

Determinants of Support for Federalism vs. Centralization: A Survey of Public Opinion in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)

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Abstract

A characteristic of the multi-ethnic democracies is the debate of federalism versus centralization in the discourse of governance. Constitutional provisions in Pakistan are nominal in support of federalism, yet the friction between provincial sovereignty and centralization still influences political rivalry, allocation of resources, and confidence of the electorate. This paper explores the determinants of popular support of publics in support of federal government versus centralized government structures by use of a cross-provincial survey among Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The study employs a quantitative research design to assess the role of institutional trust, perceived governance performance, ethnic identity, fiscal preferences, and political awareness in shaping the attitudes of the citizens toward state structure, with 714 respondents as a sample. The results show a complex picture: the respondents in KP show more favorability to federalism because of historical needs to have autonomy on the provincial level, but the respondents in Punjab show a relatively higher degree of tolerance to the concept of centralization, which is highly explained by the views on the effectiveness of administration and the unity of the nation. The results of the regression analysis show that institutional trust and perceived provincial performance are the most important predictors of federalist attitudes, whereas security concerns and the expectation of economic performance are significant predictors of centralized authority preferences. The research has theoretical contributions by incorporating the Institutional Theory and the Rational Choice views to support the idea that citizens consider the governance arrangements based on the identity and performance factors. In practical terms, the results indicate the necessity of balanced policies of decentralization that should increase provincial ability without disrupting the national coordination. Finally, the study holds that the founding of sustainable federalism is more reliant not on the design of the constitution but on whether the people believe in the capacity of subnational authorities to provide quality governance.

Keywords: Federalism, Centralization, Public Opinion, Provincial Autonomy, Institutional Trust, Pakistan, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Introduction

One of the most fateful institutional decisions that modern states face is their organizational structure of political authority between central and subnational governments. Federal structures distribute power across the different levels of government, which in theory boosts representation, policy sensitivity, and local control. On the other hand, centralized systems focus on administrative

homogeneity, cohesion, and enhanced national control. This conflict of competing governance logics is also especially relevant in developing democracies, where ethnic variety, imbalanced economic growth, and institutional weaknesses make state-building a more difficult task. Pakistan is a strong candidate in terms of studying this tension. Since the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the nation has been progressing towards a greater level of federalization, with considerable legislative and fiscal power being devolved to provinces. Arguments continue, however, on whether decentralization has brought about any better governance results or it has just dislodged the inefficiencies onto the provincial level. Opponents claim that too much provincial autonomy can disintegrate policymaking and undermine national integration, whereas its supporters claim that centralization marginalized smaller provinces historically and gave way to political resentment. There is an analytically sound comparison between Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Punjab, the largest and most economically powerful province of the country has long had a significant influence on federal politics. Its internal structures and comparatively better bureaucratic capability tend to make the centralized coordination look effective. Conversely, KP has had its share of warfare, insecurity, and a history of provincial repression that wanted to be empowered politically, and thus, federalism was politically palatable to its people.

Although the policy relevance of this discussion is high, there is rather little empirical studies on the preferences of citizens on the issue of federal versus centralized governance in Pakistan. Most of the literature is based on constitutional design, elite bargaining, or fiscal federalism, but public opinion as one of the essential sources of democratic legitimacy, is not properly investigated. In the present study, this gap is fulfilled by posing the following question:

What determines citizen ideologies in favor of federalism versus centralization in Pakistan and to what extent does this differ in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

By making the analysis based on the survey data, the research transcends the normative debates and offers systematic evidence on how ordinary citizens rate competing governance structures.

Research Objectives

1. The research aims at achieving the following:
2. To evaluate the extent of popular support of federal and centralized state in Punjab and KP.
3. To investigate the impact of institutional trust on state structure preference. To determine how the perceived provincial performance enhances support of federalism.
4. To examine how ethnic and regional identity affects the attitude towards governance.
5. To examine how economic expectations and satisfaction with service delivery affect centralization preferences.
6. To make comparisons across provinces in political attitude to decentralization.
7. To present policy proposals that should enhance cooperative federalism in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. Are Punjab and KP citizens are attracted to federalism or centralized administration?
2. What socio-political variables have the best predictive power of such preferences?
3. Is increased institutional trust associated with provincial autonomy support?
4. What is the impact of perceived performance of governance on the attitude towards decentralization?
5. Is there more power in identity based considerations than performance based appraisals?
6. What is the source of inter-provincial difference in the preferences of governance?

