In most large unitary states, however, specific regional organizations were soon established. They became an administrative vehicle through which the centre could decentralize planning, with regional bodies taking responsibility for economic development and related public infrastructure; notably, transport. These bodies were not always directly elected; indeed, they were typically created by a push from the centre, rather than a pull from the regions.

In many large European unitary states, the coordinating function of administrative regions has advanced considerably. Regions provide a valuable mesolevel perspective below that of the country as a whole but above that of local areas. Amalgamation of local governments can achieve some of the same effect but often at greater political cost, given the importance of traditional communities to many inhabitants.

A key factor influencing the development of regional institutions is whether they are, or become, directly elected. Election enhances visibility but, for better or worse, political and partisan factors come to intrude more directly into their operations.

France is an example of this transition. The 22 regional councils established there in 1972 initially possessed extremely limited executive powers. However, their status was enhanced by a decentralization law passed in 1982 providing for direct election. The first round of these elections took place in 1986. Even though French regional bodies continue to operate with small budgets, they have acquired greater visibility and authority.

The case for direct election is perhaps strongest where regions are already important cultural entities, providing a focus for citizens’ identities. In the United Kingdom, for example, attempts by the Labour government to create elected regional assemblies in England foundered on public apathy. But assemblies were successfully introduced to Scotland and Wales, where national loyalties were well-established.

The European Union has encouraged the development of a regional level within its member states. The European Regional Development Fund, established in 1975, distributes aid directly to regions, rather than through central governments. The notion, somewhat exaggerated but significant at the time, was that the EU and the regions would gradually become the leading policy-makers, outflanking central governments which would be left with less to do in this new disposition.

The EU furthered such aspirations by introducing a Committee of the Regions and Local Communities in 1988. This body, composed of subnational authorities, proved to be merely consultative, however. National executives remain more central to the policy process than the more committed proponents of regional governance in the EU had envisaged.

Even so, the complexities of multilevel governance in unitary states mean that the exclusive focus of