

REGIONS

A region is a particular geographical territory which may be given cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or economic attributes or significance depending not just on its constituent population but also on the context in which it is being invoked politically. Thus, defining a region is a political act contingent upon why the defining is required in the first place.

While regions may belong within a nation state, they are spatially different entities that have their own economic, political, administrative, and cultural instincts that may develop over time into identities. Regionalism is the politicisation of the identity associated with a certain region that pertains to its values, choices, and aspirations. Regionality is dependent on its natural or organic unity, the quality and salience of its institutions and the robustness of regional identity.

Theories and Approaches to Regions

Modernisation theorists see the unavoidable whittling away of regionalism through cultural homogeneity. To achieve this, the central elites attempt to suffuse modern values to the outposts in order that the regional masses gradually modernise. Over time, though, regions have opposed and defied efforts to culturally homogenise them, attempts at centralised political control, and economic marginalisation.

Some see regions predominantly as **cultural spaces**. The value system and identity, formed from a region's history, folklore, and cultural emblems, all distinct to that certain region can be deployed politically to articulate regional interests and strategies.

Marxists understand regions as spaces that the market has overlooked. In other words, their proposition is that unrestrained capitalist development does not apply uniformly over territory and as a result some regions are left in straits. Political economy then is a crucial factor in regional disparities that often lead to disputes.

In liberal Western democracies, regionalist secessionist movements have had very little success. While regional autonomy has been granted in a few cases, no country has split due to regional differences. For instance, countries like the UK and Canada are considered **multinational countries** where both the majority and minority nations are involved in a common socialisation as well as differentiation project. This is generally attributed to well-established institutional power and influence, belief in plurality and tolerance, and the capacity of individuals to inhabit dual identities. This **institutionalist outlook** on regions posits the power of institutions to alleviate or exacerbate regional differences through study of constitutions, bureaucracies, government structures and electoral systems among other institutions.

Regionalism from Below

The rise of parties calling for regionalism, 'regionalism from below', is explained by *democratisation*, the rise of *neoliberalism* and the weakening welfare state, and the political *mobilisation of minority groups*. Invoking democracy, many regions are able to make historical claims to regional autonomy based on identity and culture. Due to neoliberalism and its attendant policy ramifications, such as austerity, many regional parties have made ground calling for autonomy. Finally in multinational states, regionalism has grown as the minority nations have become highly politicised and utilised elections and referendums to push forward regional agendas. Even so, with time, regional parties in multinational democracies appear to become an intrinsic part of the existent party system within which the nation operates. They thus become less of a threat to unity and a constituent part of possible coalitions that contribute to stability.

Moreover, regions whose autonomy is guaranteed constitutionally through federal structuring have the greatest freedom to operate independently. In federal nations, regions amount to independent political bodies with constitutional powers and the right to engage in national politics and intergovernmental relations between regional governments.

Regional Political Economy

The polarisation of regions within states is a historical process that began with state and state-building enterprises encountering regional hostility such as military conflict, ethnic nationalism, regional movements, and party politics. This differentiation was furthered by the implementation of the welfare state. At first regional policy conducted by the central government was technocratic and de-politicised, but as state reach became more ubiquitous, regional players recognised that their interests and those of the centre were inconsistent. This led to the establishment of regional development policies to work alongside national programmes. However, changes to the international political economy meant the shrinking of regional development and welfare, which in turn resulted in new regionalist endeavours. *Defensive* regionalists who emerged were invested in the established economic sectors and its threatened dependents. *Modernising* regionalists wanted to bring straggling regions in line with the national economic standards whereas *autonomist* regionalists reinvigorated historical claims for nationhood. Finally, there is a new regionalism that has risen out of the conditions created by globalisation.

Adapted from James Bickerton and Alain-G Gagnon, 'Regions' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

Alain-G Gagnon and Michael Keating, *Political Autonomy and Divided Societies* (Palgrave Macmillan 2012)

John Loughlin, John Kincaid and Wilfried Swenden, *Routledge Handbook of Regionalism and Federalism* (Routledge 2013)

Ann Markusen, *Regions: The Economics and Politics of Territory* (Rowman & Littlefield 1987)

Asanga Welikala, 'Constitutional form and reform in post-war Sri Lanka: Towards a plurinational understanding' in Mark Tushnet and Madhav Khosla (eds), *Unstable Constitutionalism: Law and Politics in South Asia* (Cambridge University Press 2016)

Rohan Edirisinghe, 'Debating federalism in Sri Lanka and Nepal' in Mark Tushnet and Madhav Khosla (eds), *Unstable Constitutionalism: Law and Politics in South Asia* (Cambridge University Press 2016)