

Is decentralization democratic?

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Abstract. I argue that decentralization improves democracy. The main normative idea in the argument is that part of what makes democracy valuable is that it facilitates a kind of democratic autonomy. It gives citizens the opportunity to author their social and political affairs. Moreover, the opportunities that contribute most to citizen autonomy are opportunities to author outcomes they care and can easily learn more about. The main empirical premise is that people care and can easily learn more about how policies affect their locality than other localities. So if we give people more influence over issues in their locality, this will increase the extent to which we realize democratic autonomy. Thus, all else equal, decentralized polities are more democratic than centralized ones.

Keywords. Decentralization; federalism; local government; self-rule; democratic autonomy

Introduction

Decentralization is often linked to democracy. In 2021, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) said that it conceived “of decentralization as, above all else, a means to achieve democratization” (USAID, 2021, p. viii). Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, wrote that a republic with a large territory “cannot long subsist” (Montesquieu, 1766, p. 177). He thought that democracy required small-scale polities, which decentralization helps provide. Contemporary political scientists Sandra León and Lluís Orriols (2016) point out that “one of the most celebrated promises of federalism is the democratic one” (p. 847)—where federalism here is a kind of decentralization. There is a centuries-long tradition of thinking that decentralization conduces to democratic values.

There is, however, also a contrary position. Irving Kristol, in the 1960s, stressed that “decentralization is one thing, democracy is another” (Kristol, 1968, p. 22). More strongly, Daniel Kelemen suggested that “there is an inherent tension between federalism and democracy” (Kelemen, 2006, p. 221). The problem, as Robert Dahl put it, is that “in federal systems a national majority cannot prevail over a minority that happens to be [locally] concentrated” (Dahl, 1983, p. 100). Daniel Treisman claimed that any positive effect of decentralization on democracy is “at best weak and contingent” (Treisman, 2007, p. 184). So there is a tradition sceptical of any positive link between decentralization and democracy. There is no consensus.

Despite the dissensus, there is relatively little contemporary work by normative theorists on the connection between decentralization and democracy.¹ My aim in this article is to help rectify that shortcoming. I will give a simple argument that decentralization is democratic. A core aspect of democracy’s value, I believe, is that it facilitates autonomy. It facilitates a causal connection between what citizens want and what the government does, and that means democratic citizens rule themselves. What one cares and knows about matters to autonomy. One’s autonomy is best served by having more influence over things one cares and knows more about. People care and know more about policies that affect their locality than policies that affect other localities (where a ‘locality’ is any contiguous subregion of a larger state). So giving citizens more influence over local issues respects their autonomy. Thus, decentralization facilitates a core part of what makes democracy valuable.

My aim in this article is to lay out this argument in detail. We will start, in the next section, by defining the relevant notion of decentralization. I will then chart the normative background to this argument. This is a theory of democratic autonomy. We will see how the value of democratic autonomy supports decentralization and answer various objections to the argument I advance. Finally, we will explore how decentralization interacts with some other aspects of democratic theory: democratic equality and the boundary problem. Overall, I claim that democratic values support a quite specific kind of decentralization. They support self-rule rather than shared rule, institutional mechanisms to solve coordination problems, and uniform powers for local government. More broadly, I claim that decentralization is indeed democratic.

Preliminaries

This article defends political decentralization (Mookherjee, 2015). To grasp this notion, first observe that many policies mainly affect people in one subregion, or locality, of a broader state. Consider garbage collection. How frequently garbage is collected, what collectors will take, whether recycling is mandated, all differ between Chicago and Cincinnati. Or consider the provision of education, policing, healthcare. The resources governments spend on education differ between Scotland and Wales. Policing policies differ between Bavaria and Brandenburg. Tax rates also differ between different regions: income taxes in New York are higher than in New Orleans. Some policies, such as defence, usually affect everyone in a state roughly equally. But in many domains policies have much more localized impact. A state is politically decentralized insofar as, when a policy domain affects people in contiguous geographical subregions more than others, those people have more influence on policymaking in that domain. Typically, political decentralization involves locally elected governments determining local policies.

