

Divide to rule: deconcentration as coalition formation

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Deconcentration—the creation of new subnational units of government—has quietly become commonplace, with nearly 400 episodes across 126 countries over the period 1960–2010. Recent studies have argued that deconcentration is the product of local and national elites jointly pursuing patronage and electoral gain. Yet this perspective leaves unresolved why patterns of contestation over deconcentration fail to map onto dominant cleavages such as partisanship or ethnicity. Nor does it clarify the constraints that determine when and where attempts to deconcentrate succeed.

This dissertation proposes a new explanation centered on elite bargaining over political coalitions—groups of agents who choose and implement a joint course of action, such as parties or factions. I argue that politicians pursue deconcentration because it allows them to manipulate the structure of these coalitions. Creating new subnational units of government empowers new politicians, altering the potential coalitions that can emerge from elite bargaining. Thus, politicians form preferences over deconcentration according to how they believe it will impact their position in the coalition structure. Deconcentration is in turn constrained by the institutions structuring coalition bargaining.

I test the empirical implications of this theory in three ways. First, I introduce new data on deconcentration worldwide over the period 1960–2010, and use supervised machine learning models to demonstrate that the observed variation in deconcentration matches my theoretical expectations. Second, I show that sudden leadership deaths destabilize coalition structures and thereby substantially increase the probability of deconcentration. Finally, I draw on primary documents held at the National Archives of the United Kingdom to trace the coalition-manipulation mechanism through a close case comparison of three statehood movements in Nigeria over the period from 1946 to 1966.

This study contributes to a number of areas of scholarly interest. In particular, this dissertation documents the global surge in deconcentration over the last sixty years, and its implications for relationships between citizens and states the world over. It also sheds new light on debates over selectorate theory, the endogenous evolution of representative institutions and party systems, and why self-interested political actors trade away their own power.