Significance of the Study

Knowledge about the people about their preferences towards the state structure is important in terms of democratic stability. Constitutional frameworks do not provide legitimacy to governance systems, and neither does the acceptance of citizens. In cases where institutional arrangements are different to the expectations of the people, political tension grows, and may lead to a breakdown of cohesion within a nation.

This study offers three principal contributions:

1. Empirically: It provides systematic, survey-based evidence regarding federalism attitudes in Pakistan, addressing a notable gap in the literature dominated by elite-focused analyses.
2. Theoretically: It integrates institutional trust, identity politics, and performance evaluation within a unified framework explaining structural governance preferences.
3. Practically: It generates evidence-based recommendations for policymakers engaged in decentralization reforms, emphasizing the conditional nature of public support for federal arrangements.

Literature Review

The discussion of federalism versus centralization has taken centre stage in political science especially, in the study of the form of government in a heterogeneous society. The idea of federalism is generally construed to mean a constitutional system that shares power between the national and sub-national systems and thus provides both joint and self-rule. The proponents believe that decentralization increases the democratic participation, reflects the diversity in the region, and increases policy sensitivity. Opponents, however, warn that too much decentralization can spawn coordination issues, fiscal imbalances and fragmentation of policies (Ahmed & Asif, 2026a). After reviewing the literature, it is common to find that the discussion on the federalism-centralization issue has been subject to three predominant views: institutional efficiency, identity accommodation, and political economy.

Federalism as an Instrument of Democratic Governance

According to classic federal theory, geographic distribution of power helps to avoid concentration of power by dictators and enhances democratic accountability. Riker (1964) viewed federalism as a political compromise between the national leaders who wanted to control territory and regional figures and authorities who wanted their autonomy. This bargaining logic is clearly observed in postcolonial states where federalism arrangements tend to be adopted as a way of controlling ethnic pluralism (Ahmed & Asif, 2026b). Empirical researches prove that decentralized governance can enhance service delivery, as the process of decision-making is taken nearer to citizens. Local governments are in a better position to create regional-specific policies when they have a fiscal and administrative power. Nevertheless, this optimistic opinion presupposes the existence of effective institutions - which is not always true in the developing democracies.

According to Rodden (2004), a lack of provincial ability can turn the process of decentralization into a sort of fiscal laziness where the subnational governments engage in excessive spending in the hope of federal bailout. On the same note, Treisman (2007) claims that in cases where the oversight mechanisms are ineffective, corruption may be localized in federal systems. Therefore, it is the institutional maturity that determines the effectiveness of federalism and not exclusively constitutional design.

Centralization and the Logic of State Cohesion

Those who advocate centralized government believe in efficiency, uniformity as well as national integration. In states where there is a security threat or unequal development, centralization of

power can provide decision making at a faster speed and policy execution. Centralization has been associated with developmental states, where strong federal power helps facilitate easy attainment of infrastructure development, macroeconomic planning and redistributive policies. In this light, decentralization can be a hindrance to reforms by increasing veto players. It is also observed by scholars that citizens occasionally tend to favor centralization in cases whereby they find the local government to be corrupt, incompetent or elitist. This is known as performance-based centralism which implies that the preferences in governance are practical and not ideological.

Identity Politics and Territorial Autonomy

The identity recognition is another form of literature that associates federalism with identity recognition. The centralized authority in ethnically diverse societies may create the feeling of domination especially when one region is stronger in terms of demographics or politics. According to Stepan, Linz, and Yadav (2011), when federal arrangements are used, potentially disruptive identity cleavages are organized into institutionalized forms of representations. On the other hand, noncompliance with the accommodation of regional identity normally contributes to the separatist pressure. Public opinion studies also show that the stronger the attachment of persons to the provinces or ethnic groups, the more prone to decentralization they are. Identity thus does not only serve as a marker of culture but it also serves as a political prism according to which governance arrangements are considered.

Institutional Trust as a Determinant of Governance Preferences

The institutional trust is central to the development of the citizen prejudice about the political structures. When the trust of the citizens in provincial governments, said citizens are inclined to devolution; when the same trust is at the national level, the centralization process becomes more appealing. According to Levi and Stoker (2000), trust is a heuristic which diminishes political uncertainty. Instead of judging sophisticated constitutional structures, citizens make use of their trust in governing institutions. Studies in the developing democracies indicate that poor institutional trust can actually generate paradoxical preferences - the citizens might simultaneously lack trust of the local government yet insist on more autonomy as a way to be dissatisfied with the centralized power. This implies that there are multiple dimensions of governance preferences and not two.