Political decentralization is distinct from both administrative and fiscal decentralization (O'Dwyer & Ziblatt, 2006). Administrative decentralization involves central government bureaucracies implementing policy via local field offices. This can happen even when all policymaking occurs centrally. Fiscal decentralization involves local governments having power to raise and spend money. This is a part of political decentralization but does not exhaust it. For one thing, fiscal decentralization does not imply local democracy. China, for instance, is very fiscally decentralized, but not politically decentralized in my sense. My focus is on whether local people democratically control local policy. For another thing, local policies go beyond just setting tax rates and budgets. The character of policing, education, and infrastructure are each affected by non-budgetary decisions. My focus is on local influence on the broader range of policies.

Political decentralization is often associated with, but does not require, either shared rule or federalism. Shared rule means that local and national governments share responsibility for certain policy areas (Hooghe et al., 2016, pp. 23–26). This is often embodied in central legislative chambers, such as the German Bundesrat or the U.S. Senate. Self-rule means that local government has complete responsibility for some policy areas and the central government for others. This is embodied by subnational governing tiers, such as Scotland's Holyrood or U.S. state legislatures. What I am calling "political decentralization" consists in self rather than shared rule. Federalism, as I will use the term, involves the constitutional entrenchment of the power of certain subnational governments. Such entrenchment usually makes decentralization more secure but is not necessary for it to exist. In neither Spain nor the U.K. is decentralization constitutionally entrenched, but both polities have decentralized power to regions. I am interested in the *de facto* distribution of policymaking power more than its *de jure* arrangement.

My main claim is that decentralization conduces to citizens' autonomy. Perhaps the most important contrast to this claim is instrumental arguments in favour of decentralization. These point to something which is uncontroversially good and aim to show that decentralization promotes that good. One might, for instance, think that decentralization leads to economic growth or better governance. Unfortunately, the empirical evidence behind these arguments is mixed. Many studies find the requisite connections, but many do not.

To summarize, one recent survey found eighty-nine published tests on the connection between decentralization and economic growth (Canare, 2021). About 25% found a positive relationship, 28% found a negative relationship, and 37% found no relationship. As Daniel Treisman said some time ago, “to date, there are almost no solidly established, general empirical findings about the consequences of decentralization” (Treisman, 2007, p. 250). We do not have good evidence that decentralization leads to uncontroversially good consequences.

A more indirect version of this instrumental argument focuses on diversity. The idea is that decentralization leads to more diverse policy regimes. Some think such diversity is good because the policies that work will be adopted by other local governments. Decentralization creates laboratories for local experimentation (Dorf & Sabel, 1998). Others think diversity is good because people will move to more successful jurisdictions. Decentralization facilitates foot-voting (Somin, 2013, chap. 5; Tiebout, 1956). The fact that we cannot clearly see economic or quality of governance benefits to decentralization should, I think, give us pause about these arguments. If decentralization really had these effects, would it not improve growth or governance?² But I will not pursue the point. I mainly want to distinguish these arguments from my own. My claim is not that decentralization has consequences of some uncontroversially good kind, via diversity or any other mechanism. Perhaps it does; perhaps it does not. The evidence is not decisive either way. My claim is, instead, that decentralization facilitates autonomy.

Decentralization, in my view, facilitates autonomy because (and when) people care and can easily learn more about issues local to them than about issues in other regions. Let me distinguish this view from one further idea. One might think that decentralization contributes to democratic autonomy because it promotes citizen participation. John Stuart Mill (1861, chap. 16) entertained the idea that this was good “as a means of political instruction,” in order to educate ordinary citizens on political matters.³ But we might instead (more plausibly) think that participation is good as a means of promoting democratic autonomy. Citizens cannot author government policy without participating in politics. So anything that promotes participation is likely to promote people’s autonomy. I do not, however, believe that this is the best argument for decentralization.

The problem hinges on the scale of decentralization. The best evidence for any causal link between decentralization and participation comes from amalgamations of municipalities. Many countries in recent years have merged some of their local government municipalities, usually on efficiency grounds. This allows us to see how participation (especially turnout) changes in newly enlarged municipalities compared to unmerged ones. Here the literature is unequivocal: there is less participation in larger municipalities (Allers et al., 2021; Lapointe et al., 2018; Lassen & Serritzlew, 2011). Why is this then not a knockdown argument for decentralization? Because, as Joshua McDonnell puts it, “there is considerable evidence of an exponential decrease in the effect of size as population increases” (McDonnell, 2020, p.344). In other words, when we get to even small cities—a Brighton or Buffalo or Bologna—we should expect the smallness of the population to have very little positive effect on participation. So the participation argument provides some reason to empower hyperlocal bodies, but very little reason to endorse decentralization to smaller urban or regional localities. For a broad argument for decentralization, we need to look beyond participation.

