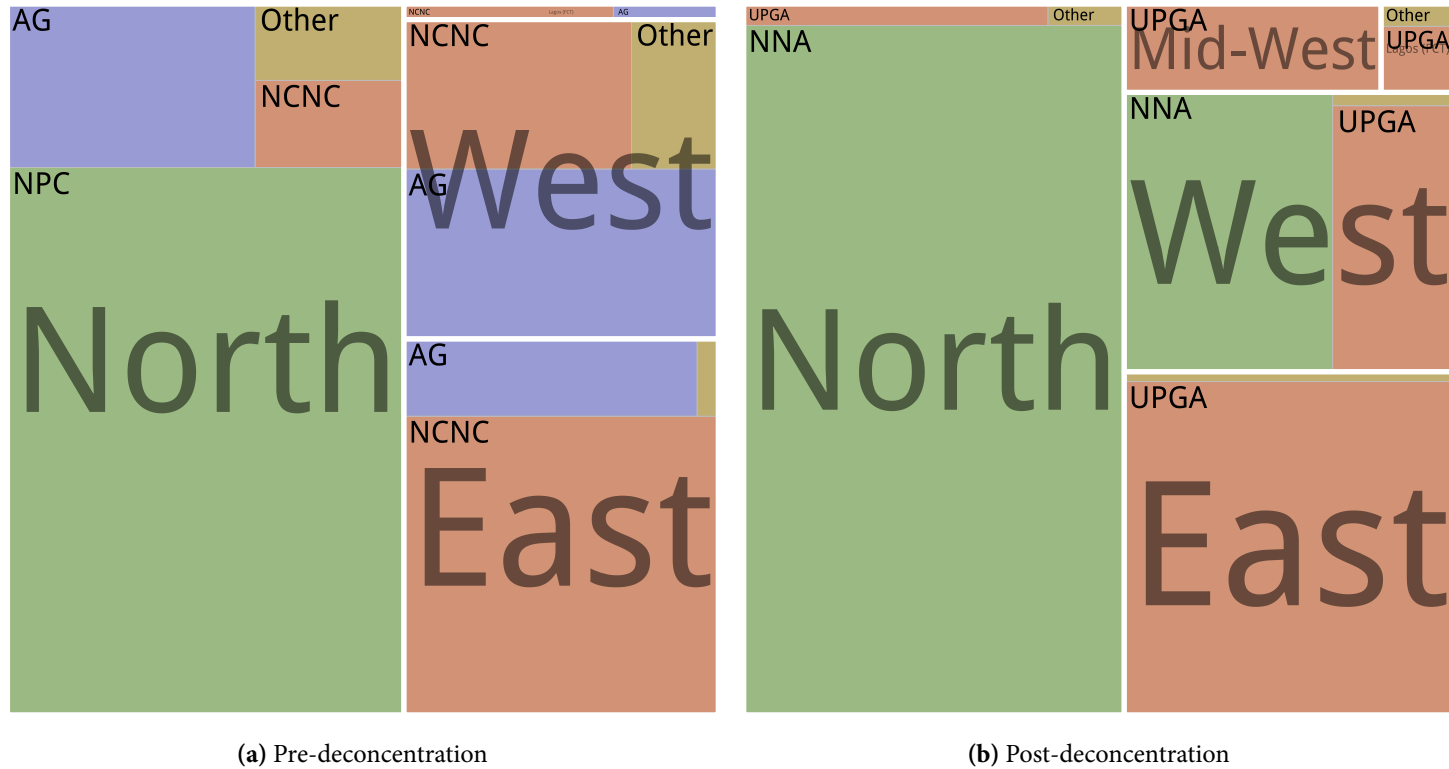


Figure 3: Coalition structure change in Nigeria. Blocks are sized proportionally to seats in the Federal House of Representatives after elections in 1959 and 1964, divided by region, and colored according to party. The creation of the Mid-West splintered the AG and caused the NPC and NCNC to reorganize into the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) and the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA), respectively. As a result, Nigeria's three dominant coalitions in 1959 became just two in 1964.

that politicians are sometimes willing to give power away in order to achieve a more favorable coalition structure. Although the NPC did not sacrifice the integrity of the North, nor the NCNC the East, both regions were significantly weakened by the creation of the Mid-West. At the time, the Nigerian constitution required a majority of regions to approve deconcentration proposals; by adding a fourth region, the NPC and NCNC ensured that they would not be able to deconcentrate without the allegiance of the West or Mid-West in the future. Each party also stood to receive a much smaller share of the revenue from the blossoming petroleum industry, which was distributed among the regions and the federal government. And since Nigerian political custom demanded all regions be represented in the cabinet, the creation of the Mid-West shrank the number of seats available for party stalwarts (Mackintosh 1962; Sklar 1963; Vickers 2000). In the end, all of these costs were outweighed by the payoff from splitting the AG.