Federalism in the Pakistani Context

The history of the federal path of Pakistan is not smooth. Though the nation officially became a federation on gaining independence, the military rule strengthened the centralized power. Minor provinces often complained of fiscal inequalities, lingual discrimination, and political disparities. The 18 th Constitutional Amendment (2010) was a watershed moment since major policy areas such as health, education, and culture were devolved to provincial governments. This reform is widely interpreted by scholars as an effort to re-tune the relations between the center and the provinces and to empower democratic federalism. However, the results are disputed. It has been argued that devolution led to better provincial ownership and policy innovation. Critics argue that not all provinces were administrative capacity-wise and as a result there was unequal service delivery. The bureaucratic power of Punjab frequently enables it to achieve reforms better, but at the same time, other provinces like KP have had to grapple with structural limitations but also managed to build more robust political messages concerning autonomy. Such opposite directions render the cross-provincial public opinion especially significant.

Performance vs. Identity: Competing Logics of Citizen Preference

Recent scholarly work reveals that citizens evaluate their systems of governance through two principal perspectives: performance-based and identity-based frames. The performance-based evaluation focuses on whether the government delivers in areas such as economic growth, security, infrastructure, and public services. Citizens are inclined to support the governance structure that they perceive as most effective in providing these tangible benefits, viewing successful institutions as legitimate and trustworthy. In contrast, the identity-based evaluation emphasizes the protection of regional culture, the enhancement of political voice, and the reduction of perceived domination by other groups. Citizens value structures that foster equal distribution of resources and safeguard their cultural and political identities. For many, these factors are as significant as, or sometimes more important than, material outcomes in shaping their preferences for federalism or centralization. The interplay between these two logics—performance and identity—creates complex attitudes toward governance. For example, a citizen may ideologically support federalism to protect regional interests but pragmatically favor centralization if provincial governments fail to deliver essential services. Understanding how these competing frames influence citizen preferences is central to the current research, which seeks to unpack the nuanced ways people assess and choose their preferred governance structures.

Research Gap

Although there is an extensive theoretical discussion on governance and institutional reforms, there is a notable lack of micro-level data specifically concerning Pakistan. Most existing studies focus on topics such as constitutional reforms or fiscal policy systems, often overlooking the attitudes and preferences of ordinary citizens. This paper seeks to address critical questions, including whether people in Pakistan genuinely support decentralized governance, whether their preferences are driven more by identity or by perceptions of institutional performance, and whether trust in institutions influences these attitudes. Additionally, it explores why different provinces might display varying levels of support for federalism. To fill this research gap, the paper presents a systematic survey of public opinion in the provinces of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, providing valuable insights into the perspectives of citizens regarding governance structures.

Theoretical Framework

In elucidating the citizen preferences, this paper combines the Institutional Theory and Rational Choice Theory resulting in a hybrid theory that incorporates structure and behavior motives.

Institutional Theory

The Institutional Theory is the one that assumes the impact of the political behavior is determined by formal regulations, the arrangements of governance, and the performance of organizations. When citizens feel that institutions are effective, fair and responsive they become legitimate. Provided that provincial governments prove to be competent, the citizens will tend to favor federalism. On the other hand, the need to have centralized control can be created as a result of institutional failure.

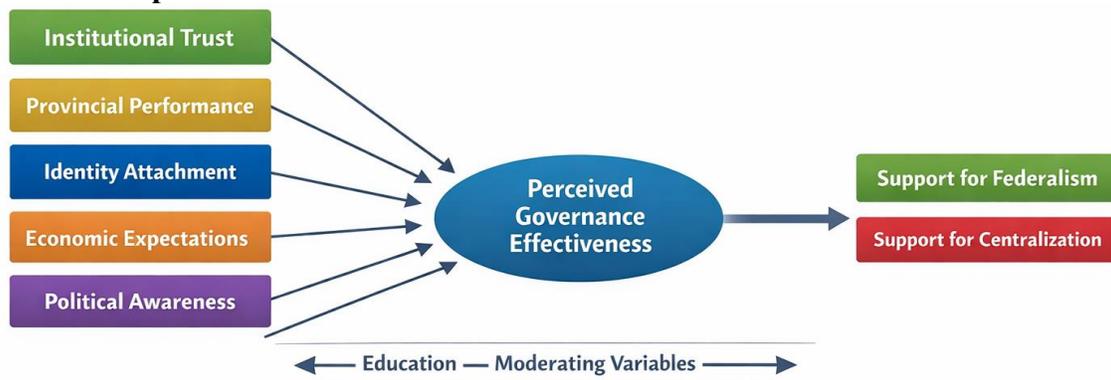
Rational Choice Perspective

According to Rational Choice Theory, citizens act as utility maximizers, supporting the form of governance they believe will provide the greatest personal and communal benefits. For instance, if centralization is perceived as a guarantee of economic stability, support for it increases. Conversely, when federalism is seen as offering greater control over resources, citizens tend to favor it. Importantly, citizens' preferences are not rigidly ideological; instead, they adapt strategically to changing circumstances to maximize their advantage.

