

**Investigating the particularities of regionalization: Contested state–federal relations and the politics of Alaska’s Arctic Policy**

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the particularities of a regionalization process by investigating how a supranational region emerges as a context of, and tool for, political contestation regarding power relations between a sub-national and national government. This is done through an empirical case study of the Arctic Policy of the State of Alaska. The analysis shows how the contested relationship between state and federal governments became re-contextualized in relation to the Arctic due to a newfound federal attention on the region. This culminated in how the Arctic region is perceived within the ‘Alaskan’ and federal contexts. Additionally, the case study shows that by attempting to transform how the Arctic is perceived within, and enacted through, the policies of the federal government, state actors in Alaska have sought to utilize federal attention on the region and exert an influence on federal policies that affect Alaska. This, in turn, has potential implications for the overall regionalization process of the Arctic itself. The paper contends that rather than de-constructing regionalization processes as wholes, by focusing on the particularities of these processes we can better understand the politics at play. This concurrently helps to illuminate how such politics may affect the trajectory of regionalization itself.

Keywords: regionalization, politics, state–federal state relations, Arctic, Alaska

## **Introduction**

During the past decade or so, there has been an abundance of news articles, academic texts and films that focus on the 'Arctic region'. Stories and images of melting sea ice, climate change, economic opportunity and potential for geopolitical conflict in the Arctic have become so widely circulated, that one rarely questions the ontological status of such an entity as the Arctic region. However, by examining the academic literature on regions, and in particular at the conceptualizations of regions in human geography, the cacophony of voices that tell us what the Arctic is (and what it perhaps should be) can be brought under analytical scrutiny. For instance, it is possible to see that these voices do not describe an external 'reality' of a region that is 'really out there' as such, but they enact this reality – they bring the region into existence through the very act of describing and defining it in various ways (Donaldson 2006; Paasi 2010; see also Latour 2005). Furthermore, it can be asserted that if the region is defined in various ways by those who enact it, the actors are not enacting the region in its singular form, but different versions of it. These versions can be more or less mutually exclusive and even contradictory in some respects, but often rely on some common denominators (Metzger 2013). Thus, it is relevant to ask why specific actors engage in agency through which regions are enacted, and why they come to ascribe specific meaning to them. In other words, the enactment of regions is also a politically relevant phenomenon.

As the amount of research concerning the current situation and future prospects of politics regarding the Arctic region has increased, two key sets of relations have gained the lion's share of the attention: first, relations between nation-states, and second, relations between indigenous peoples and nation-states. The scholarly approaches to relations between nation-states have produced multiple interpretations, ranging from potential conflict over resources (Byers 2009) to prospects of increasing multilateral cooperation and governance (Dodds 2013; Koivurova 2010; Young 2009), while studies on the politics of indigenous peoples' organizations have highlighted indigenous peoples' continuing struggle for self-determination and political agency (Nicol 2010; Tennberg

2010). Concurrently, recent work has emphasized how both the established ‘Arctic states’ (Medby 2018) and ‘non-Arctic states’ (Bennett 2015; Vääänen and Zimmerbauer 2019) constitute and perform their ‘Arcticness’. While sub-national governments as institutional political actors, and ‘sub-national’ as a context of Arctic politics have started to attract increasing attention more generally (see Holm Olsen and Shadian 2016; Roussel and Payette 2014), it has not been extensively discussed how perceptions of the Arctic region as a specific kind of spatial entity feeds into politics regarding the relations between sub-national and national ‘scales’ of government. Therefore this paper seeks to address how the Arctic region has emerged as a context of, and tool for, such politics.

The ways in which the Arctic region feeds into politics regarding the relations between a sub-national and national government is analyzed by placing specific attention on the Arctic Policy of the State of Alaska. The Alaskan state legislature adopted the policy in 2015, and it is the first comprehensive Arctic Policy in the world to be adopted by a sub-national government. The empirical research questions of this paper are:

1. How have the state–federal state relations been re-contextualized in relation to the Arctic region through the Alaska Arctic Policy?
2. What could be achieved through such a policy in terms of state – federal state relations?

These questions help to bring to the fore the more theoretical stance brought forward in the paper. In this regard, the paper builds on existing literature that has conceptualized regions as social constructs and historically contingent processes, and which has been especially focused on how regions become institutionalized through the process of regionalization (Paasi 1986; Metzger 2013). To take these notions further, the key argument in this paper is that analytical focus should be turned away from attempts to de-construct regionalization processes as ‘wholes’. Instead, if we place attention on specific moments and specific contexts in the process of a region’s ‘becoming’ – such as the Arctic Policy of Alaska – we can get a clearer view of the politics at play in such

processes. This concurrently enables a perspective on how such politics then contribute to and may serve to transform the regionalization process as a ‘whole’. To support this argument, the first empirical research question enables the analysis to unveil through the perspective of state–federal state power relations how state actors in Alaska became subjectified as stakeholders regarding the Arctic region to the extent that the Arctic Policy was put together. The second research question, in turn, helps to reveal how the Arctic region has been utilized through the Alaska Arctic Policy to transform these power relations, and how this agency contributes to the regionalization process of the Arctic itself. Alaska Arctic Policy is thus treated here as a ‘speech act’ (e.g. Austin 1962) that not only enacts the Arctic region, but *concurrently* the political agency through which the state–federal state relations are contested. Thus, it is suggested that if we treat the ‘becoming’ of regions as a series of speech acts that enact the region into being, we can ask why specific actors produce such speech acts, why is it relevant for them to enact the region in specific ways, and how such speech acts potentially affect the trajectory of regionalization. A key contestation here is that if we place the analytical focus on how specific actors become provisionally entangled in a regionalization process, we should be able to illuminate how a region emerges as a context of, and tool for, political contestation between actors.