The Nigerian case also shows how changes to the coalition bargaining environment make deconcentration more likely. The institutions structuring this bargaining had been essentially fixed from the creation of the three regions in 1939 until independence in 1960. The British had progressively strengthened Nigeria's regions and ensured each was governed by a separate party, creating a "three-legged stool" that colonial civil servants believed would ensure post-independence stability. However, in independent Nigeria, the removal of the British veto sparked renewed consideration of the statehood movements that had been nixed by a 1958 Commission of Inquiry (Colonial Office 1958): the Mid-West, as well as the ultimately unsuccessful Middle Belt and Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers states. Without the British there to protect the three-region, three-party system, deconcentration became feasible as a tool for reshaping these coalitions. It was the change to the bargaining environment brought about by decolonization that made the Mid-West possible.

Studying shocks to coalitions

More generally, my theoretical framework suggests that shocks to coalition bargaining make deconcentration more likely. With a fixed set of politicians and institutions,

deconcentration is unlikely to occur once coalition structures reach equilibrium, because every feasible coalition structure (including those with the potentially newly-empowered politicians) is considered at the beginning of bargaining. However, a sudden shift in either politicians or institutions can knock the coalition structure out of equilibrium. After such shocks, bargaining begins anew, with politicians scrambling to push coalitional bargaining toward a more favorable new outcome. During these periods of renegotiation, entirely new coalition structures become possible, and those that had previously been off equilibrium path may become optimal. Many of these new options will include deconcentration.¹⁴

To test this hypothesis, I study non-political, exogenously-timed leadership deaths. After such deaths, coalition bargaining begins anew as politicians adjust to the removal of a powerful figure from the bargaining environment, during which periods I expect deconcentration to be more likely. Further, because the timing of such deaths is exogenous to underlying political conditions, this approach allows me to identify the causal effect of coalitional considerations on deconcentration. Since these deaths' timing is linked to deconcentration only through their effect on coalition bargaining, this strategy allows me to directly test the central mechanism of my theory.

I begin by gathering new data on deconcentration worldwide since 1960.¹⁵ Like others studying subnational government units, I draw on the Statoids project (Law 2016). Statoids tracks changes to administrative divisions over time by processing official updates to a number of national and multilateral nomenclature systems.¹⁶ Where these various coding systems disagree on the timing and scope of changes to administrative divisions, Statoids reconciles the differences by drawing on primary sources and expert knowledge.

14. To be clear: re-equilibration may frequently occur without deconcentration. My theory just implies a higher rate of deconcentration during such periods of coalitional realignment than when coalitions are already in equilibrium.

15. Although other scholars have provided snapshots of deconcentration episodes in countries such as India (Mawdsley 2002) and Indonesia (Kasara 2006), inconsistent definitions, coding rules, and coverage hinder attempts to draw together existing data sources.

16. Specifically, Statoids uses updates from the International Organization for Standardization, United States's Federal Information Processing Standard, European Union's Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics, United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics, Canadian Standard Geographic Classification, and United Nations's M.49 coding systems.

From these data I determine if a country experienced deconcentration in a given year.¹⁷ Due to data constraints, I am only able to study unit creation for *primary* administrative subdivisions. These are the largest subnational units with real authority, typically states, regions, provinces, districts, or federal entities.¹⁸ This approach includes simple changes, like the creation of Nigeria’s Mid-West Region, as well as more complex episodes such as when Nigeria transformed four regions into 12 states in 1967.¹⁹ More specifically, I use the year of the *decision* to deconcentrate, not the year the change was implemented. Not only is measuring by date of decision more reliable than measuring by date of implementation, but it also tracks more closely with my theoretical framework: my outcome of interest is an elite bargain to empower others, and this outcome is observed at the moment of decision. Even when implementation of new districts is delayed by years, politicians’ long-term bargaining strategies must account for the newly-empowered actors, and so the coalitional landscape shifts immediately.

