

Identity, Federalism and Social Research: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: Federalism by design has been evidently used as a conflict resolution model in majorly divided societies. But the existing literature which brings ethnicity, identity and federalism together, remains fragmented and in need of a synthesizing outlook. In this systematic review we attempt to summarize and present the literature where identity is studied with respect to federal structures in studies related to social research. The rationale is to understand the nature of existing literature in this evolving field, and develop a nuanced understanding of federalism as a conflict resolution tool in the field of social research. We have identified 45 studies on this front from a post 2020 temporal placing, to study the contemporary case studies relevant for this review paper. We conclude the systematic review, by proposing a need to adopt more comparative designs to clearly conceptualize the causal relations between federalism and identity within multi-polar societies, and explore more policy relevant observations to guide further studies and conflict resolution strategies in social research.

Keywords: Federalism, Identity, Systematic Literature review, Social Research

INTRODUCTION

The study of identity within federalism is not a new field of study, especially in societies marked by diversity. Federalism, in its traditional sense, has been understood as a system which is divided into central and sub-national domains of control. This has been a long standing understanding of governance models, where single tiered federal structures have evolved into multi-tiered systems, to incorporate ethnic and cultural pluralism (Watts, 2008). However, the concept of federalism studied as a model of conflict resolution, starts from its linkage with ethnic identity claims, self determination movement and history of being used in conditions of regional autonomy.

While the link between identity and federalism is certain, the actual understanding of this linkage in accommodating ethnic identities remains deeply divided in the literature. Scholars like Riker (1996) have posted that federalism's inherent tier structure can institutionalize regional autonomy, thereby creating constitutional validity for safeguarding rights of the ethnic minorities in a given region. Others, such as Elazar(1987), emphasize that the "self rule and shared rule" matrix that federalism offers, suggest that power can flow from central to local level, granting autonomy to ethnic communities while maintaining national unity. However, cases have suggested that federalism particularly in ethnically divided societies can be challenging to be created, where demands of one ethnic group can invariably create spaces of exclusion for other groups.

The intricate balance between identity and federalism thus has faced many contradictory enquiries. On one hand, scholars like Watts (1998) and Karmis and Norman (2005)

suggest federalism has been seen as a means to mediate between distinct ethnic or regional identities, offering a governance system that legitimizes and institutionalizes diversity. On the other hand, Scholars such as Elazar (1993) have argued that ethnic nationalism can often act as a force that challenges federalism. The rise of ethnonationalist movements seeking independence rather than integration within a federal structure complicates efforts to use federalism as a tool for conflict resolution.

Despite its significance, the field of study remains difficult to navigate. This systematic literature review aims to examine the interlinkage between ethnicity, identity and federalism, providing the space to synthesize existing social research in a contemporary time frame and identify the patterns, construction and limitations of the literature. By exploring the theoretical foundations and temporal ambit of the studies, the review will assess how federalism is studied to accommodate ethnic identities, and the conditions of its success and failure.

I. Aim of the Review

Identity has played a significant role in creating federal systems, making it a key consideration in studies of federalism. In this regard, identity related concepts have increasingly been incorporated in behavioral theories and social research, drawing a parallel line with identity and federal studies. It is crucial, therefore, that these two fields, namely, identity studies and federal studies, find a common ground of knowledge building to align their overall operational level of research. However, it must be noted in this regard, that federalism has been regularly considered as a successful recipe for mitigating ethnic conflict, in many fundamentally divided societies, with disparate ethnic groups present in a single territorial space.

The objective of this review is to provide a clarification of the clear intersection between ethnic identity and federalism, by exploring the vast literature in this field of research. The systematic review is an attempt to consolidate the disparate nature of literature available at this intersection and critically assess the varied ways ethnic identity has been theoretically conceptualized, measured and studied in the broad discipline of federal studies. Specifically, the aim is to explore the following : 1) how ethnic identity has been understood and operationalized in studies of federalism 2) identity gaps in the research concerning ethnic nature of federal systems 3) Thematize the empirical evidence that demonstrates the interlinkage between ethnic identity and federalism.

Federalism is not just a legal structure, but works as an institutional solution to the politics of identity and autonomy. Thus, the classical version of federalism, of distributing power across multiple levels of government, did not incorporate the idea of how federalism can be conceived in multi ethnic societies. The conversation around federalism cannot be merely restricted to decentralization, but also address the contemporary issues faced by post colonial countries in accommodating ethnic autonomy and aspirations of self determination.

