

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Models of Governance

Why are some countries better governed than others? This venerable question has innumerable possible answers. Variation in the quality of governance may be attributed to geography, economics, class and ethnic group dynamics, social capital, and political culture. It is also presumably affected by geopolitical factors, by political leadership, and by diverse historical legacies.

In this book we focus on the role of political institutions – that is, *government* – in providing good governance. Other factors (societal, cultural, geopolitical, or contingent) lie in the background. Within the realm of politics, we focus on democratic regimes. We understand a country to be democratic when multiparty competition is in place. (We are *not* interested, therefore, in the role of political institutions in maintaining or undermining democracy, a subject that has received a good deal of attention from scholars.)¹

Why are many democracies plagued by corruption and ineptitude, while others manage to implement policies effectively and efficiently? Why do some democracies suffer from inefficient markets and low levels of investment while others enjoy low transaction costs, high levels of capital investment, and strong economic growth? Why are rates of morbidity, mortality, illiteracy, and other aspects of human well-being depressingly high in some democracies and impressively low

¹ Cheibub (2007), Linz (1990, 1994), Linz and Stepan (1978), Stepan and Skach (1993).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in others? More specifically, what effect do various political institutions have on the quality of governance in a democracy?

In this introductory chapter we lay out the currently dominant view on this subject, which we call *decentralist*, and set forth our own contrasting view, which we call *centripetal*. We then proceed to elaborate the causal argument underlying the centripetal theory of governance.

DECENTRALISM

Most recent work on the question of democratic governance is implicitly or explicitly decentralist. Contemporary writers and commentators usually assume that government works best when political institutions diffuse power broadly among multiple, independent bodies. This is the model of good government that most Americans embrace. It is also the model that most academics, NGOs, and international organizations (such as the World Bank) have adopted in recent years.

The decentralist paradigm is by no means new. In Western thought, the idea may be traced back to early attempts to constrain the abuse of political authority. Commonly cited exemplars include Greece and Rome in the classical age and the Italian, Swiss, and Dutch polities in the early modern era.² But the theory of decentralism was not fully formed as a self-conscious theory of governance until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the wake of the English Revolution, a cavalcade of scribblers and activists including William Blackstone, Lord Bolingbroke, Major Cartwright, Edward Coke, William Godwin, James Harrington, John Locke, John Milton, Robert Molesworth, Joseph Priestley, Algernon Sidney, and John Trenchard – collectively referred to as the Old Whig, Country, Commonwealth, or Dissenting tradition – formulated various facets of the decentralist model.³ It was the English state, as a matter of fact and a matter of principle, that supplied a primary touchstone for these writers – even those, like Montesquieu and Rousseau, who resided abroad.⁴

² Gordon (1999).

³ Brewer (1976), Foord (1964), Gunn (1969), Kramnick (1968), Robbins (1959/1968), Vile (1967/1998).

⁴ In principle, these writers were largely agreed. But there was some considerable difference of opinion as to how principle matched up with reality. Many of the aforementioned writers were highly critical of the actual workings of English government

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Models of Governance*

3

All this began to change after the American Revolution, a revolution motivated by Old Whig principles. As the British polity became increasingly centralized throughout the course of the nineteenth century, a new democracy appeared, embodying the decentralist ideal in a more conspicuous fashion. The Constitution of the United States wrote decentralist principles into the country's fundamental law, and the *Federalist Papers* provided an interpretive catechism. If ever a country was founded self-consciously on the decentralist ideal, that country was the United States. Not surprisingly, in the subsequent centuries and up to the present time the normative ideal of a de-concentrated, decentralized polity has been associated with the theory and practice of the American Constitution.⁵ So it was that the decentralist ideal, an inheritance of political thought in England, gained a new home in its former colony.⁶

Among Old Whigs perhaps the most revered writer of all was William Blackstone, whose *Commentaries on the Laws of England* educated generations of British jurists. Blackstone's interpretation of the English constitution would endure for several centuries (until Bagehot's *English Constitution*, to be discussed later). The key feature of this interpretation was the "mixed" constitution, an idea derived from Aristotle. Blackstone explains:

The legislature of the kingdom is entrusted to three distinct powers entirely independent of each other, first, the King; secondly, the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, which is an aristocratical assembly of persons selected for their piety, their birth, their wisdom, their valour, or their property; and thirdly, the House of Commons, freely chosen by the people from among themselves, which makes it a kind of democracy; as this aggregate body, actuated by different springs, and attentive to different interests, composes the British Parliament, and has the supreme disposal of every thing; there can no inconvenience

in the post-Revolutionary era. The dominance of the Crown and of the "Court" party was thought to compromise the formal principles of balance, separation, and member independence. It was alleged by these writers that the Commons was controlled by corrupt factions, which extended royal munificence to those who obligingly supported its policies on the floor of the Commons, and whose insidious influence threatened to upset the delicate balance of center and periphery.

