

# Pluralism in Research Methodologies

## Challenges to Intergovernmental Coordination Inquiry

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**Abstract:** Intergovernmental coordination remains a multidimensional and ever-contested concept, involving complex interactions across multiple levels of governance. In spite of the rich tradition of federalist scholarship, existing research often relies on descriptive, country-centric approaches and remains largely at a meta-theoretical level, offering limited insight into the mechanisms shaping coordination. This research note argues that the prevailing institutionalist bias overlooks the crucial role of individual political actors. It advocates methodological pluralism to capture both formal and informal processes. By examining the incentives of executives, ministries, political parties, lobbyists, and civil society, it disentangles the “unified actor” premise and provides a roadmap for advancing theory and empirical rigor in multilevel governance.

**Keywords:** intergovernmental coordination; intergovernmental relations; multilevel governance; political actors; methodological pluralism.

### 1. Introduction

Research on Intergovernmental Coordination (IGC) has long been dominated by country-level studies which tend to be very descriptive in nature, neglecting the mechanisms and political actors that interact in policymaking between varying layers of government. Little attention has been given to efforts directed at disentangling those arenas of governance as ‘unified actors’ and examining the political actors *per se*.

In terms of comparative research, scholars of both federal<sup>1</sup> and unitary states<sup>2</sup> have effectively

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<sup>1</sup> See, generally: H BAKVIS and D BROWN, ‘Policy Coordination in Federal Systems: Comparing Intergovernmental Processes and Outcomes in Canada and the United States’, (2010) 40(3) *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 484–507; N BEHNKE and S MUELLER, ‘The Purpose of Intergovernmental Councils: A Framework for Analysis and Comparison’, (2017) 27(5) *Regional & Federal Studies*, 507–527; A FENNA, ‘Federalism and Intergovernmental Coordination’, in B G PETERS and J PIERRE (eds), *The SAGE Handbook Public Administration* (Sage 2012) 750–763; Y HEGELE, ‘Multidimensional Interests in Horizontal Intergovernmental Coordination: The Case of the German *Bundesrat*’, (2018) 48(2) *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 244–268.

<sup>2</sup> See, generally: G STOKER, ‘Intergovernmental Relations’, (1995) 73(1) *Public Administration*, 101–122; R AGRANOFF, ‘JPART Symposium Introduction: Researching Intergovernmental Relations’, (2004) 14(4) *Journal of Public Administration Research*

mapped the processes and institutions of IGC through rich and informative contributions. Still, the debate has generally remained at a highly abstract and meta-theoretical level. As far as the state of the art is concerned, the multidimensional, multilayer, complex, and even ‘contested’ character of IGC reveal a diversity of state structures and institutional settings, bureaucracies and financial frameworks, but also a constellation of (state and non-state) actors that interact on the political landscape.

Nevertheless, efforts to translate the study of IGC phenomena into more concrete theoretical insights or empirical evidence has faced significant constraints. Arguably, the analytical lens or frames that researchers have employed might have hindered advances on this topic. Indeed, identifying the formal practice of intergovernmental interaction is important, but tracing the process of informal interactions within the broader political system might reveal hidden, but critical mechanisms that inform the policymaking process across the different territorial layers of government. Consequently, this research note aims to offer a critical insight into the extant body of work and signal the main challenges to IGC inquiry, in particular from the standpoint of using the diverse methodological tools that are available.

## 2. Challenges to Intergovernmental Coordination Research

The main challenge for IGC research is not the scarcity of theory or data, but the persistence of analytical frameworks that inadequately capture political agency. This section will examine three distinct limitations: the bias towards *formal structures and institutions* (2.1), the issue of *data selection and methodology* (2.2), and the *choice of research focus* (2.3).

### 2.1. Formal structures and institutions bias

One recurring limitation of IGC literature is its tendency to treat governments as *unified actors* instead of arenas for negotiation, competition and cooperation between multiple actors with varied preferences. By framing intergovernmental relations as interactions between abstract levels of government, scholars frequently overlook the internal political dynamics that shape coordination outcomes. Within the same level of government, divergent preferences may be pursued by executives, ministries, political parties, legislatures, and bureaucracies, generating conflicts that remain invisible in institutional mappings. As a result, coordination failures are often attributed to structural constraints rather than to the strategic behaviour of the political actors operating within those structures.

This problem is clearly illustrated by financial arrangements. Indeed, research on IGC has been shaped by a focus on formal structures and institutions, particularly those connected with the fiscal arrangements between levels of government<sup>3</sup>. Revenue-sharing schemes, grants, and re-

*and Theory*, 443-446; R AGRANOFF, ‘Federal asymmetry and intergovernmental relations in Spain’, (2005) 17 *Asymmetry Series*, IIGR, Queen’s University, Kingston; J GALLAGER, ‘Intergovernmental Relations in the UK: Co-operation, Competition and Constitutional Change’, (2012) 14(2) *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 198-213; N MCEWEN, W SWENDEN and N BOLLEYER, ‘Intergovernmental Relations in the UK: Continuity in a Time of Change?’, (2012) 14(2) *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 323-343; N MCEWEN, ‘Still Better Together? Purpose and Power in Intergovernmental Councils in the UK’, (2017) 27(5) *Regional & Federal Studies*, 667-690.

<sup>3</sup> M PAINTER, ‘Intergovernmental Relations’, in PETERS & PIERRE (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Public Administration* (n 1) 731.

distributive mechanisms constitute some of the most visible forms of coordination<sup>4</sup>. However, focusing exclusively on the formal structures and institutions involved in financial flows risks obscuring how informal processes (political incentives, party alignment, and administrative capacity) shape negotiations over those resources. Indeed, financial coordination is not merely technical; it is deeply political, involving bargaining among actors with asymmetric power and competing interests.