Through this review, we investigate the ways in which scholars of federal studies have approached the concept of ethnic identity and also study the methodologies used to examine the interlinkages along with theoretical frameworks of identity itself. Further, this review will explore how contesting ethnic identities create power sharing arrangements and the necessary political outcomes associated with it. This could provide necessary impetus to future research in this field with more nuanced and analytical studies of successfully managing ethnic conflicts through federal institutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This systematic review takes its guidelines from the PRISMA 2020 document, for generating systematic literature reviews. Although the nature of guidelines, have been extensively used in the field of health sciences, disciplines of political science and social sciences, are slowly incorporating the guidelines to make use of the highly systematic nature of executing a review based paper (Kleider and Toubeau, 2022).The guidelines ensures clarity and required transparency facilitating reproducibility of the review and allowing for a comprehensive way of reviewing the role of ethnic identity in federal studies. In this section, we describe the inclusion criteria of our study, the rovesures used to find the required literature to be reviewed, the coding of the studies and the overall results in a summarized fashion.

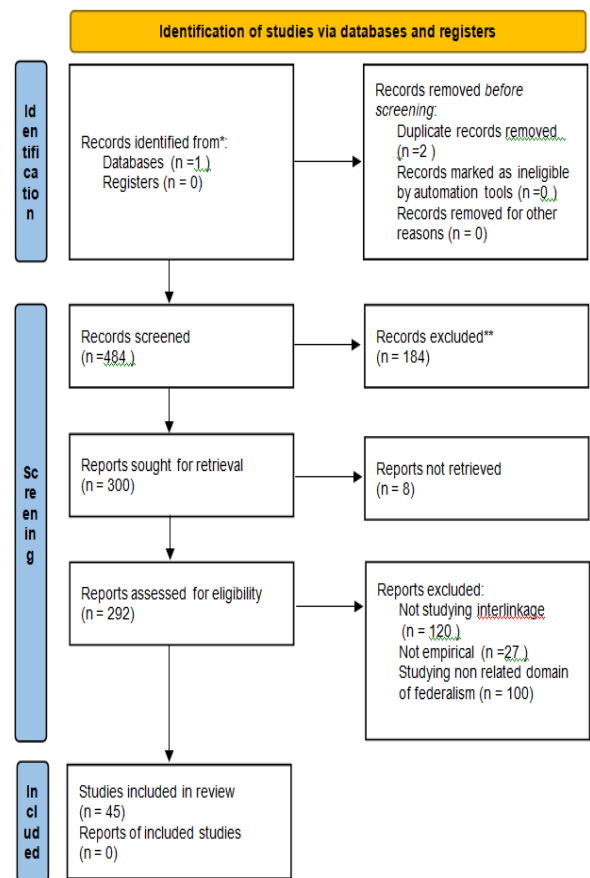
The review provides a synthesis of empirical research on ethnic identity’s role in federal systems, where the focus has been on studies produced in peer reviewed journals that largely provide empirical examination of ethnic identity and how it created federal arrangements either for conflict resolution purposes or plain need of governance. We included the research published between 2020 and 2024 in order to limit our scope and focus on countries where ethnic

identity has played a significant influence in creating their federal polity, such as Canada, Nigeria, Switzerland, India etc. Although there is significant literature available in gray literature or books as well, the review focuses only on peer reviewed studies in journals while adhering to quality measures.

To ensure reliance on a single database, we used a multidisciplinary search in SCOPUS. We conducted the search on November, 2024 and limited the publication date between 2020-01-01 and 2024-12-26 and incorporated studies written in English, due to linguistic limitations. The search terms included “ethnic identity”, “identity”, “federalism”, “decentralization”, “power-sharing”, “autonomy” etc. Studies of varied methodological choices have been screened, with any of the above mentioned keywords in its abstract.

The search gave 484 records, which were initially screened on the basis of titles and abstracts. We excluded the articles which were duplications, and studies which necessarily did not focus on federalism as a point of study. The screening process resulted in 292 records, whose full text was available. During coding, we excluded additional articles which did not meet our inclusion criteria, making the final sample to 45 records for our final systematic review.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram for Inclusion of studies



To summarize the empirical scope of these studies, we developed a codebook that captured key differences in

research design, scope, and outcomes. We coded the research design (e.g., single case study, comparative case study, quantitative analysis), the region(s) and countries studied, and the timeframe of the analysis. Coding reliability was ensured through regular meetings with my co-author, and a sample of coded entries was cross-checked to maintain consistency.