These coding rules yield 371 distinct cases of deconcentration, accounting for 4.6% of the 8,089 country-years in the data. I record at least one episode of deconcentration in fully 126 of 189 countries, for all of which I have a complete time series. Figure 4 plots a heatmap of deconcentration by region and year. Although there is evidence of clumping in countries that attained independence in the early 1960s, and again from the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the overall picture is one of broad temporal and geographic variation. The proportion of countries deconcentrating hovers between 0 and 20%.

I gather data for the independent variable of interest, leadership death, from a variety of sources. Many political science theories emphasize the role of political leadership (Ahlquist and Levi 2013), and as a result, a number of scholars have compiled

17. My data also uncover some 60 episodes of reconcentration, in which subnational units are destroyed. I set aside such cases as beyond the scope of this study, as they do not pose the same theoretical puzzle as deconcentration—subnational elites bargaining away their own power.

18. By “real authority” I mean that I exclude units used as a statistical or bureaucratic convenience (e.g., United States Federal Reserve Districts or Russian federal *okrugs*) and cultural regions without formal definition (“New England”).

19. However, I code deconcentration as 0 where existing units simply change status, as when Mexico’s Baja California Sur and Quintana Roo territories became states in 1974, or when Burundi switched from provinces to *arrondissements* in 1962.

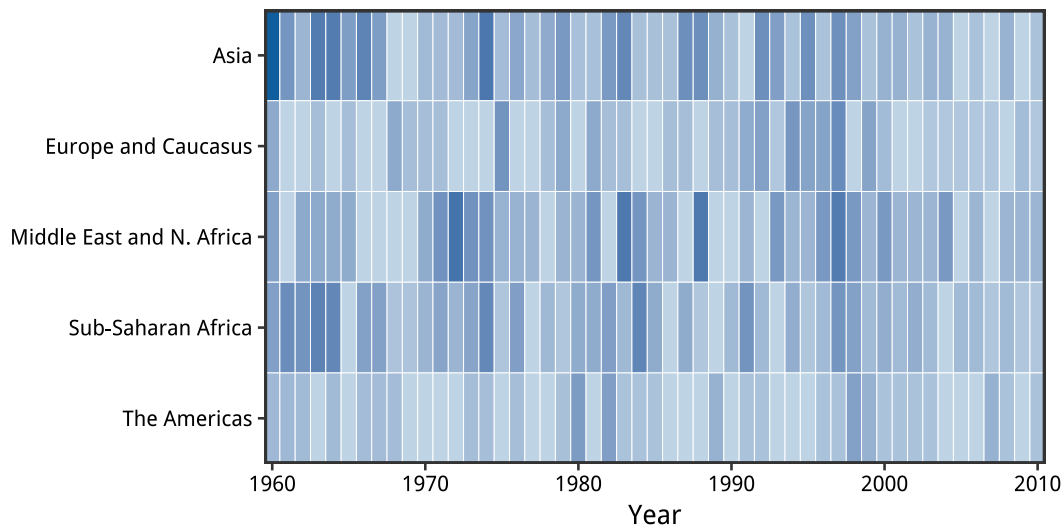


Figure 4: Global prevalence of deconcentration. In this heatmap, each rectangle is shaded according to the proportion of countries in that region and year that deconcentrated. Darker cells mean more deconcentration. Regional classifications are provided by the World Bank.

datasets on heads of states and governments that include information about how such leaders left office. The primary source I draw upon is the *Archigos* project (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009), which has the widest coverage and best documentation available. I supplement these data with two sources on leaders who died while in office: sudden deaths as identified in Jones and Olken (2005) and assassinations in Jones and Olken (2009)—the latter to rule them out of my data. I also draw on reference texts listing dates in office for heads of state, particularly the Central Intelligence Agency (2016) *World Factbook*, da Graça (1985), and Lentz (1994), which identify those who died before they could complete their term. Finally, since many of these sources do not cover more recent years, I searched major English-language news sources for mentions of leadership deaths since 2000.²⁰

The treatment of interest is a binary indicator for whether a country-year experienced a leadership death due to “natural” causes, including illness, accident, and

20. Specifically, I searched the archives of BBC News, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times for country names paired with variations on “death,” “died,” and “passed away.”

suicide. I code all assassinations, removals by internal or external forces, and battle casualties as 0. I also code any deaths that occur during coups as 0, even if they would otherwise be coded as “natural”; for instance, Salvador Allende’s suicide that came just as his regime was toppled is not included as a natural leadership death.