The paper proceeds by next introducing in more detail the framework of the study. This section positions the theoretical approach of the paper in relation to existing work on regionalization and introduces the empirical research material and how it is utilized in the analysis. The following section focuses on the first empirical research question and discusses how the contested state–federal state power relations became re-contextualized in relation to the Arctic region and thus attached to a specific territorial frame. In the succeeding section, concern is focused on the practical politics invested in the Arctic policy of the State of Alaska that pertain to state–federal state relations, and how the Arctic region is enacted through such politics. The concluding section draws together the insights that the empirical analysis provides in terms of how to approach the politics

involved in regionalization processes, and how such politics illustrate the particularities of these processes.

### **Framework of the study**

Treating regions as enacted entities is based on the established body of work that has conceptualized them as social constructs and historically contingent processes. The approaches that have built on this conceptualization have to a large extent focused on the processes through which specific regions have institutionalized, that is, emerged, stabilized and thus achieved a seeming state of 'singular being' as established parts of our spatial imagination, administrative practices and the day-to-day life in which they are reproduced (MacLeod and Jones 2001; Metzger and Schmitt 2012; Metzger 2013; Paasi 1986, 2010). In a similar vein, some attention has been placed on how regions may also eventually become de-institutionalized (Zimmerbauer, Riukulehto, and Suutari 2017). To come to grips with the variety of actors involved in the enactment of regions, Paasi (2010) has introduced an analytical distinction between what he terms 'soft' and 'hard' region work. 'Soft region work', according to Paasi, refers to institutional advocacy of teachers, entrepreneurs or journalists and 'is based on a division of labour, and the individual advocates can change while the advocacy itself continues' (2010, 2300). 'Hard region work', in turn, refers to 'systematic activism as carried out, for example, by (ethno)regionalists' (Paasi 2010, 2300). While it is more or less evident why (ethno)regionalists mobilize these 'spaces of regionalism' (Jones and MacLeod 2004) as part of their insurgent politics, this paper seeks to focus on an instance in which the enactment of a supranational region becomes *provisionally* implicated in the political agency of 'sub-national' actors. Additionally, this helps to put focus on how this kind of 'region work' may serve to transform a regionalization process, which is an issue that Paasi's (2010) account does not emphasize.

To approach the politics involved in regionalization processes, and how such politics contribute to the (re)shaping of the region, recent work drawing more explicitly from actor–network theory (ANT) provides a valuable perspective. This work has highlighted that the process of regionalization relies on the agency of various actors that serve to ‘singularize’ a specific ‘proposition for regionalization’ as a commonly agreed upon understanding of what a specific region is, that is, what its boundaries and supposed essence are. This approach has been brought forward especially by Jonathan Metzger (2013), who has argued that in order to become institutionalized a proposition for regionalization has to ‘stick’ and ‘travel’, that is, become reproduced by a variety of actors who identify themselves as regional stakeholders around specific territorially framed issue areas or concerns. More specifically, Metzger (2013) suggests that we can understand how regions may become stabilized as taken-for-granted entities by placing concern on three consecutive but potentially overlapping phases: 1) the emergence of a regional public; 2) the stabilization of a regional public; and 3) the institutionalization of the region. In the first phase territorially framed common concerns are articulated, paralleled by regional stakeholder subjectification. The second phase incorporates the formation of a regional stakeholder community and the singularization of a proposition for regionalization. In the third phase, recognized regional spokespersons are created and the proposition for regionalization is delegated into more durable socio-material forms.

While the approach is most applicable in analyzing regionalization processes as ‘wholes’ (from a region’s emergence to its institutionalization), Metzger also provides some valuable clues for an interrogation of the particularities in such processes, and how these particularities may shed light upon the politics involved. For instance, he states that:

As a proposition for regionalization is passed on between actors, we can expect that displacements, translations and negotiations back and forth concerning what the region really is and should be will occur as different actors translate, displace and

modify the proposition in their own way and according to their perspectives and perceived interests at a specific given point in time . . . Seeing that various propositions for regionalization relating to the same geographic area may be in circulation at any given time, and that these propositions are likely to mutate as they are passed along, this means that we often cannot talk of the region in the singular, but must rather refer to it in the multiple – as simultaneously existing, alternative propositions for regionalization that are sometimes (but only sometimes) mutually exclusive. (2013, 1375)

He continues:

Of course, as a proposition, the version of the region being touted by a specific, maybe self-elected, regional spokesperson can always be challenged; and often we will see many different actors scrambling to make a claim to being the legitimate spokesperson of a region, all with their own slightly (or majorly) different propositions for regionalization. (Metzger 2013, 1380)

Even though, as these quotations illustrate, the vocabulary of Metzger highlights the (potentially) contested character of regionalization processes, the attention he places on regionalization processes as ‘wholes’ serves to push the politics at play, and the relevance and role of individual (institutional) actors to the background. This is especially the case if these actors are not the key ‘region builders’ that adopt an active role in initiating and fostering regionalization processes. There is thus a need to cast light precisely on these contingencies, and on the specific moment in which actors ‘translate, displace and modify’ (Metzger 2013, 1375) a proposition for regionalization, thus potentially producing an alternative proposition to be circulated while investing themselves with a claim for regional spokesperson authority. Thus, by selectively drawing on the conceptualization of ‘regions-in-becoming as publics-in-stabilization’, the analysis here focuses on the empirical case of Alaska and the Arctic, with the focus on the state’s Arctic Policy. The empirical case provides a



perspective on how specific actors become entangled in a regionalization process. This entanglement is approached, firstly, through what Metzger (2013) calls stakeholder subjectification, and, secondly, by discussing why and how these ‘stakeholders’ then contribute to the regionalization process in specific ways through ‘region work’ (cf. Paasi 2010) implicated in political agency. Fundamentally, the attempt here is to utilize the vocabulary of Metzger and indicate how it can be used to place focus on the particularities in regionalization processes.