Let me now turn to my autonomy-based argument for decentralization. We begin by spelling out the notion of democratic autonomy.

Democratic autonomy

Imagine you could replace the democratic institutions that (likely) govern you with rule by a benevolent, competent dictator. This dictator, let us stipulate, would enact better policies than do your current institutions. They would better promote the well-being of ordinary people than we do by ruling ourselves. In some places, it is not completely implausible that polities have faced this choice. Singapore is the obvious example; it is difficult to believe that Singapore would have done as extraordinarily well as it has had it been

ruled democratically since 1965. Still, many people think there is something objectionable about replacing democratic institutions with such a dictatorship. Something is lost by the loss of democracy. This motivates the idea that democracy is not merely of instrumental value.⁴ Democratic institutions are not valuable solely because of their causal consequences. There is something intrinsically valuable about democracy. This is the normative starting point for the argument in this article.

What makes democracy non-instrumentally valuable? In recent years, one prominent answer to this question has been “equality” (Christiano, 1996; Kolodny, 2014; Viehoff, 2019). The best version of this answer hinges on the thought that some relationships, like those between master and slave, are relationships of subordination or domination. We have a right against being subjected to such a relationship. Such relationships are in part constituted by asymmetries of power. What it is to be subordinated to someone is to be subjected to their asymmetric power. Thus we have a right against being subjected to power asymmetries. Even a benevolent, competent dictatorship violates this right. We are subordinated to the dictator. The thought is that democratic institutions flatten power asymmetries, and so better serve this right to non-subordination.

I think equality does not exhaust the value of democracy. The issue is that we can equalize power by giving nobody any power at all. To see this, imagine we replaced our elected legislatures with an algorithm.⁵ Instead of representatives writing the laws, they were written by a computer program. This algorithm is perfectly reliable: when we input current conditions it outputs just laws. There would be no egalitarian objection to instituting this algorithm. Nobody has asymmetric power over anyone else when ruled by the algorithm; nobody has any political power at all. And there is no instrumental objection to instituting the algorithm. Still, something would be lost were we ruled by an algorithm. Intuitively, the problem with rule by the algorithm is that it precludes ruling ourselves. This kind of case illustrates a natural idea. Democracy’s value partly inheres in the value of such self-rule, or autonomy. Democracy is worthwhile, in part, because it facilitates self-determination or popular sovereignty. This idea is the normative picture on which the argument in this article depends.

How should we understand the value of political autonomy? I propose to see it as continuous with personal autonomy.⁶ It is valuable for you to be the one who decides who you marry, where you live, what career you pursue. The value here is one of authorship: it is valuable for you to autonomously author your individual affairs.⁷ That requires that there is a causal connection between what you want in these areas and what happens. Likewise, it is valuable for citizens to autonomously author their collective affairs. It is valuable for us to autonomously author the important features of our society: the nature of our political system, the distribution of material resources, the workings of retributive justice. What the government does has an enormous influence on the important features of our society. So it is valuable for us to autonomously author what the government does. That requires, again, a causal connection between what citizens want in these areas and what happens. I will call this value democratic autonomy.

To emphasize, democratic autonomy is not just a matter of there being a match between your preferences and what happens. You autonomously author government policy only to the extent that you causally influence said policy. To illustrate the point, imagine that the state was ruled by a dictator with a penchant for representative surveys. The dictator constantly polled a small (but representative) sample of his subjects and reliably enacted their policy preferences. In this situation, only the small number of sampled citizens causally influence policy. The rest enjoy correspondence between their preferences and policy, but they make no causal contribution to what the government does. Accordingly, in this situation, these citizens would not rule themselves. They would not author government policy. Autonomy requires that citizens’ choices causally connect to governmental actions.