Integrated Analytical Model

The proposed research hypothesizes that five significant independent variables decide whether or not to support or reject federalism. The research identifies several important variables within its analytical model. The independent variables include institutional trust, perceived provincial performance, regional or ethnic identity, economic expectations, and political awareness. The mediating variable is the perceived effectiveness of governance, which connects the independent variables to the outcome. The dependent variable, which is the primary outcome of interest, is the preference between federalism and centralization. Additionally, moderating variables such as education, income, and urban-rural residence are considered, as they may influence the relationship between the other variables and the ultimate governance preference. Together, these factors provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how citizens form opinions regarding federalism versus centralized governance, taking into account individual characteristics, perceptions, and socio-economic context.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Citizen preferences for state structure emerge from the interaction between institutional confidence, identity considerations, and performance evaluations.

The theoretical framework suggests that the citizens do not consider federalism based on constitutional principles. Rather, their preferences are formed as a result of experience of governance, institutions trust, and anticipation of economic and political performance.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research adopted a cross sectional survey design, which was quantitative, to test the perceptions of the people on federalism and centralization in Pakistan. The design enables a systematic measure of the citizen preferences besides obtaining the socio-political factors that influence the governance attitudes. Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) were chosen because of their opposite political background, administrative abilities, and population structure. Punjab is the economical and political heart of the country that may be regarded as the stronghold of bureaucracy and stasis in policies. Conversely, KP is representative of a province that is highly politically mobilized in the matters of autonomy, security issues, and transformations in governance structure. The comparative design makes the study more analytical as it will capture regional differences in political perceptions.

Target Population

The study population comprised of adult citizens between the age group 18-65 years old who lived within the urban and semi-urban towns of Punjab and KP. To guarantee that respondents gave significant responses, they had to have a basic understanding of the structures of governments.

Sample Size

The total sample size for the study was 714 respondents, which was sufficient to ensure adequate statistical power for conducting multivariate analyses. The sample was evenly divided between the two provinces, with 357 respondents from Punjab and 357 from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Using a confidence level of 95%, the resulting margin of error for the sample is approximately ± 3.7 , which is considered reasonable for research focused on public opinion.

Sampling Technique

To improve the representativeness of the sample, a multi-stage stratified random sampling strategy was implemented. The first stage involved provincial stratification, designating Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) as the primary strata. In the second stage, three districts from each province were randomly selected to reflect socioeconomic diversity: Lahore, Faisalabad, and Rawalpindi in Punjab, and Peshawar, Abbottabad, and Mardan in KP. Within each district, urban neighborhoods and adjacent semi-urban areas were identified for cluster sampling in the third stage. The fourth stage focused on household selection, where enumerators used a systematic random walk to choose households. In the fifth and final stage, one eligible adult was selected from each household using the last-birthday approach, ensuring randomization and minimizing interviewer bias in respondent selection.

Instrumentation

Data for the study was gathered using a structured questionnaire, developed from established scales relating to governance and political behavior. Prior to its official deployment, the instrument was piloted on a sample of 50 respondents to ensure its clarity and reliability. The questionnaire was organized into six main sections: Institutional Trust, Performance of Provincial Governance, Identity Attachment, Economic Expectations, Political Awareness, and Advocacy regarding Federalism versus Centralization. All attitudinal items within the questionnaire were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). This approach allowed for a nuanced assessment of respondents' opinions across the various topics included in the survey.

Table 1: Measurement Scales Used in the Study

Scale / Measure	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Sample Item
Institutional Trust Scale	6	0.87	I trust provincial institutions to act in the public interest.
Provincial Performance Scale	7	0.85	My provincial government delivers services effectively.
Identity Attachment Scale	5	0.81	My provincial identity is an important part of who I am.
Economic Expectations Scale	5	0.79	Centralized governance improves national economic stability."
Political Awareness Scale	4	0.76	I closely follow debates on provincial autonomy.
Governance Preference Scale	6	0.88	Pakistan should grant greater decision-making power to provinces.

All scales exceeded the recommended reliability threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency (Asif et al., 2019).