The data sources I draw on contain substantial disagreements about both who leaders are and how they leave office. I use contemporaneous scholarly sources to resolve coding disagreements. Where the disagreement is over who truly holds the most power, I err on the side of including leadership deaths because it constitutes a shock either way. If two politicians’ relative power is similar enough that scholars disagree on who was *more* powerful, then the removal of one is essentially indistinguishable from the removal of the other, and should produce the same effect on coalitions. More formally, I want to ensure that the stable unit treatment value assumption is not violated by applying an inconsistent treatment across units. When two politicians can be reasonably considered a country’s “leader,” the death of either one can reasonably constitute the treatment of interest. In contrast, I err on the side of excluding deaths for which I am unable to establish an apolitical cause, to ensure that my estimates are not polluted by including some deaths which are endogenous to the same forces driving deconcentration.²¹

The resulting data include 82 sudden leadership deaths due to natural causes.²² Among these cases are 25 heart attacks, 15 deaths from cancer and another 15 from other long-term diseases, 10 sudden illnesses, 9 accidents, 5 deaths during surgery, 2 strokes, and 1 suicide. Thus, over half of the deaths in my data are very sudden. Although the other half of these cases are the result of long-term illnesses, such cases do not threaten my identification strategy: even though they are not sudden, their timing is, creating exogenous variation that allows me to treat my estimates as causal.²³

21. I also code as 0 cases where the evidence indicates that leaders were forced into retirement or inactivity due to illness, despite holding formal office until death, in order to avoid bias arising from anticipation effects.

22. See the Appendix for a complete list of deaths included in the analysis.

23. Note that leadership deaths do not constitute a “strong” treatment, as the theoretical model does not suggest that the likelihood of deconcentration correlates with the strength of the player removed from coalitional bargaining. Similarly, multiple treatments are not a concern here because a single death is sufficient to destabilize coalition structures—further deaths do not yield more destabilization—and

My baseline model is a standard logistic regression with the country-year as the unit of analysis.²⁴ The treatment is an indicator that takes the value 1 if the country has experienced a leadership death in the last two years (inclusive), and 0 otherwise. For example, Mozambican president Samora Machel died in a plane crash in 1986, so this variable is coded as 1 for Mozambique in 1986, 1987, and 1988. I refer to these as “two-year windows.” Because both deconcentration and leadership deaths are hand-coded, the data are complete, covering every independent country for each year over the period 1960-2010.

This use of windows in lieu of simple contemporaneous deconcentration has two motivations. First, the data are noisy, so studying simultaneous death and deconcentration is likely to obscure more than illuminate. For instance, the second Emir of Kuwait, Sabah Al-Salim As-Sabah, died on December 31, 1977. Restricting the model to contemporaneous deconcentration would unrealistically limit the timeframe for observing the relationship predicted by the theoretical model to just a few hours. Using two-year windows addresses this measurement problem. Second, the theoretical model says little about how long coalitional bargaining is expected to take, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it varies broadly and can take up to 18 months—as in Belgium, where the June 2010 elections did not yield a government until December 2011. Using a post-death window as the main covariate allows time for the bargaining at the heart of the model to unfold. I demonstrate that my results are robust to choosing alternative window lengths in the Appendix.

Deconcentration follows coalitional shocks

The first column in Table 1 provides the main result. As expected, a country experiencing a sudden leadership death is more likely to deconcentrate within the following two years. This effect is also substantively significant. The probability of deconcentration

experiencing leadership death does not affect the probability of future leadership death. These results can be found in the Appendix.

24. Estimating the LATE with panel data and a binary response is non-trivial; Angrist and Pischke (2009) and Wooldridge (2010) both suggest an alternative strategy using linear probability models. Results from these models are nearly identical to those reported here and can be found in the Appendix.

Table 1: The effect of leadership death on deconcentration

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Death in last two years	0.56* (0.25)	0.55* (0.28)	0.53* (0.27)	0.55* (0.28)	0.53 [†] (0.27)
Development			-0.06* (0.03)		-0.04 (0.03)
Democracy				-0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.02)
Country and year FE?	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
BIC	3,025	4,628	4,679	4,628	4,686

* $p < .05$, [†] $p < .10$. Each model includes 8,089 observations across 189 countries.

increases to 7.7% following such deaths—a 72% increase. If the baseline frequency of deconcentration were raised to that following a sudden leadership death, then we would expect to observe an extra 265 cases of deconcentration, or more than 5 extra per year, over the period 1960-2010.