What kind of causal connection must there be between citizen preferences and governmental actions? One notion of causation is difference-making: on this notion, one’s choices cause some effect only if, were one

to choose differently, the effect would not come about. Citizens rarely have this kind of causal impact on what the government does. Instead, the relevant kind of causal connection is causal contribution.⁸ This is the kind of causation at work in cases of overdetermination. Suppose it takes ten people dumping waste in a river to make the water undrinkable. You, together with twenty other people, dump waste in the river. You may not make a difference to the water becoming undrinkable. But you contribute to it. Likewise, when you vote for a candidate you contribute to their election, even when you do not make a difference to it. One can enjoy authorship over something by causally contributing to that thing.

A key question is how democratic autonomy generates democratic rights. One could understand this in basically consequentialist terms. The idea is that authorship is good for people, democracy promotes authorship, so we should have democracy. This, however, is not a very strong argument for democratic institutions. On the one hand, that is because real-world democracies may not do all that much to actually promote people's autonomous authorship of government policy. Voters are very often ill-informed, irrational, and apathetic. Such voters are not in a very good position to author government policy.⁹ On the other hand, one might plausibly think that authorship is valuable only when it is authorship of something valuable.¹⁰ Authoring a genocide is not good for you. But democracies often enact morally dubious policies. So there is not much value in citizens having authorship over these policies.¹¹ These points temper the extent to which we should think real-world democracies promote a valuable kind of authorship.

A better way to understand the argument for democracy is in deontological terms. Human beings are deliberatively mature beings. We can understand our options and choose those options that hook up to our core values. Such deliberative capacity—our agency—mandates that other people respond to us in certain ways. Specifically, other people have a *pro tanto* duty to enable us to author our affairs. We should be given the opportunity for such autonomous authorship. That includes authorship over our personal affairs, but also over our social and political affairs. Really, it just means people owe it to us to help us, or at least not hinder us, in our making a causal contribution to what happens in the world. On this view, we should have democratic institutions not strictly because they promote the value of authorship. Rather, giving people the opportunity for authorship is the appropriate response to their autonomy. It is the opportunity to causally impact outcomes that is key to democratic autonomy.

To what extent does the ability to causally contribute to a given outcome affect one's opportunity for autonomy? For the argument in this article two factors are crucial. The first is what one cares about. We care about certain things more than other things. I might care about where I live, but I do not care much about whether there is iodine in my salt. This makes controlling where I live more important, to my autonomy, than controlling whether there is iodine in my salt. Generally, to evaluate how much opportunity someone has for authorship, *ceteris paribus*, we should see how much causal contribution they can make to various outcomes and weight this by how much they care about each outcome. So giving people more influence over things they care more about, *ceteris paribus*, does more to enable their opportunity for authorship over the world than giving them influence over other things. Influence over what one cares about matters most to autonomy.

A second factor concerns knowledge. When one knows very little about one's options, one often has little opportunity to make an autonomous choice. Suppose I am deciding what career to pursue after college. I need to decide whether to take an analyst job in banking or do a Ph.D. But I cannot learn anything about what either career path involves. In this case I do not have the opportunity to autonomously author my career. Generally, to evaluate how much opportunity someone has for authorship, *ceteris paribus*, we should see how much causal contribution they can make to various outcomes and weight this by how accessible knowledge about those outcomes is to them. The accessibility of knowledge is largely determined by how costly it is to attain such knowledge. When it costs you nothing or very little to learn a lot about an option, knowledge about that option is very accessible to you. When it is very costly (or impossible) to learn about

an option, knowledge about it is relatively inaccessible. So giving people more influence over things they can easily learn more about, *ceteris paribus*, does more to enable their authorship over the world. Influence over what one can easily know a lot about matters most to one's autonomy.

That completes the key parts of the picture of democratic autonomy. To reiterate, the idea is that we owe it to people to enable their opportunity to autonomously author their social and political affairs. We improve people's opportunity for such authorship most when we increase their influence over things they care and can easily learn more about.

From autonomy to decentralization

We get to an argument for decentralization via two further premises. The first premise is that people care more about policy in their own region than in other regions. Think about, say, garbage collection. The idea here is that Sydneysiders care more about how garbage collection works in Sydney than how it works in Perth. Or consider tax rates. The thought is that Albertans care more about what the tax rates are in Alberta than what the tax rate is in Nova Scotia. The more local a policy is, *ceteris paribus*, the more we care about it.