We also coded the political outcomes related to federalism, focusing on ethnic identity's influence on intergovernmental relations, political representation and ethnic violence. Specific outcomes included power-sharing arrangements, conflict resolution methods, and federal decision-making processes of mitigating clashes between competing ethnic groups. We analyzed which level(s) of government (local, regional, national, or supranational) were involved in these processes and whether the studies examined qualitative differences, timing, scope, or the severity of federal responses to ethnic demands. Lastly, we coded the nature of ethnic identity's effect on federal systems, assessing whether the hypothesized influence of ethnic identity (e.g., decentralization, regional autonomy, or minority rights) was supported by the data. The results of this coding are presented in subsequent sections and will inform future research and policy recommendations on the role of ethnic identity in federal.

RESULT

The rationale of this review was to understand how concepts like ethnic identity are incorporated within a broad sample of federal studies. The major results of this review focus on conceptualization of ethnic identity, how ethnic identity and federalism are studied together, and the outcomes of the research in providing policy relevant understanding of conflict resolution. The results are largely based on the data extracted from 45 studies that properly align with the outcome of the review. The review draws on research findings from various geographical regions including Ethiopia, Canada, India, Russia etc.

Research Aims: Most of the studies included in the review, investigated the relationship between ethnic identity and federalism (30/45), while some studies focused on the construction of public opinion and how federal structures are evolved. A few reviewed papers aimed to suggest the outcomes of a ethnic federal structure in further triggering ethnic conflicts (3/45). This remains consistent with the debate of how ethnofederal structures have been argued to incite secessionist movements. But a few reviewed papers have also provided theoretical justification behind ethnic identity formation and the politics of state building (4/45).

Methods: In 78% of the studies, qualitative methods have been primarily used with most researches using single case studies. Some comparative case comparison within qualitative research existed (5/45). This reflects that there is a broader trend of federal and identity centric research to be qualitative in nature. Few studies have used quantitative methods (10/45), employing approaches like studying the Afrobarometer data, conjoint experiments, Citizen perception and alternate governance structures in representative surveys and lastly analysis of comparative political datasets (Yimenu, 2024; Ahram, 2020;

Goelzhauser & Konisky, 2020; Jacobs & Munis, 2020). The pattern within quantitative studies has been to rely on international datasets and provide causal explanations of ethnic conflict triggers and study the development of state building in these regions.

Temporal Scope : The temporal analysis of the case studies within the review, suggests that the majority of the literature focuses on Ethiopia as a prominent point of analysis (10/45). Nevertheless other regions like Nigeria, India, Canada, Pakistan and American Federalism have been studied within the time frame. With respect to quantitative studies, the focus has been largely in the MENA region. This is probably due to the presence of conflict trackers and datasets pre-existing in the geographical space. Ahram (2020) studied the separatist conflicts around the Arab Springs of 2011, using a fuzzy set and qualitative comparative analysis framework to study individual case studies of Iraq Syria, Libya and Yemen and identify key causal factors.

With respect to studies in South Asia, i.e India and Pakistan, although having an intricate history of having ethnofederal structures of autonomy, the studies have been largely descriptive and not analytical, with one exception (Hausing,2021), where a typology of autonomy have been created to study the divergent nature of ethnic federations and politics of self-determination in Northeast India.

DISCUSSION

In the review, much of research has focused on how construction of ethnic identity has a direct function related to its federal models. Especially in the studies which had deployed a comparative methodology, the difference in the federal arrangements and their effect on the political outcomes were noted (Yimenu, 2024; Hausing, 2021; Bhattacharya, 2024; Ahram, 2020; Chonka & Healy, 2020). However, majorly the studies had relied on a small number of case comparisons, which tend to have similar history and evidently similar federal arrangements, thus limiting the ability of the research to come up with more concrete empirical evidence of how ethnic identity is interlinked with federal models.

Most of the studies had presented the comparison of the cases that lack significant variation in their ethnic construction. For instance, studies had individually presented the cases of Canada, Switzerland and Belgium, but they failed to account how ethnic identity might function differently in other federal constructions. Yimenu (2024) however, used a quantitative comparative approach to investigate how federalism has worked in five different African federations, using data from V-Dem and Afrobarometer. Similarly, countries with much more complex or pluralistic societies, such as India, have not been studied in an analytical fashion, with certain exceptions.

