Unpacking the Role of Regional Intergovernmental Organizations in Complex Governance Systems

Shuwen Zhang
PhD Candidate in Public Administration
Department of Public Policy, Management and Analytics
University of Illinois Chicago

Abstract

This research critically examines the role of Regional Intergovernmental Organizations (RIGOs) in promoting collaborative governance in the U.S., addressing the gap in empirical studies on their impact and effectiveness. It employs a multi-dimensional analysis to explore RIGOs' impact on regional policymaking and cooperation. The study first investigates how regional power dynamics and decision-making processes influence public investment allocation, using a national dataset. It then assesses RIGOs' ability to boost interlocal cooperation through a case study in Iowa, applying the Augmented Synthetic Control method to evaluate the effects of RIGOs on local governments' collaboration. Additionally, it develops a taxonomy of RIGOs in the Chicago area to understand their characteristics and roles in complex governance system. This research aims to provide insights to enhance RIGOs' strategies for better regional governance and contribute to the scholarly conversation on collaborative governance.

Purpose
  This research project focuses on Regional Intergovernmental Organizations (RIGOs), vital entities that enable local governments to address regional challenges collaboratively. RIGOs play a significant role across regions serving more than 83% of the U.S. population, fostering interlocal collaboration, facilitating collective decision-making, and strategically managing federal and state resources. However, despite their importance, there is a noticeable lack of empirical evidence examining their effectiveness. This research aims to bridge this gap by drawing on diverse data sources to assess the impact and efficiency of RIGOs. The first paper in this project examines the influence of regional power dynamics and RIGOs' decision-making structures on regional public investment decisions based on national wide data. This analysis is pivotal in understanding how collective decisions are shaped and the consequent effects on broader regional policies. The second paper studies whether the formation of RIGOs can foster interlocal collaboration by utilizing the longitudinal data from Iowa through a causal research design. I adopted an innovative methodology, Augmented Synthetic Control, to test the difference before and after RIGOs are formed. The third paper revisits the RIGO framework by Miller and Nelles (2018), to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of such organizations, designed to facilitate large-sample empirical analyses. By establishing a precise classification, this project lays the groundwork for future studies to build upon.

Contribution
Contribution to Scholarship within Public Administration
  This research project offers substantial contributions to the field of public administration by addressing two critical areas of inquiry. Firstly, it pioneers empirical examination in an underexplored domain, assessing the real-world impacts of RIGOs on regional policy-making. By deploying nationwide data, the initial study presents an unprecedented empirical analysis to evaluate RIGOs' influence, focusing on power dynamics and equity across local communities. The second paper investigation introduces a groundbreaking causal analysis framework, aiming to determine the long-term effects of RIGOs on fostering interlocal collaboration.
  Secondly, the project advances scholarly understanding by dissecting the roles and attributes of RIGOs within intricate governance frameworks. The third study is designed to elucidate these aspects, setting a robust groundwork for future large-scale empirical research. By delving into these uncharted territories, this research project illuminates the multifaceted impacts of RIGOs, providing a nuanced perspective on their operational efficacy and contribution to public administration theory.

Applicability for Practice and Theory Development
  From a practical standpoint, this research holds immense relevance for state and local public managers, who anticipate RIGOs to catalyze enhanced collaboration and streamline regional policymaking. Despite high expectations and considerable investment in these organizations, a tangible evidence base assessing their effectiveness remains elusive. This study aims to fill this critical knowledge gap, offering empirical insights that could validate or recalibrate managerial expectations and strategies concerning RIGOs.
  Moreover, the research findings are poised to influence practice directly, equipping public administrators with data-driven insights to optimize RIGOs' operational frameworks and strategic orientations. Concurrently, the theoretical implications of this study are profound, as it contributes to the ongoing discourse on governance structures, intergovernmental relations, and

collaborative public management. By empirically grounding the theoretical constructs associated with RIGOs, the research fosters a deeper, more actionable understanding of their role in contemporary governance, thereby facilitating informed theory development and practical application in the field of public administration.