The main body of the empirical material consists of eleven interviews conducted in Alaska between May and June 2016 (Table 1), and of the final report and implementation plan of the Alaska Arctic Policy Commission (AAPC)<sup>1</sup>, published in 2015. Public letters sent by the chairs of the AAPC to key figures in the U.S. federal government provide additional empirical material. The policy documentation and the additional material are used to render visible the ways in which the Arctic region is enacted through them, that is, they are seen as a speech acts that not only enact the region but concurrently the forms of political agency invested in the policy. The interviews provide a deeper outlook on the drivers and manifestations of such agency, as well as on how the Arctic vis-à-vis state–federal state relations are conceived in Alaska. In essence, they help to foreground the ‘Alaskan’ positionality and thus enable the analysis to specifically focus on the process of stakeholder subjectification. The underlying goal of the empirical analysis is to discuss the politics at play in regionalization processes by unveiling how the Arctic region has emerged as a context of, and tool for, political contestation regarding state–federal state power relations in the Alaskan context.

[Table 1 here]

### **Alaska, state–federal state relations and regional stakeholder subjectification**

In his discussion on the emergence of a ‘regional public’ as a phase in regionalization processes, Metzger (2013, 1378) – by drawing on Marres (2005) – uses the term public ‘to come to grasp with

the heterogeneous and potentially geographically dispersed assemblages of actors that become attached or caught up with a specific issue or problem.’ He continues that a *regional* public is not only made up of ‘laypeople’, but may also

consist of all sorts of geographically dispersed networks and organizations, including (but not limited to) business promotion networks, government agencies and cultural associations, who become topologically rather than topographically attached or caught up in a regionalization process generated by the issue—either by way of their own deliberate actions or commitments, or as the consequence of the purposeful or unwitting activity of others. (Metzger 2013, 1378)

The formation of a regional public entails the establishment of regional stakeholder subjectivities. In this regard ‘stakeholderness’ can be seen as ‘the subject position through which an actor concerns itself to “have a stake” in and therefore become committed to the fate of a specific entity’ (Metzger 2013, 1379) and should be understood as ‘the achievement of a process of “learning to be affected”’ (Marres 2005, 62).

While the theorization provided by Metzger is in itself convincing, he provides scant empirical evidence on how such processes unfold in practice when it comes to individual (institutional) actors. What remains to be elaborated is how, exactly, specific actors ‘learn to be affected’ by issues that are framed in regional terms, especially if we consider a situation in which the region in question has to some extent already been institutionalized. Further, if we consider a situation in which an actor does not get ‘caught up’ in a regionalization process as an ally for the ‘proposition for regionalization’ being circulated by other actors, but raises opposition against it, how can we approach the process of stakeholder subjectification in such a case? This, it is suggested, depends on who the other actors are that have adopted a specific ‘proposition for regionalization’, how such a proposition contradicts the interests of the actors raising the opposition, and what the established power relations are between the actors. This point of view is elaborated by looking into how state

actors in Alaska ‘learned to be affected’ by issues that were articulated in terms of the Arctic region. To understand this process, one has to understand not only the context of Alaska, and the contested nature of state–federal state relations, but also how these relations have been re-contextualized in relation to (and with the help of) the Arctic region.

It needs to be emphasized that the relationship between the state government of Alaska and the federal government of the United States has long been contested by Alaskan political actors (Haycox 2016). This contestation can be traced back to the times before Alaska gained statehood in 1959, and it can be seen as a key constituent of the ‘Alaskan’ identity narrative and political discourse in Alaska. The statehood project itself hinged on the issue of economic self-determination, which the proponents of statehood argued Alaska was deprived of under its status as a United States territory (see Gruening 1955). The controversies that have unfolded since statehood was granted, which have centred on contestation over the role of the federal government in Alaska, have typically been sparked by the issues of the management of federal land (roughly 60 per cent of Alaska is federally owned) and federal environmental regulation in Alaska (see Haycox 2016). These issues also resonate with strong anti-federalism, something which has been a key feature of political struggle in America in general (Jonas 2002).

In the Alaskan context the role of the federal government has been questioned particularly (but not exhaustively) because – since the discovery of oil in the Prudhoe Bay area on the Arctic Ocean coast in 1968 – the economy of Alaska has revolved extensively around the oil industry. In fact, it has generated roughly 85 per cent of the state’s annual revenue, indicating the dependence of the state government on this single economic sector. Yet, even though the importance of the oil industry in Alaska has been fundamental for the state’s economy, its relevance to the national economy of the United States is quite marginal. In fact, the combined GDP of Alaska was the fifth smallest of all the states within the U.S. in 2016. Furthermore, Alaska has the second smallest population in the U.S., which means that the federal government only has a small amount of

political accountability (to Alaskans) when it comes to its policies that affect Alaska. This is indicated, for instance, in the United States House of Representatives in which the number of seats per state is apportioned by population. Alaska has one seat, while, for example, California as the most populous state has 53.

Economic irrelevance and small population have manifested themselves as lack of political leverage for Alaskan state actors with regard to the federal government. At the same time, national policies that have affected Alaska have often been shaped by the popular perception of Alaska in the contiguous United States. This perception itself has been continuously articulated through the contradictory imaginaries of natural wilderness and economic opportunity. While the juxtaposition of both of these imaginaries has been heightened by the American frontier narrative, in which Alaska is imagined as the 'Last Frontier' (Kollin 2001), the imaginary of economic opportunity in particular has been enthusiastically promoted by Alaskan state actors. Indeed, as Ganapathy (2013, 105) has noted, 'within an Alaskan context, oil development is framed as a matter of "states' rights" and efforts at wilderness protection are often viewed as misguided or the work of "non-Alaskans."' The relevance of these competing imaginaries of Alaska is exacerbated by the geographic distance of the state from the contiguous United States. Together, these issues combine to make a position that is fluctuating but also marginalized for Alaska and its state representatives in the national context.