To examine whether this result is simply capturing cross-sectional or temporal heterogeneity, the model in column (2) adds country and year fixed effects. Adding these parameters degrades model fit, but the LATE is unchanged. I also investigate whether these results are also robust to including two obvious controls, economic development and democracy. I measure development using gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, in thousands of constant 2006 US dollars (World Bank 2017), while democracy is given by the “revised combined” Polity IV score (Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2011). To avoid post-treatment bias, I use the level of economic development or democracy observed immediately prior to the first year for which leadership death data are available in each country. I also use multiple imputation to account for missingness among the controls (Kropko et al. 2014). These results are reported in columns 3-5 of Table 1, with the LATE unchanged. Thus, the effect of leadership death on deconcentration does not appear to be an artifact of underlying conditions.

Many additional specification checks are reported in the Appendix. I show that my estimates are robust to: using contemporaneous (post-treatment) controls; dropping

observations with missing controls; interacting democracy and development with the treatment; clustering standard errors; accounting for geographic clustering; and using alternative treatment windows.

One potential concern is stark class imbalance in deconcentration: only about 4.6% of observations are coded as 1, with the rest 0s. Despite being *relatively* rare, deconcentration is not absolutely rare, since it is observed in these data nearly 400 times. There is some debate over the circumstances under which absolute and/or relative rareness poses a problem: standard maximum likelihood estimates can suffer from bias not only from the “small sample” problem but also from issues relating to data complexity and small disjuncts (King and Zeng 2001; He and Garcia 2009). To examine whether such bias affects my estimates, I estimate the model with a “rare events correction” (Choirat et al. 2016), as well as a penalized maximum likelihood (PML) approach developed by Firth (1993). In both cases, I find that if anything, class imbalance biases the estimated effect of a leadership death downward (see the Appendix). Since the magnitude of this bias is statistically and substantively inconsequential, I prefer standard maximum likelihood over these more computationally intensive estimators.

A related concern is that because there are so few leadership deaths in the data, the estimates may be sensitive to a few particular cases. To study this possibility, I use jackknife estimation, iteratively dropping each observation and re-estimating the model. The jackknifed LATEs all fall in the range $[0.50, 0.56]$, suggesting that the results are not reliant on any individual observations. I then jackknife by country, iteratively dropping all observations for each of the 189 countries in the data and re-estimating the model. This procedure yields estimates ranging over the interval $[0.44, 0.59]$. While this technique produces more varied estimates, as expected when more observations are dropped simultaneously, nothing deviates substantially from the baseline result. In short, neither jackknife procedure uncovers evidence of high-leverage cases or countries which exert undue influence on the estimate of interest.

Figure 5 presents the estimated effects of a sudden leadership death on the probability of deconcentration for a selection of these models. Each point represents the mean difference in predicted probability of deconcentration as estimated by a given