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics (N = 714)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Province	Punjab	357	50%
	KP	357	50%
Gender	Male	382	53.5%
	Female	332	46.5%
Age Group	18–30	248	34.7%
	31–45	296	41.4%
	46–65	170	23.8%
Education	Up to Matric	206	28.9%
	Intermediate	219	30.7%
	Bachelor’s & Above	289	40.5%
Monthly Income	< 50,000 PKR	274	38.4%
	50,001–100,000 PKR	301	42.2%
	> 100,000 PKR	139	19.5%
Residence	Urban	468	65.5%
	Semi-Urban	246	34.5%

The demographic distribution suggests a balanced sample with adequate representation across gender, education levels, and income groups.

Data Collection Procedure

The research was conducted over a four-month period using face-to-face surveys. Enumerators were specifically trained to administer the survey, enhancing the accuracy of responses and reducing the likelihood of item non-response. This approach ensured data quality and reliability throughout the study. Ethical standards were strictly observed during the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, participation remained voluntary, and respondents were guaranteed anonymity. The information collected was securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes. These measures were instrumental in minimizing social desirability bias and encouraging honest responses from participants.

Analytical Strategy

SPSS 27 and AMOS were utilized for data analysis, allowing for the application of advanced statistical modeling techniques. The analyses included both descriptive and inferential approaches. Descriptive methods such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations provided an overview of the data, while inferential techniques included independent sample t-tests for provincial comparisons, Pearson correlations, multiple regression, and one-way ANOVA. Additionally, mediation and moderation analyses were conducted to further understand relationships among variables. The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to international ethical standards throughout its implementation. Participants had the freedom to withdraw from the research at any stage, ensuring their autonomy was respected. No detailed personal data was collected, preserving respondents' privacy. Sensitive political topics were addressed in a neutral and nonpartisan manner to avoid bias. Additionally, the research plan underwent an audit in accordance with institutional research guidelines, further reinforcing its ethical integrity.

Results

Descriptive Overview of Governance Preferences

The main aim of this study was to determine whether citizens like a federal or centralized form of governance to be in place and what influences these sentiments. The general results show that there is a moderate national preference towards federalism but there is a great deal of provincial difference.

- Support for Federalism: 58%
- Preference towards Centralization: 29%.
- Undecided: 13%

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the level of respondent in favor of provincial autonomy was significantly higher than in Punjab.

Table 3: Public Support for Governance Structure (N = 714)

Governance Preference	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Support Federalism	214	30.0%
Moderately Support Federalism	200	28.0%
Prefer Centralized System	207	29.0%
Undecided / Neutral	93	13.0%

Mean GP Score: 3.41 (SD= 1.12)

The findings imply that although it can be concluded that the majority supports federalism, the minority that prefers centralized power is still rather large, which implies that the discussion is still a long way to go before seMean Governance Preference Score: 3.41 (SD = 1.12) The findings indicate that even though the majority supports federalism a significant minority still supports the centralized power and this means that the debate is not yet over.

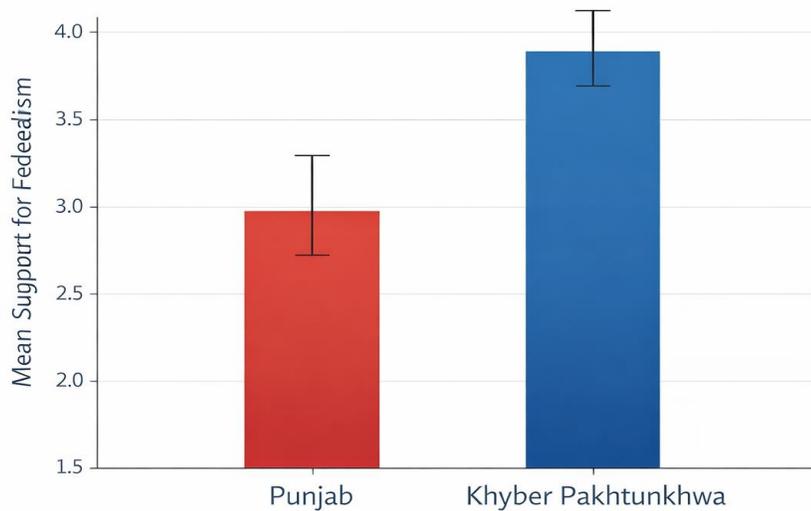
Provincial Comparison of Federal Support

Table 4: Mean Support for Federalism by Province

Province	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Punjab	357	3.14	1.09	6.72	< .001
KP	357	3.68	1.04		

The independent sample t-test confirms that the difference is statistically significant, indicating that provincial context plays a decisive role in shaping governance preferences.