The studies were descriptively dense, but did not specify, whether their goal was to test an existing theory or generate a new one. Testing political stability of federal systems where multi-ethnic societies reside would be a much

suitable option to generate a new hypothesis about the relationship between ethnic identity and federalism.

However, some studies have successfully been able to present a casual role of ethnic tensions and need for a federal solution, with specifying the role of centralization, de-centralization and re-centralization in the management of diversity in the contested region and within the competing groups (Keil & Alber, 2020).

The case of Ethiopia however, has been covered significantly to argue how ethnic federalism has been used for political control. The studies largely explore how ethnic federalism rather than promoting inclusivity has created a political environment of undermining national unity. The studies emphasize on how the systems have failed to integrate ethnolinguistic diversity and have been used more likely as an administrative tool to politicize ethnic identity (Ogbazghi, 2022). However, Gashute et al. (2024) using the same case study, argues that the thesis that ethnic federalism itself is flawed is not an accurate representation. Using an exploratory research approach, the study has suggested ways to correct the contradictions inherent in Ethiopian Federalism.

In this context, to better understand causal interactions between ethnic identity and federalism, Bhattacharya (2024) compared the case of India and Malaysia, arguing that in plural societies different layers of federal symmetry are required to accommodate ethnic diversity to address the politics of recognition and autonomy. Similarly Hausing (2021) presents a unique typology to study autonomy and understand under what conditions the state, in this case Indian state, is likely to accommodate competing demand of the territorially concentrated tribals. The study uses timing and mode of negotiation as one of the key variables of explaining how ethnic federations are created/negotiated. The study also has merit in getting tested in other case studies like Iraq, Ethiopia, Cyprus etc.

i) Relation between Identity and Federalism:

The major bulk of the studies have argued the link between identity and federalism in their own case specific context. For example, Wolfschwenger and Saxinger (2020) theorized the idea of Moldovan ethnic identity, while Ishiyama (2023) theorized the idea of ethnification of Ethiopian politics. In either case, a clear causal link between ethnic identity and federal structures is hard to deduce. However, studies like (Keil and Alber, 2020) argues that “growing body of literature still focuses mainly on the analysis of selected cases in which federalism is applied, while more comparative research is desperately required in order to better understand when and how federalism can be successful as a tool in ending violent conflicts”. He uses contestation as a concept to argue that it is a key element in multinational states, which tried to incorporate and accommodate territorial autonomous arrangement to pacify the demands of ethnic groups.

Studies like Hausing (2021) on the other hand, while keeping his focus on the Indian experience argued “Confronted with distinctive ethnolinguistic and armed tribal groups with demands ranging from outright secession

and self-determination to internal autonomy, the Indian state responded by envisioning a vast array of autonomy arrangements. These have, in varying ways and consequences, simultaneously help recognize, negotiate and accommodate the ‘self-determination’ claims of territorially concentrated ethnolinguistic and tribal groups and share sovereignties with the Indian ‘state-nation’”. He has a similar observation regarding the need for more comparative studies, where he cites the work of Hassan (2008), in order to gather more nuanced and empirical evidence regarding the functioning of ethnic federations and more importantly study “when, how and under what circumstances” autonomous arrangements have flourished in India. His study gave more importance to a specific part of India, i.e, the Northeastern states, where there are a variety of different autonomous arrangements within the Indian federal polity.

The studies suggest that there is an unavoidable link between ethnic identity and federalism, however, terms like ethnic federation, ethnofederal, ethnoterritorial are used interchangeably without proper conceptual cushioning. Studies like Bhattacharya (2024) are ideally referring to asymmetric federal models, but this ‘asymmetricism’ in this case is used to accommodate/integrate various ethnic demands of the competing groups. These specific studies are looking at ethnic federalism, as a solution to conflicts arising from politicization of ethnic identity itself.

The literature reveals that the ‘rival hypothesis’ as termed by Herrera (2008) regarding federalism and its relation with ethnic conflict still remains consistent. While this review considered studies from the past 4 years, the studies mostly concerning examples of Ethiopia, suggested that ethnofederalism itself gives power to further mobilization of ethnic demands, which at the end culminates into rebellion against the state, and further fragmentation of the society. However, what remains more empirically justified from the review, is that studies have argued that proper institutional designing of the federations, is the key deciding factor with respect to whether an ethnic federation will work or not ? (Hausing, 2021).

ii) Limitations of the review:

The paper acknowledges that the sample of research reviewed has been limited in nature. The purpose however, was to provide of synthesis of selected works on ethnic identity and federalism, and examine the intersection between theoretical underpinnings of identity and how it translated into creating federalized governance structures. The sample of 45 studies, used in the review, which was selected in a systematic manner under the PRISMA guidelines. A specific ethnic identity was not selected for the review, in order to provide a holistic understanding of the intersection of literature available in the field. While qualitative studies from a descriptive lens are empirically rich sources of data, further analytical work on the intersection between federal models and identity can provide policy relevant knowledge creation and finally an attempt for conflict resolution.