In 2015, the United States assumed the two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council (AC). The AC was founded in 1996 and is the main institutional body for international cooperation in the Arctic context. It has played a central role in the regionalization process of the Arctic as an international political region, predominately focused on the issue area of environmental and scientific cooperation (see Keskitalo 2004). Additionally, AC working groups, especially through assessments such as the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, have been integral in attaching climate change to the region as a territorially framed concern. The U.S. chairmanship of the AC was a

culmination point for the growing attention that the Arctic region had acquired in the U.S. federal government, as exemplified by the Bush administration's Arctic policy statement of January 2009 and the national strategy for the Arctic region produced by the Obama administration in 2013. For Alaska, the U.S. chairmanship of the AC meant one crucial thing: new-found national and international attention, stemming from the fact that large parts of Alaska fall within the Arctic region by any definition. This can also be seen as a key factor behind Alaska's Arctic Policy and as a major ingredient in the process of stakeholder subjectification:

I think the primary purpose [of the Alaska Arctic Policy] was an understanding by a couple of legislators that the U.S. was going to be chairing the Arctic Council, and the last time the U.S. chaired the Arctic Council, the state had no involvement, didn't have a policy, wasn't thinking about it, doing it, wasn't involved, so all of the decision-making was in the hands of the federal government. So I think this time around, not just this time around, but there's been a, sort of a building interest around the world and in the United States on the Arctic, and so, because of that, because of the fact that the U.S. was assuming chairmanship of the Arctic Council the legislature, these couple of members of legislature decided, we need to do something about it and make sure we have our own policies implemented, that we're acting upon those policies, and that we have something to contribute to this broader effort. (I-4)

I think the Alaska Arctic Policy Commission and the drafting of the document was a response to federal Arctic Policy, certainly. I think to some extent there was an element of frustration on the Alaska side with their level of input into the federal process, and especially with the growing interest and growing focus on the Arctic from outside, and the federal government's growing outreach. The federal government has become, you know, quite visible in terms of Arctic policy. (I-10)

These quotations indicate that a key driver of the Alaska Arctic Policy was the increased federal and international attention devoted to the region, which was intensified by the U.S. chairmanship of the AC. Still, this raises the question as to why it is relevant (for the state government) to ‘contribute to this broader effort’ or to respond to the federal Arctic Policy. In other words, what is seen to be *at stake* for ‘Alaska’ when it comes to federal or international Arctic policies?

In 1984, the federal government of the United States adopted an official definition of the ‘Arctic boundary’ in its Arctic Research and Policy Act (ARPA) (Figure 1). The definition is still in use. While this has been a relatively insignificant territorial delineation, as it does not constitute any administrative unit, notable here is that most of the oil and gas extraction in Alaska takes place within this federally defined Arctic region. Furthermore, as the production volumes within the established fields have declined, the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas, together with the federally owned Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska (NPR–A) (both of which also fall within the Arctic region), have proven the most promising areas for future extraction. It is also noteworthy here that the state’s jurisdiction only covers a strip of three nautical miles from the coastline, which means that most of the projected offshore fields in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas would be under federal jurisdiction. The issue of whether or not, and to what extent, to open these areas to oil and gas companies has been strongly debated both in Alaska and in the national context (Ganapathy 2013; Haycox 2016).

[Figure 1 here]

The AAPC was put together in 2012 and was founded on the recommendations of the Alaska Northern Waters Task Force that was operational between 2010 and 2012. The AAPC was established to outline the interests of the state in relation to the Arctic region, and to define the position of the state with regard to other key actors, especially the federal government, through the drafting of an Arctic Policy for the state. Within the policy process, the ANWTF and the AAPC adopted the imaginary of the Arctic as an economic frontier (see Steinberg, Tasch, and Gerhardt

2015). This imaginary in the Alaskan context is in part based on the existing economic relevance of, especially, the Prudhoe Bay area for the state's economy. Additionally, it also draws from the more recent framing of the wider circumpolar Arctic region as holding vast potential in terms of resource development and 'global' logistics – potential that is perceived to be realizable due to climate change. During the policy making process, it became evident that there was a mismatch in how state and federal actors perceived the Arctic. The contrasting viewpoints of the state and federal governments were often brought up in the interviews:

I think that the state sees [the Arctic] as far as, you know, potential for revenue, economic development. The federal government has this perennial debate between environmental protection and economic development that, you know, they're really at the whims of other, other forces, the industry and the environmentalists. So there's no question that the state sees it very differently than the federal government, and I think also to some extent, the state government is equally frustrated by the role of the federal government here, the oversight of the federal government. In my view this, and it changes, not dramatically, but it changes administration to administration. I mean we presently have with the Obama administration, greater, or opened a greater influence by the environmentalists. (I-8)

You've got a bunch of people in national capitals that haven't the faintest freaking idea of what's going on out here, okay. And then you got the people out here who are trying to make a living. That's the difference between Alaska Arctic policy and Washington Arctic policy that exist today. (I-7)

Even though the U.S. federal government has been seen to approach the Arctic region with ambivalence (Steinberg 2014), the Obama administration's emphasis on addressing climate change and environmental issues, together with the AC chairmanship also meant greater attention being paid to the region. It was seen in the policy-making circles on the state level in Alaska that the way

in which the Arctic region was perceived within and enacted through the policies of the federal government – with the focus on environmental issues and climate change – needed to be addressed. This played into the position assumed by the AAPC – and the Alaskan state legislature which adopted the state’s Arctic policy – which was based on the time-tested position of political actors in Alaska viewing the federal government as ‘overreaching’ its position with respect to policies that affect Alaska (Thomas and Boyer 2016). As an example of this, one interviewee noted, that ‘we blame the federal government for the failure of Shell to continue their operations in the Arctic’ (I-2).