The main mechanism behind this is likely self-interest. Policies in our localities have more of an impact on our interests than policies in other localities. We tend to care more about things that more affect our interests. So we tend to care more about local policies. But in many cases other mechanisms are probably also at work. We tend to have emotional attachments to certain places: we care especially about our cities or regions (Lewicka, 2011). And we often form locally bound social identities.¹² We come to think of ourselves as Californians or Texans or Coloradans. We tend to care more about things that affect places we are attached to or groups we identify with. So, if we identify with a locality or a group which occupies that locality, we will tend to care especially about policies that impact this locality. We will care more about policies that impact our own locality than policies that impact another locality.

There is somewhat disparate empirical support for this premise. One line of support comes from distance decay in willingness to pay for environmental goods. People are willing to pay more for improving or preserving environmental goods (such as wetlands or rivers) the closer they are to them (Bateman et al., 2006). This is well-explained by self-interest: the closer people are to, say, a river, the more likely they are to use it. Additionally, people often support a policy in the abstract, but not when its burdens fall on them. People might, for example, support building opioid treatment centres in general but oppose building one near where they live (de Benedictis-Kessner & Hankinson, 2019). Again, this is well-explained if such people care more about things that (negatively) affect their locality than other localities. None of this is to say that we never care about policies in other cities, states or regions: clearly, we do. But it is to say that, *ceteris paribus*, we care more about policy local to us.

The second premise is that people tend to have easier access to knowledge about policy in their locality than policy in other localities. People in, say, New York City can more easily learn about how building new subway stations will affect transport in New York City than about how building new subway stations in Los Angeles will affect transport in Los Angeles.¹³ Several mechanisms underpin this. On the one hand, how easy it is to learn about something depends on how much we know about it already. I conjecture that people tend to know more about local policies anyway because they care more about them. We tend to learn about things that we care about. If, as a result, one already knows a little bit about New York transport policy, then it is less costly to learn more about such policy. The knowledge one already has comes for free, and one can build on it with less effort and time than if one knows nothing at all about New York policy. So if we really care more about local policy, it is routinely less costly to learn about it.

On the other hand, incidental learning is a key foundation for political knowledge.¹⁴ This is politically relevant learning that happens when one engages in non-political tasks. Perhaps one is trying to get from

Brooklyn to Williamsburg; one learns, in doing so, about poor interborough transport connections. This knowledge bears on how different transport policies will affect New Yorkers. The point generalizes. A huge amount of information bears on how different policies will impact an area: information about local norms, local geography, local patterns of behaviour.¹⁵ When one lives somewhere, one gains much of this knowledge costlessly, while going to work or school, socializing, doing groceries, getting a haircut, generally conducting one's day-to-day life. So knowledge about local conditions is often easily accessible to locals, and much less easily accessible to outsiders. Not many people in, say, Des Moines know how difficult it is to get from Brooklyn to Williamsburg. Thus, knowledge about how a policy will affect an area is much more accessible to residents than to non-residents.

I want to avert a concern here. One might note that, sometimes, people seem to know more about national politics than local politics. Specifically, they know more about who occupies national office and how national institutions work than who occupies local office or how local institutions work (Somin, 2013, p. 122). This does not undermine my thesis. My thesis is not about personnel or institutions. It is about policy. I claim that people know more about how policies will impact their locality than other localities. Knowing who is in national office or how national institutions work does not mean one knows how national policies will impact different localities. Quantitative evidence that does bear directly on my thesis is scant, but what little there is seems to support it. One study in the U.S., for example, asked people to name three states that had a range of policies (Harper, 2025). People generally could identify some states that had legalized marijuana. But for other tested policies, over 65% of people would not even venture a guess, and when they did guess, large numbers of them got it wrong (Harper, 2025, p. 682). Knowledge about the policies of other states seems low, and thus plausibly so is knowledge about how policy affects these states.