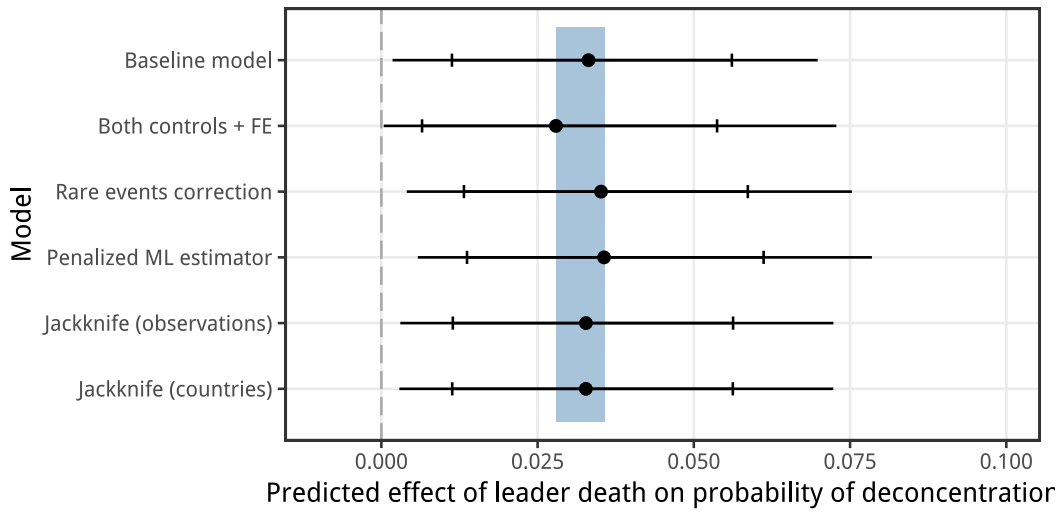


Figure 5: The effect of leadership death on deconcentration. The estimated effect of leadership deaths on the predicted probability of deconcentration across models. Estimates and standard errors are constructed from 1,000 draws from $\mathcal{N}_{MV}(\hat{\beta}, \mathbb{C}[\hat{\beta}])$. Points represent mean draws, with lines and ticks for 95% and 80% quantile intervals, respectively. Solid dots indicate estimates that are statistically significant at $p < .05$, with hollow dots for those that are not. Jackknife estimates are average means and quantiles.

model, constructed from 1,000 draws from $\mathcal{N}_{MV}(\hat{\beta}, \mathbb{C}[\hat{\beta}])$, with lines (ticks) for 95% (80%) quantile intervals. For jackknife specifications, I present means across each set of quantiles from parametric bootstrapping on each iteration of the jackknife procedure. The shaded box highlights the range of point estimates across these specifications. The estimated effect of a leadership death on the probability of deconcentration is stable around the 3 percentage point effect given by the baseline model. Given the observed probability of deconcentration of 4.6%, sudden leadership deaths are expected to increase the probability of deconcentration by 50-100%.

These results rely on an identification strategy that treats sudden, apolitical leadership death as a plausibly exogenous treatment. The main threats to inference are therefore non-random assignment of the treatment and anticipation effects (see, e.g., Dunning 2012). If sudden leadership deaths are caused by the same forces that lead to deconcentration, then my results could simply be capturing the endogenous relationship between both variables and those outside forces. Equally, if political elites can anticipate leadership deaths, then they may delay efforts to deconcentrate until after the head of state passes away, biasing upward the estimated effect of the death itself.

There is little evidence to suggest that non-random assignment is a problem. For one, it is the *timing* of leadership deaths that is exogenous, and not necessarily death itself. A randomization failure would therefore require that the assignment of the timing of a leadership death is related to the force driving deconcentration. Very few variables seem likely to affect both. One potential connection could be that more economically developed countries have better health care services and are therefore less likely to experience leadership deaths and, potentially, deconcentration. Yet regressing deaths on GDP per capita yields a null result ($\hat{\beta} = -0.00, p \approx 0.13$), suggesting that deaths are *not* more common in poorer countries. This may be because rulers typically receive health care far exceeding that available to most of their country's citizens, even in the poorest countries. And many of the illness-related deaths in my data occur outside the country which the deceased ruled, such as Gabonese President Léon M'ba's death in Paris. The anecdotal evidence suggests that a null relationship between GDP and the frequency of sudden leadership death makes sense, and that the state of a

country's healthcare infrastructure does not determine when leaders die in office.

Turning now to anticipation effects: if political elites are simply waiting until after heads of state die to initiate reforms, then we should see much of the observed deconcentration essentially simultaneous to deaths. To test whether such anticipation is a problem, I re-code the post-death windows to *exclude* simultaneous deaths. Thus, to revisit the Mozambique example above, instead of coding 1986, 1987, and 1988 as 1 for Samora Machel's death in 1986, the two-year window is coded as 1 only for 1987 and 1988 in this analysis. I then re-estimate the baseline model with two-year windows as well as the three-, four- and five-year windows considered above. Results from this alternative coding are presented in the Appendix. The estimates are noisier but again substantively unchanged from the main analysis above, indicating that anticipation effects do not account for my results.

Finally, to strengthen the causal interpretation of the baseline result, I conduct two sets of placebo tests. I first estimate a series of models identical to the baseline model, but where instead of the treatment, deconcentration is regressed on a placebo windows of varying lengths occurring prior to a leadership death, as well as after a leadership death but lagged by five years. Results for these models are also reported in the Appendix; in no case is the estimated effect of the placebo window statistically distinguishable from zero.