Previous Research and Theoretical Developments

Collaborative Governance Theories

The scholarly examination of collaborative governance has yielded various theoretical frameworks that illuminate the significant function of Regional Intergovernmental Organizations (RIGOs) in fostering collaborative decision-making processes. One key framework posits that RIGOs are central to governance models where stakeholders unite in consensus-driven environments within structured institutions (Ansell & Gash, 2007). These RIGOs are crucial for enabling dialogue and agreement among various parties.

Transitioning to economic perspectives, the institutional collective action framework identifies RIGOs as mechanisms that, while complex and potentially costly, enable integrated responses to complex public sector challenges (Kim et al., 2020). This framework views the integration and delegated authority within RIGOs as essential for addressing multi-faceted issues, albeit acknowledging the heightened transaction costs they entail.

Another viewpoint, the ecology of games framework, presents RIGOs as platforms facilitating interaction and cooperation across a network of policy actors, supporting collective action in policy decision-making (Lubell et al., 2010; Lubell, 2013). These institutions are seen as central nodes within a broader policy ecosystem, enabling dialogue and coordination on various issues.

From a network governance perspective, RIGOs are conceptualized as network administrative organizations, instrumental within certain network structures for enhancing the sustainability, legitimacy, and efficiency of collaborative efforts (Kenis & Provan, 2009). This theory delineates different network configurations and situates RIGOs within a framework that underscores their potential for fostering effective governance.

Despite these theoretical insights, there is a recognized need for empirical validation. The theories propose significant roles for RIGOs but also indicate gaps in our empirical understanding of these entities. Concerns arise regarding the actual outcomes facilitated by RIGOs, the quantification of associated costs and benefits, and the effectiveness of these organizations within the complex tapestry of regional governance.

The Empirical Study of RIGOs: A Nascent Field

Historically, research on regional governance institutions has been characterized by detailed case studies that, while providing in-depth contextual understanding, fall short of offering broad generalizability or empirical rigor (Norris, 2001; Visser, 2004; Bryan & Wolf, 2010). These studies highlight the roles of these organizations in enabling cooperation and policy coordination but often do not extend to large-scale empirical validation.

In recent decades, significant progress has been made through the RIGO framework (Miller & Nelles, 2020). This framework aims to identify the core characteristics of RIGOs and set the stage for comparative and comprehensive studies that could provide a clearer picture of the effectiveness of these organizations. However, the RIGO framework is still in a very early stage.

Building on this foundation, the proposed research seeks to contribute significantly to the field by empirically assessing the effectiveness of RIGOs in regional problem-solving and collaboration. By leveraging a combination of data sources and a robust analytical framework, this study not only aims to offer new insights into the operational success of RIGOs but also address a critical gap in the existing literature and enhance our understanding of their role in regional governance.

Research Design

This research project has three main research papers. Each paper will use different data and explore different key questions towards RIGOs.

Paper One

(1) Proposed Research Questions:
- What is the impact of regional power dynamics on the public investment distributions of RIGOs?
- How do the decision-making structures within RIGOs influence their public investment distributions at the regional level?
- In what ways do regional power dynamics shape the decision-making processes of RIGOs?
- To what extent do the decision-making structures of RIGOs moderate the impact of regional power dynamics on their public investment distributions in the region?

(2) Data:

Information regarding the decision-making structures of RIGOs, including details about governing board members and voting weights, will be sourced from their bylaws. Revenue data for local governments, which is essential for calculating the Regional Power Diffusion Index (RPDI), will be obtained from the census bureau. Additionally, data concerning regional public investments will be gathered from the annual budget reports of RIGOs.

(3) Proposed Research Method:

A random sample of 50% (239/477) RIGOs will be selected based on national Regional Intergovernmental Organizations data set (https://www.rigos.pitt.edu). This analysis will be conducted using the following steps:
- Assessing the power dynamics within regions through the use of a Regional Power Diffusion Index. The RPDI quantifies power distribution in a region by considering "the sum of the square root of each local government's percentage revenue contribution." A smaller RPDI indicates greater concentration, while a larger one signifies more dispersion.
- Inductively coding the categories of decision-making structure.
- Exploring whether these existing power dynamics influence RIGOs' decision-making structures.
- Examining if variations in decision-making structures impact regional public investment made by RIGOs by Ordinary least squares regression analysis.