Let us now connect this to decentralization. We can begin by considering a toy model. Suppose there are ten governmental decisions you might have a say over. You care and can easily learn a lot about decisions 1-5. You care and can easily learn little about decisions 6-10. Compare two situations: in one, your influence is distributed equally among all ten. In the other, your influence is concentrated on decisions 1-5 and you have little influence on decisions 6-10. I contend that you enjoy more opportunity for autonomous authorship of your affairs in the second situation, because here you have more influence over decisions you care and can easily learn more about. In other words, to improve your opportunities for autonomous authorship, we should trade the first for the second circumstance. Decentralization instantiates this kind of trade for most citizens. It takes away some of our power over decisions about other localities (6-10). But these are decisions we care and can easily learn less about. And it compensates us by giving us more power over decisions in our own locality (1-5). These are decisions we care and can easily learn more about. So giving more policymaking power to localities—decentralizing—increases people's autonomy.

I will put the point a little more generally. In the previous section I claimed we should give people opportunities for autonomous authorship. We do this best by giving them more influence over things they care more about and can more easily access knowledge about. I have just claimed that people care more about policy that primarily affects their locality rather than other localities, and that knowledge about the impact of such policy is more accessible. So giving people more power over policy in their own locality better enables their opportunity for autonomous authorship. More political decentralization gives people more power over policy in their locality. So more decentralized polities better respect citizen autonomy than more centralized polities. If people do care and can easily learn more about policy that affects their locality than policy that affects other localities, we have reason to devolve power to smaller localities. Decentralization is more democratic in the sense that it is supported by democratic values.

Let me clarify one point. There is a lot of flexibility in the use of my term "locality" in this argument. Specifically, a locality is any contiguous subregion of a larger state, but different subregions are of different sizes. Does the argument support hyperlocal government, e.g., government on the neighbourhood level

rather than the city or regional level? If people care and can easily learn more about policy that affects their neighbourhood than policy that affects other neighbourhoods, it does. I suspect that regardless of how small the region, people care and can easily learn more about how policy will affect that region than how it will affect other regions of that size. This is because the mechanisms discussed previously (primarily, self-interest and incidental learning) seem to apply no matter how small the locality. If so, the argument does support hyperlocal government. Having said that, this is largely conjectural. The empirical evidence gives out at the hyperlocal level. And in any case, there are weighty pragmatic reasons against very small units of local government. Smaller government is often less administratively efficient (Blom-Hansen et al., 2014). The proliferation of smaller units of government exacerbates the coordination problems discussed in the next section. I suspect these pragmatic considerations outweigh the considerations in favour of hyperlocal government. So we have an argument for hyperlocal government, but not a decisive one.

What we do have is a straightforward democratic argument for broader decentralization. Democratic values support decentralization from the national to the regional level, from the regional level to the urban level, and from the urban level to the borough level. In the next section, we will explore some objections to this position.

Objections and replies

Majority rule

Probably the most prominent objection to this kind of argument is that decentralization is counter-majoritarian. The basic idea is that democracy requires majority rule. It requires that, when a majority of people want something, they get that thing. The problem with decentralization is that it means that sometimes a national majority will not get their way over local issues. Suppose that, in the United States, a national majority opposes marijuana legalization. But majorities in certain states, such as California, support it. Local control over policing and courts makes it difficult for the national majority to get their way on this issue. The point generalizes to other kinds of decentralization. The more power is given to people in each locality, the less power a national majority has to set local policy.¹⁶

To address this worry, we have to understand just how majority rule connects to democratic values. Suppose we empower a specific minority. Imagine, for example, that we give those with college degrees extra votes. Then people in the majority have less opportunity to make a causal contribution to government policy. Sometimes, they will be outvoted by the minority and so will not contribute to any policy outcome. Even when they are on the winning side, their causal contribution will be watered down by that of the empowered minority. So empowering a particular minority improves the opportunities of the members of this minority to make a causal contribution to government policy but reduces that of most people. That is usually a bad trade: better to improve more than fewer people's opportunities for autonomous authorship. So we should usually opt for majority rather than minority rule.

Still, it is a severe overgeneralization to think that this means democracy requires majority rule in all circumstances. Majority rule often, but not invariably, facilitates people's opportunity for democratic autonomy. That is because such opportunities are not just about making a causal contribution to policy. They are about contributing to policies one cares and can easily learn most about. So when a specific minority cares more and can easily learn more about some policy areas than does a majority, giving that minority special power to set policy in those areas will maximize the opportunity for democratic autonomy. Now often, we cannot identify any such minority—that is why majority rule often makes sense from the perspective of democratic autonomy. But we can do it when it comes to local policies. People tend to care and can easily learn more about policies that affect their locality than policies that affect other localities. So

the argument for majority rule is undercut in cases of local policies. In these cases, decentralization is better for autonomy.