## 2.2. Data selection and methodology

Another challenge concerns *data selection* and *methodology*. Intergovernmental coordination produces vast amounts of data (e.g., legal texts, policy papers, meeting records), but no single data source is sufficient to capture its complexity. Data selection is therefore contingent on the research question being investigated, while data analysis depends on the methodological strategy best suited to that question.

There is no single ‘best’ method for studying intergovernmental coordination. *Methodological pluralism* emerges as an imperative rather than a discretionary choice. Indeed, data collection and analysis may benefit from a variety of research strategies: ethnographic approaches, focus groups, network analysis, expert surveys, and case studies each illuminate distinct dimensions of IGC. Combining these methods allows researchers to identify processes, mechanisms, and causal pathways that remain hidden in single-method designs. Moreover, pluralism enhances comparability across cases and strengthens empirical grounding, advancing research beyond meta-theoretical debates.

## 2.3. Framing the research question

A further challenge involves the *choice of research focus*. Beyond data generation and analysis, IGC scholars should focus on issues that expose coordination demands and underlying power relations between actors. Moments of crisis (e.g., natural disasters, or the Covid-19 pandemic) can be particularly revealing. Such approaches enable researchers to trace coordination both *vertically* (across levels of government) and *horizontally* (within the same level), highlighting the conditions under which cooperation emerges or breaks down.

## 3. Institutional Design and Coordination Challenges

The structure of the state corresponds to the territorial distribution of power within said state, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each tier of government<sup>5</sup>. In multilevel contexts, the institutional design balances between *self-rule* and *shared rule*. The self-rule dimension refers to the authority exercised by the regional constituent units within the state over their territory (region), whereas shared rule shapes the authority exercised by a regional government or its

<sup>4</sup> COST Action IGCOORD, CA20123 – Intergovernmental Coordination from Local to European Governance, *Memorandum of Understanding*, [https://e-services.cost.eu/files/domain\\_files/CA/Action\\_CA20123/mou/CA20123-e.pdf](https://e-services.cost.eu/files/domain_files/CA/Action_CA20123/mou/CA20123-e.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> P CALÇA and T RUEL, ‘Setting up institutions in multilevel states: Assemblies, parties, and the selection of candidates’, (2023) 30(4) *Party Politics*, 704-718; T RUEL, N BESSA VILELA, N JESUS SILVA and Z OPLOTNIK, ‘Intergovernmental Coordination in Portugal’, (2023) 32(5) *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia* 31-42; A MURPHY and F GHENCEA, ‘The Legal Framework for Local Government Coordination in Romania’, (2023) 32(5) *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia* 105-115.

representatives in a country over time<sup>6</sup>.

This dimension is critical to any research puzzle on intergovernmental coordination, as design choices (i.e., centralised vs. decentralised, unitary vs. federal) affect both the formal machinery and informal processes of multilevel governance. Research has demonstrated that subnational power and authority vary across federal and unitary systems, as well as among subnational units within the same state<sup>7</sup>. Such asymmetries strain governing processes by creating uneven capacities and bargaining power<sup>8</sup>, which in turn can hinder effective coordination.

At a normative level, intergovernmental coordination processes rest on the political authority attributed to each territorial unit. However, in both federal and unitary systems, the capacity for governing, decision-making, and cooperation is contingent on contextual conditions rather than guaranteed by formal status alone. Coordination is shaped by multiple factors operating across governance levels: institutional design, fiscal autonomy or dependency, administrative capacity, political commitment, and the clarity of roles and responsibilities<sup>9</sup>.

These issues constitute critical challenges for research on IGC. Beyond theoretical debates, it is essential to identify the conditions under which governments across different levels are able to cooperate. Addressing these questions requires the use of innovative methods and research strategies capable of advancing empirical knowledge in this field. In this respect, the central innovation of this research strand lies in the systematic use of methodological pluralism to extend the analytical boundaries of existing scholarship.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Methodological pluralism acknowledges that the development of the social sciences has always been shaped by a plurality of perspectives that not only coexist but often engage in productive dialogue. In practice, the availability of data, the complexity of research questions, and the need for comparison across contexts frequently require the use of diverse methodological tools. Consequently, there is no single, unique, or universally adequate conceptual framework capable of fully “describing the world”<sup>10</sup>. In the study of intergovernmental coordination, embracing methodological pluralism is therefore not merely a pragmatic choice but a necessary condition for capturing the multifaceted and politically contingent nature of coordination processes.

<sup>6</sup> G MARKS, L HOOGHE and A SCHAKEL, ‘Measuring Regional Authority’, (2016) 18(2-3) *Regional & Federal Studies* 111-121.

<sup>7</sup> R AGRANOFF, ‘Intergovernmental Relations and the Management of Asymmetry in Federal Spain’, in R AGRANOFF (ed), *Accommodating Diversity: Asymmetry in Federal States* (Baden-Baden: Nomos 1999); D ELAZAR, *Exploring federalism* (The University of Alabama Press 1987); R WATTS, *Comparing Federal Systems* (Ontario: Queen University Kingston 1999).

<sup>8</sup> S SHAIR-ROSENFELD, ‘Shared rule as a signal of central state commitment to regional self-rule’, (2021) 32(3) *Regional & Federal Studies* 375-392.

<sup>9</sup> N BEHNKE and S MUELLER, *Policy Brief 1: Challenges and Opportunities of Intergovernmental Coordination*, November 2021, COST Action IGCOORD, CA20123 November 2021, <https://igcoord.eu/activities/policy-briefs/>.

<sup>10</sup> N RESCHER, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus* (Oxford University Press 1993) 41.

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