⁵ Switzerland, along with pre-modern polities in England, the Netherlands, and northern Italy, are also occasional reference points.

⁶ Bailyn (1967, 1968), Pocock (1975), Pole (1966), Shalhope (1972, 1982), Wood (1969).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

be attempted by either of the three branches, but will be withstood by one of the other two; each branch being armed with a negative power sufficient to repel any innovation which it shall think inexpedient or dangerous.⁷

The theory of the mixed constitution, with all its parts in balance, was said to extend back to Anglo-Saxon England.⁸

This notion led directly to the theory of the separation of powers, as articulated initially by Montesquieu and somewhat later by Madison, in the famed Federalist Paper 51.⁹

The great security against a gradual concentration of the several powers in the same department, consists in giving to those who administer each department the necessary constitutional means and personal motives to resist encroachments of the others. . . . Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. . . . In republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates. The remedy for this inconveniency is to divide the legislature into different branches; and to render them, by different modes of election and different principles of action, as little connected with each other as the nature of their common functions and their common dependence on society will admit.¹⁰

Amalgamating the work of Montesquieu, Madison, and countless other constitutionalists from the eighteenth century to the present, M. J. Vile arrives at what he calls a “pure doctrine” of separate powers.

It is essential for the establishment and maintenance of political liberty that the government be divided into three branches or departments, the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. To each of these three branches there is a corresponding identifiable function of government, legislative, executive, or judicial. Each branch of the government must be confined to the exercise of its own function and not allowed to encroach upon the functions of the

⁷ Blackstone (1862: 36).

⁸ Pocock (1957/1987).

⁹ “When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, or in the same body of magistracy, there can be then no liberty; because apprehensions may arise, lest the same monarch or senate should enact tyrannical laws, to execute them in a tyrannical manner. Again, there is no liberty, if the power of judging be not separated from the legislative and executive powers. Were it joined with the legislative, the life and liberty of the subject would be exposed to arbitrary control; for the judge would be then the legislator. Were it joined to the executive power, the judge might behave with all the violence of an oppressor” (Montesquieu, quoted in Casper 1989: 214).

¹⁰ Madison, Federalist 51 (Hamilton et al. 1787–88/1992: 266–7).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Models of Governance*

5

other branches. Furthermore, the persons who compose these three agencies of government must be kept separate and distinct, no individual being allowed to be at the same time a member of more than one branch. In this way each of the branches will be a check to the others and no single group of people will be able to control the machinery of the State.¹¹

Separate powers thus refers to a division of labor and diffusion of power at the national level (or indeed at any single level of government).

Federalism, the second theoretical component of decentralism, is also an ancient idea.¹² Broadly interpreted, the federal idea may be traced back to city-state confederations in classical Greece, the medieval Hanseatic League, and the equally venerable Swiss confederation. If we take a more restrictive view of what it means to be federal, the arrival of this form of government has a fairly precise date: the founding of the American republic. Indeed, the United States was the first polity to invoke federalism as an explicit theory of governance.

Thus, the theory of decentralism has two fundamental axioms, one pertaining to horizontal divisions (separate powers) and the other pertaining to vertical divisions (federalism). Both are enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Potentially, the theory of decentralism extends to other political institutions as well, a matter we shall shortly explore. But first, it is important that we take note of two quite different perspectives on the virtues of decentralization.

The dominant strand, including Blackstone, Montesquieu, and Madison, sees in decentralized institutions a mechanism to prevent direct popular rule, or at least to moderate its effects. A majoritarian system, it is feared, is prey to manipulation by unscrupulous leaders and envious masses bent on the redistribution of wealth.¹³ A second

¹¹ Vile (1967/1998: 14). See also Brennan and Hamlin (1994), Gwyn (1965), Marshall (1971: 100), and Tomkins (2001).

¹² "A constitution is federal," writes William Riker (1964: 11), "if 1) two levels of government rule the same land and people, and 2) each level has at least one area of action in which it is autonomous, and 3) there is some guarantee (even though merely a statement in the constitution) of the autonomy of each government in its own sphere." On the theory and intellectual history of federalism, see also Beer (1993), Davis (1978), and Mogi (1931).

¹³ Riker (1982).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

strand, associated with Paine, Rousseau, and others of a radical (in present parlance, left-wing) persuasion, sees in decentralized power a mechanism for bringing government closer to the people. Their assumption is that centralized power is usually controlled by elites, whose interests run contrary to those of the masses. The only hope for popular control of government is therefore to de-concentrate the locus of decision making.