The problem with the majoritarian critique of decentralization is that it is not founded on any detailed account of what makes democracy valuable. This is a feature of several such critiques. Consider, for example, Daniel Treisman's claim that "electoral competition drives governments to choose the same local policies under centralization and decentralization" (Treisman, 2007, p. 182). His idea is that national parties will advance different policies for each area in order to match the median voter's preferences in that area. So voter preferences will be just as well satisfied in decentralized as in centralized polities. Treisman's mistake is thinking that the value of "respecting majority preferences" (Treisman, 2007, p. 180) consists in *correspondence* between citizen preferences and government policy. A deeper understanding of democratic values lets us see that what matters instead is citizens causally influencing policies. And in decentralized polities, citizens have more of a causal influence over the policies that matter most to their autonomy.

Alternatively, consider Trevor Latimer's observation that "there is an inverse relationship between citizens' influence over collective decisions and what they can do with it" (Latimer, 2023, p. 124). His idea is that decentralization gives people more influence over local policies but that local policies matter less. Smaller communities govern "fewer people and less territory" (Latimer, 2023, p. 124). Latimer seems to be thinking that the value of self-rule is exhausted by how much causal influence one has over policy multiplied by how much the policy affects people. A deeper understanding of democratic values lets us see that, instead, what matters is having a causal influence over policies one cares and can easily learn most about. The underlying issue is that neither critic gives any detailed account of what makes democracy valuable. Without such an account one cannot properly evaluate the connection between democracy and decentralization.

Clarity of responsibility

Let us turn to another worry. I have suggested that decentralization is valuable, in part, because it means that people have more influence over the issues they can learn more about. But some people worry that decentralization reduces political knowledge in general. The worry is that one important kind of political knowledge is knowledge of who is responsible for what. In decentralized political systems, it can be unclear who is responsible for certain policy successes and failures. Think about cases where local and national governments must coordinate in order to supply some policy effectively. If there is a policy failure, then one might worry that voters will not be able to learn whether this is the responsibility of local or national officials. That will detract from their ability to make an autonomous vote choice in elections and so detract from their opportunity to author government policy. If so, decentralization detracts from democratic autonomy.

To address this worry, we return to the distinction between self-rule and shared rule. Shared rule means different tiers of government share policy power in certain domains. Self-rule means different tiers have distinct policymaking power in different domains. The problem of clarity of responsibility is really a problem for systems of shared rule (León & Orriols, 2016). Shared rule enables political actors at different tiers to easily obscure who is responsible for policy failures. Self-rule does not, since policy responsibilities are clearly delineated. So this worry underlines that the distinction between these forms of decentralization is key. We should be sceptical of shared rule. We should prefer a form of decentralization in which the policy powers of different tiers of government are sharply demarcated. Our ideal should be the state assembly rather than the U.S. Senate.

We can buttress the point by noting that, in certain ways, self-rule also improves citizens' access to politically relevant knowledge. Most importantly, it allows voters to use other regions as a "yardstick" for comparison (Besley & Case, 1995). They can look at how well their region is doing relative to others and draw an inference about the competence of local officials. They can look at how policies in their region differ from those in other regions and use this as evidence of the reasonableness (or lack thereof) of local policy. At the

same time, decentralization might incentivize local politicians to disseminate information about conditions in their region (Somin, 2013, p. 127). This all makes knowledge more accessible. So even if decentralization does lead to mild obfuscations of responsibility, that can be compensated for by its clarifications of relative performance.

Perhaps I am too sanguine about systems of self-rule. Self-rule might not obscure responsibility for conscientious voters, but for real voters it provides ammunition for motivated reasoning. Voters often interpret information in a way that shows their party in a good light (Lenz, 2012; Lodge & Taber, 2013). When the parties in power at the local and national levels differ, partisans choose which level to blame for a policy failure on the basis of their partisan identity. If they are co-partisans with the local party, they tend to think that the failure is due to national government. If they are co-partisans with the national party, they tend to think that the failure is due to the local government. So perhaps decentralization destroys voters' knowledge of responsibility even without shared rule. It allows them to fool themselves into thinking their co-partisans are not responsible for policy failures (Golder et al., 2017, chap. 7; León & Orriols, 2019).