The second set of placebo tests examines whether leadership deaths lead to manipulation of other political institutions. The results presented so far may just reflect general political maneuvering that occurs during the heightened uncertainty following a leadership death. To investigate whether deconcentration is specifically tied to coalition bargaining, and not just garden-variety institutional manipulation, I regress a series of indicators for alternative institutional changes on the two-year post-death window from the baseline model. These indicators are: changes to veto players, the powers of subnational government units, term limits, proportional representation, and presidentialism, all from the Database of Political Institutions (Beck et al. 2001); enacting new constitutions, amending them, or suspending them, all from the Comparative Constitutions Project (Elkins, Ginsburg, and Melton 2009); and large changes (i.e., of three or more points) in the Polity scores used above. As reported in the Appendix,

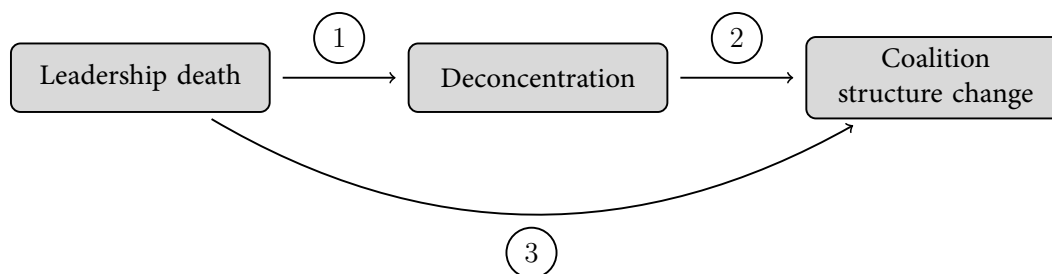


Figure 6: Causal structure. Exogenously-timed leadership deaths destabilize existing coalition structures. Politicians then use deconcentration to push renewed coalitional bargaining toward a more favorable new equilibrium.

leadership deaths do not increase the probability of any such institutional changes. These results suggest that my estimates are not just picking up generalized instability following leadership death, but rather are capturing the specific role of deconcentration as a means to direct coalition bargaining.

Checking the mechanism

These findings indicate that sudden shocks to coalition bargaining lead to more deconcentration. If, as I have argued, the causal mechanism is that politicians' preferences over coalitions induce preferences over deconcentration, then we should also observe coalitional realignments following leadership death, and in particular, following deconcentration. Figure 6 maps these causal links. The foregoing analysis has focused on establishing ①. I now study linkage ②, the effect of deconcentration on eventual coalitional changes, to verify that coalitional considerations are the driving force. However, since deconcentration and coalition changes are clearly endogenous, I also study the direct link from death to coalitional outcomes in ③, which should not suffer from endogeneity bias due to the exogenous timing of the deaths.

The ideal data to test these links would account for all changes to coalition structures (including factions within dominant parties and changes to cross-party coalitions) globally. Since these data do not exist, I take a narrower approach using changes to the size of the cabinet. Such changes are definitionally a subset of all cabinet shake-ups,

which are in turn a good indicator of shifts in the membership of the ruling coalition, since ministerial appointments are used to reward allies and punish defectors (Bäck, Debus, and Dumont 2010). Alterations to the ruling coalition are themselves a subset of all variation in the coalition structure. Changes to the cabinet size should therefore correlate to coalitional realignments more broadly.

Data on cabinet size come from the Cross-National Time Series (CNTS) Data Archive (Banks and Wilson 2013). CNTS provides a count of the number of cabinet-level members for each country-year. Since my theory does not suggest the direction of this change—whether the number of politicians in the ruling coalition will increase or decrease following deconcentration—I code a binary indicator for any change occurring. I expect that leadership death and deconcentration both increase the probability of a change in the number of cabinet members. To test this hypothesis, I estimate a series of models similar to the baseline model, where the outcome is this indicator for any change in the number of cabinet members and the covariate of interest is either deconcentration or death, to test (2) or (3), respectively. As in the main analysis above, I use two-year post-deconcentration and -death windows.

Since we might expect a baseline level of cabinet turnover, I also investigate whether the magnitude of changes in the number of cabinet ministers is larger after deconcentration or death than under normal politics. I code an alternative dependent variable as the absolute magnitude of change in the number of cabinet ministers and regress it on the same two-year windows using standard ordinary least squares. Again I expect that the estimated effect of deconcentration or death is positive. Further, in many countries, changes to ruling coalitions may not be reflected not in the size of the cabinet but rather in who holds ministerial positions. To study this possibility, I use data on major cabinet changes, which CNTS defines as the simultaneous replacement of more than 50% of cabinet ministers. I code a country-year as 1 if one or more major changes occur, and 0 otherwise, and estimate the same logistic regressions as in the baseline specification.