The review did not consider themes like fiscal federalism and specific ethnic constriction, as the focus was largely to

study how federalism was studied in context of indeed. Future reviews can further narrow down the scope and study the way identity itself is constructed and its impact on political outcomes at the sub-national level, or even review to study the thesis of ethnic competition. Lastly, the review was dependent on one database i.e SCOPUS. Other databases like Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, Web of Science can be considered, depending on institutional access to the reviewer and availability of full text articles in the databases.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this systematic review was to evaluate the studies which focused on the interlinking aspect of identity and federalism. From our review, it has been clear that ethnicity, identity and federalism play a significant role in shaping each other. However, the studies have divergent impressions on how federalism can either politicize ethnic identity or they have argued careful federal solutions to accommodate contesting ethnic identity. This has, however, not helped in getting a clear causal explanation between the two. One of the key reasons for that, is the limited variation in case studies, and significant use of single case studies to draw the nuances of federal structures and decentralization, with some exceptions (Hausing, 2021 ; Bhattacharya, 2024). This does not allow isolating the impact of ethnic identity on federal structures, or necessarily come up with policy relevant observations on how to design federal systems to better function in multi ethnic societies.

While the quantitative studies had employed comparative cases the diversity within the cases was not significant enough to provide firm inferences. On the other hand, qualitative studies, with exception of Bhattacharya (2024), were not in the position of measuring the interaction between ethnic identity and federalism.

The review does not attempt to draw any large conclusions, as the overall literature of federal studies and identity studies is vast. While our review highlights the presence of many themes in the existing literature which can be further looked at with much more nuance. For example, this review reveals that ethnic based federalism if not properly designed, can lead to further divided societies. This however, does not mean that ethnic federalism itself promotes polarization. The case of Ethiopia, has been revealed multiple times in our review, of being an example of failed ethnic federalism, coupled with political targeting of ethnic minorities and using federal systems as political tools of violence. Similarly, studies have also revealed that ethnic federalism can often change the power dynamics in a region, by making ethnic minorities the political majority in the region, which further creates a cycle of ethnic competition as argued by Hausing (2021). These important themes are analyzed in isolation, but remain massively important in discussing the political nuances of ethnic federalism.

The review had many examples of successful ethnic federations coming up like India and Switzerland, but due to lack of comparability and absence of clear variables of

these federations, it was difficult to determine whether these cases can be looked at as universal solutions. Bhattacharya (2024), also compared the case of India and Malaysia, to argue the need of more comparative studies in this field, to better understand federal experiments. For example, the Indian case of federalism itself has different arrangements in different states, with different ethnic identities fighting for their autonomy. The case of Indian federalism itself cannot be looked at as a singular model of ethnic federalism.

The review also highlighted some limitations, in systematic reviews in these fields of study in general. While using PRISMA guidelines, a level of transparency and reproducibility was achieved, the process is largely made for quantitative researchers in health and medical sciences. In order to use it in the field of social sciences, where terms like identity are being studied, the expectations of measurability are limited in such reviews. This suggests the need for a revised look for conducting systematic reviews in social sciences itself where the methodologies are much more qualitative in nature.

However, this review successfully points towards two major areas of future research that could be useful in further studying the relationship between ethnic identity and federalism. Firstly, there is a need for more comparative research in order to study how federal systems behave in multi ethnic societies and observe how they are negotiated and finally designed. A more diverse range of cases, which invariably provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ethnic federations are created and how contesting identity groups can be accommodated in a federal polity. Secondly, the review highlighted the need for more contemporary analysis in the field, with more emphasis on how ethnic federations have evolved over time. While some qualitative studies, had quite rightly focused on a historical method to contextualize how ethnic identity was formed in the first place it is also important to shift the temporal dynamics of the research in order to provide policy relevant studies as well.

The overall complexity of federalism and ethnic identity might pose a challenge in drawing definitive conclusions, but this review has laid ground for some level of future research that can focus on the nuances of divergent political outcomes of ethnic federations and evolve our understanding on this niche field.

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