Figure 2: Mean Support for Federalism by Province



The figure shows the regional dissimilarity in the attitudes towards governance indicating that political history and autonomy consideration affect the attitudes of citizens.

Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Institutional Trust	3.26	0.88	1	5	0.87
Provincial Performance	3.18	0.91	1	5	0.85
Identity Attachment	3.52	0.84	1	5	0.81
Economic Expectations	3.34	0.86	1	5	0.79
Political Awareness	3.11	0.82	1	5	0.76
Governance Preference	3.41	1.12	1	5	0.88

Identity attachment recorded the highest mean score, indicating that regional belonging remains a powerful psychological factor in political attitudes.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between the principal variables.

Table 6: Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Governance Preference	1.00					
2. Institutional Trust	.69***	1.00				
3. Provincial Performance	.63***	.58***	1.00			
4. Identity Attachment	.55***	.42***	.39***	1.00		
5. Economic Expectations	-.48***	-.36***	-.31***	-.29***	1.00	
6. Political Awareness	.46***	.40***	.37***	.33***	-.21***	1.00

***p < .001

Federal support demonstrates the strongest positive correlation with institutional trust, highlighting its significance in fostering confidence in governing institutions. Additionally, the negative

relationship observed between the economy and expectations suggests that individuals who prioritize macroeconomic stability are more likely to favor a centralized governance approach. Furthermore, strong attachments to identity emerge as crucial predictors of pro-federal attitudes, emphasizing the role of personal and collective identity in shaping preferences for federalism.

One-Way ANOVA (Education Effects)

Education was tested as a moderating socio-economic factor.

Table 7: ANOVA — Governance Preference by Education

Education Level	Mean	SD	F	p
Up to Matric	3.21	1.15	8.94	< .001
Intermediate	3.36	1.10		
Bachelor's & Above	3.59	1.05		

Stronger support of federalism is linked to higher education, which might indicate the heightened political consciousness and convictions on normative adherence to promoting decentralization through democracy.

Multiple Regression Analysis

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to identify the strongest predictors of governance preference.

Table 8: Multiple Regression Predicting Support for Federalism

Predictor	B	SE	Beta (β)	t	p
Constant	0.98	0.21	—	4.67	< .001
Institutional Trust	0.52	0.05	0.41	10.4	< .001
Provincial Performance	0.37	0.06	0.29	6.82	< .001
Identity Attachment	0.31	0.05	0.24	6.10	< .001
Economic Expectations	-0.28	0.06	-0.19	-4.90	< .001
Political Awareness	0.22	0.07	0.14	3.14	.002
Income	0.09	0.04	0.07	2.11	.035

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.62$

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.61$

$F(6, 707) = 96.45, p < .001$

The model demonstrates a remarkable level of explanatory power, accounting for 62 percent of the variance in public opinion research. Among the predictors examined, institutional trust stands out as the most significant factor, followed closely by the performance of provincial institutions. These findings indicate that people tend to favor federalism when they perceive their provincial institutions as strong and trustworthy.

Moderation Analysis

(Income as Moderator)

To figure out whether economic position changes the relations between institutional trust and governance preference, income was tested.

Table 9: Moderation Results

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Institutional Trust	0.49	0.05	9.80	< .001
Income	0.12	0.04	3.00	.003
Trust × Income	0.15	0.05	2.94	.004

R² Change: .018 (significant)

The respondents with higher incomes also convert the institutional trust to greater support of federalism than the respondents in low income groups, which can be interpreted as implying that economic security can moderate greater tolerance of decentralized governance.

Summary of Key Findings

A number of key findings have been obtained:

1. The majority, although not overwhelming, support exists in federalism. The fact that the centralist minority is large shows that there is still controversy about the way Pakistan should be governed.
2. Provincial context matters. KP citizens are much more federalist than the Punjab citizens.
3. Decentralization preferences are motivated by trust. The citizens support federalism when they have confidence that provincial governments are competent.
4. Outcome is preferred to ideology. The outcomes of governance are of more importance than constitutional theory.
5. Identity is still politically strong. Institutional preferences are still dependent on regional attachment.
6. Centralization is promoted by economic insecurity. Stronger federal control is more likely to be preferred by citizens who want macroeconomic stability.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that citizen preferences regarding federalism and centralization in Pakistan reflect not abstract constitutional commitments but rather institutional confidence, governance performance, and socioeconomic expectations. These results reinforce the emerging comparative politics consensus: institutional legitimacy, rather than structural design per se, determines public acquiescence to governance arrangements (Rothstein, 2011; Fukuyama, 2014).