Results from all of these models are presented in the Appendix. As expected, experiencing deconcentration or a sudden leadership death increases the probability of a change in the number of cabinet ministers. Each also increases the magnitude of

changes in the number of cabinet ministers, and each leads to more ministerial turnover. Adding country and year fixed effects attenuates effect sizes and adds noise, but the general finding remains unchanged. Taken as a whole, these results provide substantial evidence for all of the causal links in Figure 6. Sudden leadership death causes a notable increase in deconcentration, which then carries forward through to changes in coalition structures, as proxied by changes to the cabinet. This analysis provides strong evidence that coalitional bargaining is the mechanism driving deconcentration.

Understanding worldwide deconcentration

Over 125 countries have created new subnational units of government in the last 60 years. Understanding how governments administer territory, fill representative assemblies, raise revenue, and distribute public goods—how governments actually govern—requires understanding the causes of deconcentration. In this paper I identify deconcentration as an important phenomenon in its own right, separate from decentralization, and provide a new theory for understanding why it happens. My central claim is that politicians use deconcentration to change the shape of political coalitions. A key implication of this framework is that shocks to the coalition bargaining environment can precipitate deconcentration by pushing coalitions out of equilibrium. This instability provides politicians with the opportunity to use deconcentration to push the bargaining toward a more favorable new coalition structure.

I examine this hypothesis using new data on deconcentration covering 189 sovereign states and 50 years. I find that sudden, apolitical leadership deaths dramatically increase the probability of deconcentration, providing clear evidence in support of the model. When heads of state and government die unexpectedly, the probability of deconcentration over the following two years increases by 3.3 percentage points, or 72%, in the baseline model. These estimates are robust to a variety of alternative modeling strategies. In addition, my identification strategy does not appear to be threatened by non-random assignment or anticipation effects, and a battery of placebo tests indicates that they are not just artifacts of noisy data. Finally, both deconcentration and sudden leadership death both lead to more changes to coalition structures, providing further

evidence for the mechanism identified in my theoretical framework.

Focusing on coalition manipulation generates many avenues for further research. In particular, this perspective suggests much greater focus on the institutional context than in existing accounts of administrative unit proliferation. My theory predicts that deconcentration is less likely in contexts where more politicians are required to consent to deconcentration—e.g., in polities with more veto players. This prediction appears consistent with the lack of deconcentration in the world's strongest federations, including the United States and Australia, but requires more systematic investigation.

For scholars who use subnational variation to answer important political science questions, my results suggest that deconcentration—and the coalitional considerations behind it—should explicitly be considered in developing their empirical strategies. Inferences that rely on subnational units as static, apolitical administrative boundaries may be unreliable if these units are instead a byproduct of coalition bargaining. My findings suggest scholars should take care to ensure that their findings are robust to the possibility that subnational maps are drawn with factional or partisan goals in mind.

Understanding deconcentration as a function of coalition bargaining also suggests a new way to think about the origins of electoral institutions and political parties. While previous scholarship focuses on one-directional causal relationships (e.g., Cox 1997), coalitional bargaining provides a mechanism through which institutions and parties can evolve endogenously. While this paper focuses on the number of subnational government units, it may be that other institutions—e.g., presidential veto powers—can be similarly understood as part of a broader bargaining game. My theory would predict, for instance, that legislators could be induced to accept a constitutional amendment granting presidential veto powers if they viewed the resulting coalitional changes as sufficiently profitable. This simultaneous bargaining over institutions and coalitions is a topic scholars should take up further.

A coalition bargaining perspective may also help us better understand one condition under which political actors are willing to trade away their own power. Individual politicians may be better off under alternative coalitions even if it means giving someone else territory and tax revenues. This perspective can illuminate a broad range of situations in which individuals appear to trade away their power, chief among

them post-war demobilization and the emergence of representative institutions in non-democracies—particularly where agreements are unenforceable and institutions are weak (Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik [2016](#)). Understanding how coalitional considerations can motivate political actors to trade away their own power can provide insights far beyond the study of deconcentration.

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