Radicals share with their Establishment confreres a belief that government is mostly to be feared, rather than trusted. Both Madison and Paine see good government as equivalent to limited government. In the much-quoted words of Adam Smith:

Every system which endeavors, either, by extraordinary encouragements, to draw towards a particular species of industry a greater share of the capital of the society than what would naturally go to it; or, by extraordinary restraints, to force from a particular species of industry some share of the capital which would otherwise be employed in it; is in reality subversive of the great purpose which it means to promote. It retards, instead of accelerating, the progress of the society towards real wealth and greatness; and diminishes, instead of increasing, the real value of the annual produce of its land and labour.

All systems either of preference or of restraint, therefore, being thus completely taken away, the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord. Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men. The sovereign is completely discharged from a duty, in the attempting to perform which he must always be exposed to innumerable delusions, and for the proper performance of which no human wisdom or knowledge could ever be sufficient; the duty of superintending the industry of private people, and of directing it towards the employments most suitable to the interest of the society. According to the system of natural liberty, the sovereign has only three duties to attend to; three duties of great importance, indeed, but plain and intelligible to common understandings: first, the duty of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies; secondly, the duty of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it, or the duty of establishing an exact administration of justice; and, thirdly, the duty of erecting and maintaining certain public works and certain public institutions, which it can never be for the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals, to erect and maintain; because the profit could never

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Models of Governance*

7

repay the expence to any individual or small number of individuals, though it may frequently do much more than repay it to a great society.¹⁴

In pithier, though perhaps overstated, terms, Thomas Paine opines,

Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness. The former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher. Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil, in its worst state an intolerable one. . . . Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise.¹⁵

Among twentieth-century writers decentralism takes a number of different forms, each with its own terminology, theoretical framework, and policy concerns. This far-ranging camp includes early group theorists;¹⁶ British pluralists;¹⁷ American pluralists;¹⁸ writers in the public choice tradition, especially as oriented around the intertwined ideas of separate powers, fiscal federalism, veto points, and insulation;¹⁹ Guillermo O'Donnell's conception of horizontal accountability;²⁰ and certain renditions of principal-agency theory.²¹ This set of views is for the most part consonant with modern conservatism (i.e., nineteenth-century liberalism), as articulated by A. V. Dicey, Milton Friedman,

¹⁴ Smith (1776/1939: 650–1). Centuries later, the idea is reiterated in public choice work. “Rent-seeking activity,” writes James Buchanan, “is directly related to the scope and range of government activity in the economy, to the relative size of the public sector” (Buchanan 1980: 9; see also Colander 1984: 5).

¹⁵ Paine (1776/1953: 4). James Madison (1773: 525) concurred, though in more moderate tones: “It has been said that all Government is an evil. It would be more proper to say that the necessity of any Government is a misfortune.”

¹⁶ Bentley (1908/1967).

¹⁷ Laski (1917, 1919, 1921). For writings by G. D. H. Cole and J. N. Figgis, see Hirst (1989).

¹⁸ Dahl (1956, 1961, 1967), Herring (1940), Truman (1951).

¹⁹ Aghion et al. (2004), Brennan and Hamlin (1994), Buchanan and Tullock (1962), Hammond and Miller (1987), Henisz (2000, 2002), Keefer and Stasavage (2002), Lake and Baum (2001), Mueller (1996), Niskanen (1971), North and Weingast (1989), Oates (1972, 1999), Persson et al. (1997), Rasmusen and Ramseyer (1992), Tiebout (1956), Weingast (1995). For skeptical discussion of these assumptions, on purely formal grounds, see Treisman (2003).

²⁰ O'Donnell (1999).

²¹ Moreno, Crisp, and Shugart (2003).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Friedrich Hayek, Robert Nozick, Herbert Spencer, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Ludwig von Mises.

Despite their evident differences, all twentieth-century decentralists agree on several core precepts: diffusion of power, broad political participation, and limits on governmental action. Fragmentation sets barriers against the abuse of power by minorities, against the overweening ambitions of individual leaders, against democratic tyrannies instituted by the majority, and against hasty and ill-considered public policies. Decentralist government is limited government. Each independent institution acts as a check against the others, establishing a high level of interbranch accountability. Bad laws have little chance of enactment in a system biased heavily against change, where multiple groups possess an effective veto power over public policy. The existence of multiple veto points forces a consensual style of decision making in which all organized groups are compelled to reach agreement on matters affecting the polity.²² Limitations on central state authority preserve the strength and autonomy of the market and of civil society, which are viewed as separate and independent spheres. Decentralized authority structures may also lead to greater popular control over, as well as direct participation in, political decision making. Efficiency is enhanced by political bodies that lie close to the constituents they serve, by a flexible apparatus that adjusts to local and regional differences, and through competition that is set into motion among rival governmental units.