Institutional Trust as Foundation of Federal Support

Institutional trust emerged as the strongest predictor of federalism support, aligning with Institutional Theory predictions that political structures gain legitimacy through perceived effectiveness and fairness (North, 1990). When citizens trust provincial governments, decentralization appears logical and appealing; local decision-making becomes less threatening, and autonomy gains political traction. Conversely, distrust toward provincial authorities drives citizens toward centralization as a stability-seeking response. This pattern suggests federalism preferences reflect quotidian governance experiences rather than ideological positioning. The finding resonates with Levi and Stoker's (2000) conceptualization of trust as heuristic reducing political uncertainty. Citizens employ institutional confidence as cognitive shortcut for evaluating complex constitutional arrangements. For federalism to secure popular support, provincial institutions must demonstrate trustworthiness through consistent performance.

Performance-Based Federalism: Pragmatism Over Ideology

Provincial performance ranked as the second most influential predictor, indicating citizens evaluate governance pragmatically rather than through federalist ideological lenses. When subnational governments demonstrate administrative competence, support for decentralization increases. This pattern aligns with performance legitimacy concepts (Rothstein, 2011): citizens favor the governmental level they perceive as most effective. Citizens are not inherently federalists or centralists; they are pragmatists whose preferences respond to governance outcomes. When provincial governance appears inefficient, partial, or politicized, citizens view centralization as restoring coordination and policy coherence. This performance sensitivity implies federalism support remains contingent rather than fixed. The practical implication: citizens endorse federal arrangements conditionally upon demonstrated subnational effectiveness.

Identity and Enduring Political Salience

Despite performance considerations, identity attachment remains a robust predictor of governance attitudes. Respondents strongly identifying with their province demonstrated significantly higher federalism support. This finding reflects broader patterns in multinational states where territorial identity translates into political demands for recognition and self-governance (Stepan et al., 2011; Hale, 2004). KP's stronger federal orientation illustrates this dynamic. Historical experiences of political marginalization, security challenges, and resource control aspirations may have amplified autonomy's symbolic significance (Shinwari, 2015). However, identity does not operate independently. The study reveals that institutional trust moderates' identity-based preferences emotional attachment alone cannot sustain decentralization support when governance outcomes disappoint. Identity may generate autonomy demands, but performance determines their durability.

Economic Expectations and Centralization Appeal

The negative correlation between economic expectations and federalism support represents another critical finding. Citizens prioritizing macroeconomic stability, fiscal coordination, and national development gravitate toward centralized governance. This reflects rational calculus: large-scale economic planning associates with strong federal oversight in citizens' cognitive frameworks (Rodden, 2004). In developing economies where regional disparities may intensify under decentralization, citizens may view centralization as ensuring equitable resource distribution. This does not signify anti-federalism sentiment but rather tension between autonomy aspirations and economic security concerns. Policymakers should recognize fiscal federalism as not merely technical arrangement but determinant of popular fairness perceptions.

Education and Political Sophistication

ANOVA findings demonstrate positive association between education and federalism support. Educated respondents exhibit greater exposure to democratic principles, constitutional arguments, and political discourse, fostering appreciation for power-sharing institutions (Almond & Verba, 1963). Political awareness's significant positive correlation with federal support suggests informed citizens more comfortable with governance complexity. This finding carries optimistic implications: as populations become educated about decentralized democracy, support for such arrangements may increase. However, rising awareness without corresponding institutional performance improvements may produce more critical citizens—not simply endorsing federal structures but demanding reform and accountability.

Provincial Variation and Contextual Conditionality

The significant provincial differences underscore governance preferences' contextual conditionality. KP's stronger federalism orientation reflects distinct historical trajectory: regions

with autonomy movements, security challenges, or marginalization perceptions develop stronger attachment to decentralization as protective mechanism (Horowitz, 1985). Punjab's relative centralization acceptance may reflect satisfaction with existing arrangements and concerns that decentralization could disrupt administrative efficiency. This variation carries important implications for federal design: uniform decentralization policies may generate divergent responses across provinces. Federal reforms must account for regional differences in historical experience, institutional capacity, and public expectations.