This study employs an exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach. It commences with a qualitative phase in which data is gathered and analyzed to identify and classify the decision-making frameworks of RIGOs using content analysis. This is followed by a quantitative phase that examines socio-economic and public investment data. The findings from both phases are

then combined through relational analysis in subsequent steps for comprehensive insights. The research findings will shed light on the factors that drive the structure of RIGOs' decision-making and how these variations influence regional policy decisions.

Paper Two

(1) Proposed Research Questions:

Do RIGOs effectively promote interlocal collaborations as anticipated by researchers and public managers?

(2) Data:

The formation year of RIGOs and their member local governments, and the region they serve are collected through their website. The data on interlocal collaboration will be collected by utilizing the 28E dataset. This dataset encompasses all interlocal agreements in Iowa spanning from 1993 to 2020.

(3) Proposed Research Method:

This essay fills this knowledge gap by employing the augmented synthetic control methodology and analyzing longitudinal data to investigate the impact of establishing a RIGO on local public service networks. In Iowa, there are 18 RIGOs, with one formed in 2007 and the rest established during the 1960s and 1970s. This provides an opportunity for causal inference research design to compare interlocal collaboration before and after the establishment of an RIGO. The study will test the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: The establishment of a RIGO increase interlocal collaboration in the region.
- Hypothesis 2: The establishment of a RIGO increase geographic distance of interlocal collaboration in the region.

This study will also explore which policy areas are more impacted by forming a RIGO and how do partnerships change overtime.

The study focuses on measuring the impact of forming a new RIGO in 2007. The dependent variables are the number of newly formed interlocal agreements among RIGO members for all services areas. The treatment group consists of the specific RIGO formed in 2007, while other existing RIGOs in Iowa serve as the control group. This formation serves as an intervention during the study period.

Paper Three

This paper focuses on identifying RIGOs in Chicago metropolitan area—one of the largest metropolitan areas and a common ground for local actors to converge for decision-making, resource allocation, and service provision. By concentrating on area, the study seeks to develop an inclusive definition and a comprehensive set of attributes of RIGOs.

(1) Research Plan

- Identify and map out key participants in the complex governance network in the Chicago metropolitan area.
- Identify all the RIGOs among the actors found in step one.
- Develop multidimensional attributes that can categorize the RIGOs identified by qualitative coding (such as scale, membership structure, decision-making structure, organization size, policy functions, purpose, funding recourses, etc.).
- Explore the distinct roles of different types of RIGOs and analyze how they integrate into the broader fabric of this governance network.

(2) Data

        This study will be accomplished by collecting and analyzing organizational-level data on RIGOs, including their membership, structure, function, purpose, and size. The organizational-level data will be collected based on the publicly available data from their websites and documents. To complement this data and provide insights into the role of RIGOs in governance networks, coordinators from each listed RIGO will be invited to participate in an online survey. The primary data collection method is content analysis based on organizational websites and documents, and the secondary is online surveys.

Itemized budget and budget justification

I am seeking funds to support the collection of data critical to the analyses planned for papers one and three. Due to the scarcity of research and data on RIGOs, this research project required extensive data collection efforts to ensure the results were valid and credible. The employment of two research assistants is pivotal to achieving the project's objectives, especially given the ambit of our analysis.

For Paper One, which examines the nationwide effects of RIGOs on regional investment decisions, a comprehensive dataset is indispensable. Similarly, Paper Three requires an in-depth, inductive examination of RIGOs within the Chicago metropolitan context, necessitating equally thorough data collection. This approach ensures this research is grounded in solid empirical evidence.

The research assistants will be recruit from graduate students with both quantitative and qualitative data analysis training.

Item	Cost	Explanation
Two Research Assistants	Total: $3,012 Cost Break Down: • Hours per week per RA: 10 hours • Duration: approximately 10 weeks • Rate of Pay: $30.12/hour (University of Illinois Chicago's standard rate for graduate hourly positions)	Hiring RAs for data collection on following tasks: • Collecting decision-making structures of RIGOs based on their bylaws (for paper one). • Collecting public investments decisions based on RIGOs' annual budget reports (for paper one). • Collecting attributes of RIGOs in the Metropolitan Chicago (for paper three). • Interviewing RIGOs coordinators (for paper three).

(There is no additional financial support for this research project.)