Based on this discussion the state actors in Alaska subjectified themselves as stakeholders regarding the Arctic region first by attaching the state’s economic future to it, and second, because the growing federal attention on the region was seen to contradict this vision. In this way, the renewed federal attention on the Arctic region re-contextualized the contested relationship between the two governments. In light of this, stakeholder subjectification has been a gradual process, in which the already contested issues were re-framed in ‘Arctic’ terms – pertaining to a certain territorial space called the Arctic. The contestation culminated in the issue of the economic self-determination of the state and on the role of the federal government in potentially impeding its realization. When it comes to the Arctic region, and federal Arctic policies, the perceived stake for Alaska is thus nothing less than the economic future and self-determination of the state. However, the increasing federal and international attention on Alaska was not only seen as a negative phenomenon as it was also seen as an opening for political participation and influence beyond the general capacities of Alaskan actors on a national and international scale. The next section discusses in more detail how this opening was utilized, and how the politics involved contribute to contested state–federal state power relations and potentially the regionalization process of the Arctic itself.



## **Politics of the Alaska Arctic Policy**

### ***Contesting the supposed essence of the Arctic and proposing an alternative***

While Metzger (2013) highlights the uncertainty and mutability of the trajectory towards regionalization by emphasizing that regionalization processes are prone to contestation, his approach, and empirical examples, say little regarding *why* specific actors engage in this contestation. In other words, even though his approach implies that there are politics involved in determining and influencing the outcomes and transformations of regionalization processes, he does not cast more specific attention on what kinds of politics may be at play. This is understandable as the purpose of his conceptual model is to understand regionalization processes through the notion of institutionalization, which directs the focus on the ‘fusion of interests’ that is necessary for a proposition for regionalization to ‘singularize’ rather than placing concern on the potential conflict of interests that becomes attached to the region by specific actors. The politics involved in shaping regionalization processes are, of course, context bound, and the process of stakeholder subjectification discussed above in the context of Alaska and the Arctic provides a fruitful entry point into discussing these politics. This is precisely because it is clear that the ‘Alaskan’ interests in ‘the Arctic’ are closely tied to the contested state–federal state power relations, which, in turn, culminate in the contradiction regarding how the Arctic is perceived within the ‘Alaskan’ and the federal context.

One way to approach the politics involved in the (re)shaping of regionalization processes is to follow Allen and Cochrane (2007), who provide a useful discussion on ‘regional assemblages, politics and power’. By conceptualizing regions in relational terms as constituted through a geographically dispersed assemblage of actors, they assert that in such a configuration

the practices of power may be less about the visible machinery of decision-making and rather more to do with the displacement of authority, the renegotiation of

inducements, the manipulation of geographical scales and the mobilizations of interests to construct politically meaningful spatial imaginaries. (Allen and Cochrane 2007, 1171)

To approach these practices of power, the discussion by Metzger and Schmitt (2012, 269) regarding regional spokespersonship is illustrative:

By producing discourse in the name of the region and in the name of the interests of the region, a regional territorial spokesperson claims status as a clearing house of regionality and takes upon itself the right to formulate the interests of the region and the power to define what does and does not belong to the region (Latour 2005, 31), hence both attempting to position itself as the legitimate embodiment of the voice of the region and, at the same time, articulating a particular version of the supposed essence of the region.

By drawing upon these notions, it is possible to discuss how claims for regional spokespersonship, and the associated articulation of a particular version of the supposed essence of the region are constitutive of the politically meaningful spatial imaginaries implicated in practices of power. If considered in the context of the empirical case here, the empirical material provides an ample number of examples regarding how ‘Alaska’ is positioned as a ‘regional spokesperson’ regarding the Arctic:

Alaska is America’s Arctic, and the Arctic is a dynamic region that is changing rapidly. We cannot let the perceptions of others – who might not understand its value or its people – determine Alaska’s future. Alaska’s future in the Arctic demands leadership by Alaskans. (AAPC 2015a, 2)

Whether it’s the broader effort internationally, or at the federal level, Alaska really should be in the driver’s seat in helping the federal government set Arctic policy

because, as I said earlier, Alaska is the only reason the United States is an Arctic nation. Most folks in the lower 48 have no earthly idea what the Arctic is about, what goes on. They don't have the same weather conditions, they don't have the same light and darkness conditions, they don't have the same wild resources that we have. There are so many differences between Alaska and the rest of the country that it makes perfect sense for us to have a policy that helps guide the federal government in their decision-making. (I-4)

As indicated by these quotations, it is evident that claims for regional spokespersonship are formulated especially in relation to the U.S. federal government. Through these claims state actors in Alaska have positioned themselves – or more precisely they have positioned ‘Alaska’ and thus themselves as representatives of Alaska – as the legitimate embodiments of the voice of the Arctic region<sup>2</sup>. This is done by drawing from a territorial argument and emphasizing that it is Alaska that makes the United States an Arctic nation, which is why ‘Alaskans’ should have an important role to play regarding decision-making concerning the Arctic<sup>3</sup>. This claim for regional spokespersonship is dovetailed by the articulation of a particular version of the supposed essence of the region, which constitutes an alternative ‘proposition for regionalization’ regarding the Arctic. This is illustratively put in a letter sent by the chairs of the AAPC to Admiral Papp (who held the position of a Special Representative for the Arctic in the U.S. Department of State between 2014 and 2017) and Ambassador Balton (who was the Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials during the U.S. AC chairmanship period):

While we can all agree on the need to identify the “national imperative” that will motivate all Americans in supporting Arctic endeavors, your recent comments on this being a “moral obligation to protect the region and preserve it for future generations” dismisses the fact that Alaskans have been doing just that, and quite well, for many decades. We already have that moral obligation, because the American Arctic is our

home. We are not supportive of locking up the Arctic or designating additional wilderness areas; Alaskans should have access to the development lands that we were promised. Instead, we hope you will focus on the important goal of supporting a vibrant economy through resource development, a simplified permitting regime and a positive investment arena, which has the potential to deliver social benefits while responding to the need for a healthy environment. (AAPC 2014, 2)