Theoretical Implications

The findings support integrating Institutional Theory and Rational Choice perspectives. Citizens evaluate governance structures through dual lenses: normative (identity, trust) and pragmatic (performance, expectations). Federalism gains support not merely because it democratically distributes power but because citizens believe it can deliver tangible benefits. This "credibility-based" approach to federal support suggests institutional trust constitutes the psychological foundation upon which decentralized systems are built. The study also advances beyond binary explanations (identity versus performance) by demonstrating their interaction. Governance preferences emerge from complex interplay between emotional attachments and rational calculations. This multidimensionality requires theoretical frameworks capable of accommodating both.

Practical Implications

For Pakistani policymakers, several implications emerge:

First, decentralization's success requires parallel investment in provincial institutional capacity. Granting autonomy to incapable institutions breeds disillusionment and centralization backlash. Second, communication strategies should emphasize provincial government achievements. Public perceptions of performance matter as much as objective outcomes. Third, fiscal federalism arrangements must address equity concerns. If decentralization produces visible disparities, centralization support will grow among disadvantaged populations. Fourth, federal reforms should be province-sensitive rather than uniform. KP and Punjab require differentiated approaches reflecting their distinct historical relationships with central authority. Finally, civic education regarding federalism's rationale and functioning could strengthen informed support for decentralized governance among educated citizens.

Conclusion

This study investigated determinants of citizen preferences for federalism versus centralization in Pakistan through comparative survey analysis of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The findings reveal that while federalism commands majority support, this backing remains conditional rather than ideological. Citizens do not endorse governance arrangements based on abstract constitutional principles; preferences emerge from experienced institutional performance, perceived governmental competence, and anticipated economic stability. Institutional trust emerged as the strongest predictor of federal support, underscoring a fundamental governance truth: political institutions gain legitimacy through performance. When provincial institutions appear competent, transparent, and responsive, decentralization becomes appealing and logical. Conversely, distrust drives citizens toward centralization as coordination-and-stability-seeking response. The study also affirms identity's enduring significance in shaping political attitudes. Provincial attachment remains a robust source of autonomy support, particularly in regions with histories of marginalization or self-governance aspirations. However, identity alone cannot sustain federalism and effective governance outcomes must accompany it. Economic expectations constitute another

critical factor. Citizens concerned with macroeconomic stability and national development gravitate toward centralized control, indicating pragmatic trade-offs between autonomy aspirations and economic security concerns. This tension reveals federalism not as fixed institutional choice but as continually negotiated balance between efficiency, representation, and trust. Provincial divergence further supports governance preferences' contextual conditionality. KP's stronger federal orientation compared to Punjab's relative caution suggests regional histories and administrative traditions fundamentally shape how citizens evaluate decentralization. Collectively, these findings advance a significant argument: constitutional design matters less for federal system stability than institutional credibility. Federalism thrives when subnational governments inspire trust in their managerial capacity; it falters when decentralization becomes synonymous with fragmentation and incompetence.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to federalism literature in several respects:

First, it integrates Institutional Theory with Rational Choice perspectives, demonstrating that citizens evaluate governance structures both normatively and pragmatically. Second, it advances a credibility-based approach to federal support, identifying institutional trust as the psychological foundation for decentralized systems. Third, it incorporates identity and performance within a unified framework, moving beyond binary explanations to reveal governance preferences' multidimensionality. Fourth, it provides empirical evidence regarding public opinion in Pakistan, a context where elite-centered analyses have predominated.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations suggest directions for future inquiry:

First, the cross-sectional design captures preferences at a single point; longitudinal research could track how attitudes evolve with governance performance changes. Second, the focus on two provinces limits generalizability; extending research to Balochistan and Sindh would provide comprehensive national picture. Third, quantitative methods identify correlations but cannot fully capture preference formation processes; mixed-methods research incorporating qualitative interviews would enrich understanding. Fourth, the study measured perceptions rather than objective governance performance; future research might examine relationships between objective indicators and subjective preferences. Fifth, the sample excluded rural populations; rural-urban comparisons represent important future direction.

Concluding Reflection

Pakistan's federal experiment continues evolving. The Eighteenth Amendment significantly devolved authority, but constitutional provisions alone cannot guarantee federalism's success. This study demonstrates that sustainable federalism depends fundamentally on citizens' conviction that subnational authorities possess capacity to deliver quality governance. Institutional trust, once established, creates self-reinforcing cycles: trusted provincial governments gain autonomy that enables better performance, which deepens trust. Conversely, distrust triggers centralization pressures that may undermine federalism's very foundations. For Pakistan's diverse provinces, the path forward requires patient institutional building, responsive governance, and federal arrangements flexible enough to accommodate regional variation while maintaining national coordination. Federalism's legitimacy ultimately rests not in constitutions but in citizens' daily experiences with the institutions governing their lives.

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