So much for the theory. What are the specific institutional embodiments of decentralism? Separate powers implies two elective lawmaking authorities as well as a strong and independent judiciary. Federalism presumes the shared sovereignty of territorial units within the nation-state. Both also suggest a bicameral legislature, to further divide power at the apex and to ensure regional representation. In addition, the decentralist model seems to imply a written constitution, perhaps with enumerated individual rights and explicit restrictions on the authority of the central state. Most decentralists embrace the single-member district as a principle of electoral law, maximizing

²² Buchanan and Tullock (1962). Although this vision of politics is associated with the work of George Tsebelis (1995, 2000, 2002), Tsebelis himself does not present a normative argument for a multiple-veto-points constitution (see Appendix A).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Models of Governance*

9

local-level accountability. Some advocate preferential-vote options (within single- or multimember districts) or a system of open primaries, thus decentralizing the process of candidate selection. Taking the principle of decentralism seriously leads us toward several additional institutional features: multiple elective offices, frequent elections (short terms), staggered terms of office, nonconcurrent elections, fixed-term elections (thus removing the tool of parliamentary dissolution from party leaders), term limits, popular referenda, recall elections, and loose, decentralized party structures.

Although one might quibble over details, there is no denying the basic institutional embodiments of the decentralist political order, where power is diffused among multiple independent actors. This is the reigning paradigm of good governance at the turn of the twenty-first century.

CENTRIPETALISM

In contrast to the precepts of decentralism, we argue that good government arises from institutions that *create* power, enhancing the ability of a political community, through its chosen representatives, to deliberate, reach decisions, and implement those decisions. Following James Bryce (see the epigraph), we refer to such institutions as centripetal, signifying a gathering together of diverse elements.²³

Centripetalism, as the term implies, is more centralist than decentralist. Accordingly, its intellectual lineage may be traced back to Thomas Hobbes, Jean Bodin, and the concept of sovereignty as it developed in the seventeenth century.²⁴ Arguably, the primordial theory of governance is Hobbesian. The first task of government is to prevent humans from killing each other. Keeping the peace is necessary if civil society is to persist, and is achievable only in a political system that monopolizes power in the hands of a single individual. Challenges to unitary sovereignty lead to discord and, at the limit, to civil war, as Hobbes himself witnessed. The sovereign's will to power is in fact the secret ally

²³ The term "centripetalism" has also been employed in the context of party competition (Cox 1990; Reilly 2001; Sartori 1976; Sisk 1995). Our usage is evidently much broader. Another important antecedent is the work of Arend Lijphart, discussed at some length in Appendix B.

²⁴ Merriam (1900).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88394-8 - A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance

John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of good government, for a successful assertion of sovereignty produces a reign of tranquility. The stronger the sovereign, the more durable the peace.

This is, to be sure, a rather limited vision of good governance. Hobbes did not expect the sovereign to perform good works, beyond suppressing rebellion. In later centuries, the centralist ideal became more expansive. By the end of the nineteenth century it was possible to envision a sovereign who was at once supreme (for a limited time) and accountable. Walter Bagehot, who perhaps more than any other writer deserves to be credited as the theorist of democratic centralism, identified this new model of government in his classic work, *The English Constitution*, where he contrasted the developing Westminster polity with the highly decentralized American polity:

Hobbes told us long ago, and everybody now understands, that there must be a supreme authority, a conclusive power, in every State on every point somewhere. . . .²⁵ The splitting of sovereignty into many parts amounts to there being no sovereign. . . . The Americans of 1787 thought they were copying the English Constitution, but they were contriving a contrast to it. Just as the American is the type of *composite* Governments, in which the supreme power is divided between many bodies and functionaries, so the English is the type of *simple* Constitutions, in which the ultimate power upon all questions is in the hands of the same persons. . . . The English Constitution, in a word, is framed on the principle of choosing a single sovereign, and making it good; the American, upon the principle of having many sovereign authorities, and hoping that their multitude may atone for their inferiority. . . . Parliamentary government is, in its essence, sectarian government, and is possible only when sects are cohesive.²⁶

For reform Whigs, Tories, and nineteenth-century Liberals including Burke, Peel, Disraeli, Gladstone, and Bagehot, strong government – personified in the bureaucracy and the cabinet – was a mechanism to resist popular pressures, restrain corruption, and limit the extravagances of the monarch.

A quite different motivation could be found among social liberals such as T. H. Green, L. T. Hobhouse, Graham Wallas, and Sidney and

²⁵ Bagehot (1867/1963: 214–15).

²⁶ Ibid., 219–22.