This shows that the transformation of the supposed essence and interests of the region – or the territorial concerns that are seen to define them – within the federal government has emerged as a key ingredient in the political agency invested in the Arctic Policy of Alaska. By claiming the status of a regional spokesperson, and by positioning ‘Alaskans’ as the ones who can define what the ‘real’ interests of the region are, the main objective is to transform the ways in which the Arctic region is enacted through the policies of the federal government. Importantly, it is not only emphasized that the Arctic should be seen as an economic space in its own right, but is a space in need of economic development ‘for the people’:

We are concerned that Alaskans will not be able to develop our economy in a way that will allow us to respond to, and prosper, in the face of change. All levels of government can work together to empower Alaskans to adapt and promote resilient communities. We believe that people should come first. (AAPC 2015a, 3)

Climate change is a global challenge and Alaska’s citizens and its economy should not bear the consequences of mitigation. (AAPC 2015a, 10)

Through these kinds of notions, a connection is made between federal ‘Arctic’ policies that tackle the issue of climate change and the negative effects these policies have for the day-to-day survival of people in Alaska under conditions brought about by climate change. In this way the aim is to make the federal government accountable for those of its policies that address the Arctic but end up

affecting Alaska, the people living in Alaska, and, lest it be forgotten, the revenues of the state. By highlighting that ‘people should come first’, the popular perception of the Arctic as first and foremost an environmental space is displaced. This is to transform the criteria through which the Arctic region as a territorial object of policy is imagined within and enacted through the policies of the federal government. This is done by claiming that the Arctic is about the people that live there and, therefore, the federal Arctic policies should enact this vision by allowing increased drilling for oil on federally owned lands and in the seas adjacent to Alaska; by directing the revenues of such activity towards the state; and furthermore by channeling federal funding for infrastructure and other projects in these ‘Arctic’ areas to support economic development ‘for the people’.

In addition, by highlighting that ‘climate change is a global challenge’, the solution to climate change is placed ‘out of reach’ for federal Arctic policies. Territorially framed ‘Arctic’ policies are thus portrayed as more or less futile regarding the broader effort of fighting climate change while simultaneously having concrete (negative) repercussions for Alaskans. This lays a claim that policies with specific territorial (Arctic) focus are inadequate in addressing such a ‘global’ issue, therefore climate change should not be seen as a ‘regional’ concern to be tackled through ‘Arctic’ policies. Put together, by contesting the supposed essence of the Arctic region and by producing an alternative ‘proposition for regionalization’ in which economic development for the people of the Arctic would become the key territorial issue to be focused upon, the Alaskan state actors are utilizing ‘the Arctic’ to influence federal policies that affect Alaska<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Constructing spaces of engagement: making the proposition ‘stick’ and ‘travel’***

Based on the above discussion, it is apparent that the transformation of the way in which the Arctic region is perceived within the federal government is a key dimension of political agency invested in the Arctic Policy of Alaska. However, such a transformation has little chance of being implemented if the imaginary it incorporates is not successfully disseminated. In other words, the ‘proposition for regionalization’ forwarded through the Alaska Arctic Policy needs to ‘travel’ to ‘stick’. As the

quotation in the previous section from a letter addressed to Admiral Papp and Ambassador Balton demonstrates, this effect has been worked towards through direct correspondence. However, it is also notable that the Arctic Policy of Alaska incorporates a wider strategy to engage the whole ‘assemblage’ of actors that have a direct and even indirect role to play in the governance of the region. This manifests itself as network-building, or in the building of ‘spaces of engagement’ (Cox 1998), and also resonates with Ash Amin’s (2004, 36) often-cited assertion that ‘local advocacy . . . must be increasingly about exercising nodal power and aligning networks at large in one’s own advantage’ since ‘there is no definable regional territory to rule over’. Such agency is especially apparent in the implementation plan of the policy in which not only multiple state and federal agencies, but also local, private and non-governmental actors and organizations are addressed and thus tied to it on the practical level. The implementation plan for the policy is based on four efforts:

- 1) The state of Alaska will promote economic development;
- 2) The state of Alaska will address the response capacity gap in Alaska’s Arctic;
- 3) The state of Alaska will support healthy communities;
- 4) The state of Alaska will strengthen Alaska’s Arctic science and research.

These efforts are divided into 32 recommendations for action, which identify the leading agency and partner actors. Sixteen different departments of Alaska state administration are indicated as leaders of the efforts, while altogether 45 federal agencies and 35 state agencies are listed as partners. The category of partners incorporates the further sub-category of ‘other’, which includes international organizations such as the AC, non-governmental organizations such as indigenous peoples’ organizations, private sector actors such as Alaska Native Corporations, and representatives from academia. These dimensions were also articulated in the interviews:

Very much [the policy] is a framework for how should state agencies, the government, state government approach all these things. And that’s number one. Second, it’s a

message to the nation with, with all due respect, we acknowledge that you have a national strategy and an implementation plan too, but there's an important role for the state of Alaska in this. And it was a huge message to the international, kind of Arctic community, circumpolar Arctic that a sub-national government is developing its own Arctic policy . . . And I mean, you know, a fifth component is the general public. (I-1)

The references to the international 'Arctic community' and the general public deserve further attention. First, 'Arctic' governance and policy-making are not merely 'intra-national' issues, as the AC in particular serves as an established collaborative platform that actively shapes national policies through various assessments produced by its working groups (Wormbs 2015). Further, the political relevance of the AC in Arctic governance has increased, especially since different multilateral and legally binding agreements have been negotiated under its auspices. This international scope can be seen as a key factor behind Alaska's re-joining the Northern Forum (NF). The NF itself was established in 1991 as a collaborative platform for northern sub-national governments. Evolving in parallel with the AC, the NF holds an observer status within the Council, but was denied permanent participant status when the AC was established in 1996 (permanent participant status was restricted to indigenous peoples' organizations). Alaska resigned from the NF in 2011 due to a lack of political will, but re-joined in 2016 in parallel with the newly adopted Alaska Arctic Policy and the United States' chairmanship of the AC. The potential utility of the NF was highlighted in the interviews:

If all sub-national governments participated in Northern Forum it would be a more effective body. And if its only focus was then, you know, adding value to Arctic Council work, and making sure that all Arctic Council work was down-scaled and informed by regional, sub-national governments, that would be amazing. I mean that's the missing element. (I-1)

The NF context shows how ‘sub-national’ actors have engaged in building an institutional ‘space of engagement’. This indicates that the establishment of international ‘regional’ collaborative platforms (e.g. the AC) that shape national policies, and thereby affect also the ‘spaces of dependence’ of ‘sub-national’ governments, can be responded to by the ‘sub-national’ actors in constructing transnational cooperative networks (e.g. the NF). This reflects what Soldatos (1993, 46) has termed ‘sub-national paradiplomacy’, which refers to ‘direct international activity by sub-national actors supporting, complementing, correcting, duplicating or challenging the nation-state’s diplomacy’.

While the NF context is portrayed as a channel through which to influence the work of the AC, and thus indirectly the national ‘Arctic’ policies that affect Alaska, there are similar attempts to utilize the U.S. chairmanship of the AC to influence the agenda of the AC itself. This is facilitated by seeking to increase the presence of state representatives as parts of the U.S. AC delegation (see AAPC 2013), but also by attempts to directly affect the priorities of the U.S. chairmanship agenda. The latter is indicated in the letter addressed to Admiral Papp and Ambassador Balton in 2014, and in which the Canadian chairmanship agenda from 2013 to 2015 that attempted to put emphasis on economic development is highlighted:

In addition, your recent speeches . . . are concerning; you both identified climate change and ocean stewardship as being on the forefront of the U.S. chairmanship agenda. Continuing some major initiative(s) related to Canada’s Arctic Council chairmanship theme of “development for the people of the North” came across as not very important to the State Department. We believe that jobs and economic development for the people that actually live in the Arctic is a high priority and not an afterthought for Alaskans. (AAPC 2014, 2)

In addition to the attempts to disseminate the understanding of the Arctic as a space that is in need for economic development ‘for the people’ within the federal government and the AC, the



awareness of the general public of Arctic issues is likewise highlighted as impacting national Arctic policies. As the ideas of regional consciousness and identity have been focal justifications for regionalist movements that have contested territorial power relations within states, in the empirical context here the aspiration to create *national* consciousness regarding the Arctic is illustrative of attempts to exert indirect influence on the federal government and its Arctic policies:

Nationally though, the question is, has always been, that we somehow needed to get the rest of the country to realize we're an Arctic nation . . . Your average citizen in Ohio or Texas doesn't think the U.S. is an Arctic nation . . . And so, to get any sort of national momentum behind something, you know, in the Arctic is actually difficult, unless it's about environmentalism or something like that. (I-11)

The aspiration to generate national consciousness regarding the Arctic in order to influence federal policies resonates with how, for example, NGOs attempt to mobilize publics around specific issues (see Barnett 2008). That a region (i.e. the Arctic) has emerged as a context in relation to which mobilization of publics is done, and how this complements the attempts to engage federal agencies and international platforms in general, affirms that the 'regional assemblage' (Allen and Cochrane 2007) is being mobilized as a 'space of engagement' (Cox 1998). As the governance of regions and decision-making regarding them is not 'endogenous' to the region (as a territory) but often relies on an (geographically dispersed) assemblage of actors that enact the region through their practices, this evidences how power can be regarded as 'power to' engage this assemblage of actors to work towards the interests of the 'network-builders'. In this sense the 'regional assemblage' is mobilized through the Alaska Arctic Policy as a channel through which to exert influence beyond the conventional capacities of Alaskan actors. The federal attention on the Arctic region – together with the AC and the NF – is thus also mobilized to overcome the more rigid jurisdictional and institutional arrangements that have often marginalized the efforts of Alaskan state actors to influence federal decision-making. In such politics the attempt to complement the generally held

perception of the Arctic as an environmental space with one that favours economic development is central. In other words, by making the ‘proposition for regionalization’ as formulated in the Alaska Arctic Policy ‘stick’ and ‘travel’, the Alaskan state-actors have sought to overcome their marginalized position. This, in turn, can have implications to the regionalization process of the Arctic itself. An interviewee provided a perspective that this work had been somewhat successful:

One of the things that the [Alaska Arctic Policy] Commission did was it actually shaped the national strategy on the Arctic. We had weekly phone calls with the president’s group, the executive steering committee, and we worked together on a lot of things. When they first put out their preliminary NSAR, the word people wasn’t even included, it was about oceans, it was about governance, it was about ecosystems. And, if you look now on their website, their top three priorities now, they have economic development for people in the Arctic. That wasn’t something they had ever considered, because to them the Arctic was just this wasteland . . . We were really successful in reminding them that a lot of people actually live there. (I-11)

Even though this indicates that the Arctic Policy of Alaska has had some success in harnessing the federal attention placed on the Arctic to facilitate the ‘Alaskan’ interests by making the proposition stick and travel and thereby shaping federal policies that affect Alaska, this success is at best provisional:

The contradiction though, I think between the state and the federal government, is that [the Arctic] is a popular thing right now, so the federal government is involved because it’s in the media and there is bright light shining on it. But they’ll soon forget and we’ll go back to where we are, I think, I fear. I hope I’m wrong but I think that’s a big problem . . . So the contradiction is we do this every day, we’ll continue to do it every day and you wonder if the federal government is going to remember that Alaska is even a state in a few years. (I-4)

## Conclusions

This paper has sought to discuss the role of selected institutional actors within a regionalization process. This has been done by primarily drawing from the conceptual model developed by Jonathan Metzger (2013). While his conceptualization of 'regions-in-becoming as publics-in-stabilization' offers analytical handles to approach the varied processes at play in regionalization, the framework serves to fade out, rather than foreground the actual politics at play in such processes. This, it is argued, is due to the focus the conceptualization places on regionalization processes as 'wholes', which inevitably leaves the particularities of such processes under-examined. To elaborate on this work, this paper has sought to illuminate these particularities inherent in the processes of regions by placing concern on how a supranational region emerges as a context of, and tool for, political contestation over power relations between different 'levels' of government.

Based on the analysis presented in this paper, the way in which a region emerges as a context of contestation can be approached through the process of stakeholder subjectification in which the conflict of interest between actors is re-articulated in a regional territorial frame (cf. Metzger 2013). When we, in turn, focus our attention to how the region becomes a political tool in such a situation, we can place emphasis on how the transformation of the territorial concerns that define the supposed essence of the region emerges as a key political strategy to shape the actions of others. These others are the 'assemblage' of actors involved in the governance of the region (cf. Allen and Cochrane 2007), and their relevance is highlighted as 'nodes' in networks of relationships through which a 'proposition for regionalization' that displaces other propositions can be made to 'travel' and thus 'stick'. Through such a process, 'peripheral' actors in particular may find opportunities to have an influence over governance practices way beyond their normal capacities. Concurrently, this can also affect the trajectory of regionalization by transforming what the perceived essence and interests of the region are. Still, it is also apparent that this influence can be short-lived, since it

depends on whether the attention can be maintained of those who are attempted to be engaged to pursue certain goals.

Based on these notions, we can see why specific actors adopt and promote alternative ‘propositions for regionalization’, thus potentially affecting the trajectory of a regionalization process. Of course, to be able to understand more comprehensively whether this trajectory is ultimately transformed, we would have to follow more extensively how these propositions travel and thus potentially stick.

This would be a vast task to undertake, especially in the Arctic context where the number of actors involved in ‘region work’ is extensive, to say the least. It is thus inevitable that when focus is placed on the particularities of a process, the amount of work required to unpack the process as a ‘whole’ through these particularities gets considerably more extensive. Nevertheless, the key argument here is that while not overlooking regionalization processes as wholes, we should be more attentive about how specific actors and institutions become entangled in them: how they learn to be affected by regionally framed issues, thus subjectifying themselves as stakeholders regarding a region; what kinds of political responses such subjectification induces; and how these ‘regional’ politics then contribute to the overall regionalization process. A key notion in this respect is, that even though this ‘region work’ implicated in political agency would not transform the regionalization process as a ‘whole’, it still contributes to the overall enactment of the region. Simultaneously, it can be effective in specific ways, even if these effects would only be provisional. By placing concern on these issues it is possible to place further attention on the particularities in regionalization processes, and how these particularities illustrate the political dynamics involved in the shaping and re-shaping of particular regions, and our understanding(s) of them.

## Notes

1. The AAPC consisted of ten legislative members, sixteen public members and six ex-officio members. The Commission was co-chaired by Senator Lesil McGuire (Republican) and Representative Bob Herron (Democrat).
2. Such claims for regional spokespersonship exhibit an interesting point of contrast regarding the continuing calls of indigenous peoples' organizations (IPOs) for increased self-determination based on their claim to represent the 'local' voices of 'the Arctic'. In fact, when asked what the Arctic means to Alaska, a representative of an IPO stressed that 'those in the southern part of the state, I think, very many of them, even though they live in Alaska, are somewhat ignorant of what life in the Arctic is like. You'll find in the big city of Anchorage that the general population has very little understanding of what the Arctic is except that it's a place where there's some oil development and, there's cold and a lot of sun in the summer, and a lot of darkness in the winter' (I-6).
3. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the AAPC adopted the federally defined 'Arctic boundary' as a basis for its work (Figure 1). This federally defined Arctic boundary differs from the generally perceived boundary of the Arctic in Alaska, especially by including the Aleutian Islands in the region. Furthermore, the Arctic Council has also drawn multiple boundaries for the Arctic region. As the boundaries set by the AC incorporate larger parts of Alaska into the Arctic than the federal definition, it is telling that the AAPC nevertheless decided to choose the federally defined Arctic boundary as the basis for its work.
4. It needs to be noted that Alaskan actors as well have deployed the Arctic in the past as a geographical frame of reference when promoting the development of natural resources in 'the Arctic' to the national audience. This is especially indicated in the article 'The Day of the Arctic Has Come' by the former governor of Alaska, Walter Hickel, published in Reader's Digest in 1973.

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Table 1. Interviewees and their positions.

Interviewee	Position
I-1	Director of a non-profit organization specialized in Arctic issues
I-2	Academic, Arctic governance expert
I-3	Academic, expert in Arctic governance and international relations
I-4	State official, Arctic policy expert
I-5	Academic, expertise in history
I-6	Indigenous peoples' organization representative
I-7	Former Alaskan elected official
I-8	Academic, expert on indigenous issues
I-9	Representative of an Alaska Native corporation
I-10	Indigenous peoples' organization representative
I-11	State official, Arctic policy expert

### Arctic Boundary as defined by the Arctic Research and Policy Act (ARPA)

All United States and foreign territory north of the Arctic Circle and all United States territory north and west of the boundary formed by the Porcupine, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers; including the Arctic Ocean and the Beaufort, Bering and Chukchi Seas; and the Aleutian chain.<sup>1</sup>



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Map author: Allison Gaylord, Nuna Technologies. May 27, 2009.

1. The Aleutian chain boundary is demarcated by the 'Contiguous zone' limit of 24-nautical miles.

Figure 1. Official federal definition of the boundary of the Arctic region.