This worry is addressed by our deontological interpretation of the import of democratic autonomy. The opportunity for authorship of our social and political affairs requires that knowledge is accessible to us. But it does not require that we access such knowledge. The key point about motivated reasoners is that they are perfectly able to avoid motivated reasoning. They often do so when given small monetary incentives (Prior & Lupia, 2008). So they can access knowledge; they just choose not to do so. Thus, if my knowledge about my options is impaired by motivated reasoning, this does not impair my opportunity for autonomous authorship. If I decide to fool myself into thinking that my co-partisans can do no wrong, that does not diminish my opportunity to know who is responsible for policy failures.

Coordination problems

Let us turn to a final worry. Imagine that most people in the country want to raise national welfare spending, but they also want to pay less tax themselves. Overall, they prefer increased spending to paying less tax. Decentralization can make coordinating on increased spending difficult. When a centralized state makes decisions, a national electorate can just elect a party with “more spending” in its platform. But when there are elections in many different regions, no regional electorate can ensure much more national welfare spending occurs: each regional electorate only has power over its own tax and spending policies. So, for each regional electorate, it might make sense to elect a regional party with “less taxation” in its platform. Yet if all regional electorates opt for lower taxes, none get their first choice—more national welfare spending. This is a coordination problem. Regional electorates cannot coordinate on their collectively most preferred option, because each has an incentive to defect from this option. So people cannot contribute to the outcome they care most about. Opportunities for authorship are impaired.

This is a serious, but addressable, problem with decentralization. One approach to addressing the issue is piecemeal. There are various identifiable coordination problems. Each one can be addressed specifically. Consider the problem of excessive borrowing—each local government has an incentive to borrow more than it can afford to pay back, because it may be bailed out by the central government (Rodden & Wibbels, 2002). To address this, the central government need only credibly commit not to bail out local governments. If it cannot do that, then it can impose constraints on how much local governments may borrow. Or consider races to the bottom in income taxes or welfare spending (Volden, 2002). These happen if high earners move to low-tax areas while welfare beneficiaries may move to higher-spending areas. This makes it financially onerous for any locality to create a high-tax, high-spending regime. One solution to this problem is equalization payments based on fiscal capacity and need.¹⁷ These are block grants from the central government that are lower when a locality contains more taxable income, and higher when it contains

greater spending need (e.g., in terms of health needs). Such payments mean migration no longer matters to a locality's fiscal health and so reduce the incentive each locality has to cut taxes and spending.

These approaches address specific, common, coordination problems. There is also a more general solution. One can allow localities to bind themselves to some policy conditional on other localities being bound. One way to do this is to allow local governments to jointly write national law. If all, or perhaps a (super)majority of local governments agree on some bill, then that bill gets passed into national law. Similar devices are national referendums with a double-majority requirement. These are referendums in which the ballot measure passes if it achieves a national majority of the vote and a majority in a majority of localities.¹⁸ These devices take away each locality's ability to defect from the collectively preferred policy. So they solve the coordination problem while preserving a measure of local influence over local policy. Thus, the coordination problems created by decentralization are serious but seem to be superable.

That completes my defence of the argument for decentralization from democratic autonomy. In the final section I want to see how this argument compares to other democratic considerations around decentralization.

Further democratic arguments

Equality

I have suggested that democracy is valuable, in part, because it respects citizen autonomy. I think it also facilitates citizen equality. Democratic political systems equalize the distribution of political power and so reduce the extent to which some citizens have asymmetric power over others (Kolodny, 2014; Viehoff, 2019). This reduces subordination. Recently Arash Abizadeh (2021) has suggested that such egalitarian considerations support an argument for decentralization. Abizadeh's suggestion is motivated by the plight of persistent minorities. He thinks that Francophones in a unitary Canada would have a democratic complaint against being consistently outvoted (Abizadeh, 2021, pp. 747–748). His explanation is that the members of persistent minorities have less political power than those of persistent majorities. Decentralization reduces these power inequalities. So, he thinks, decentralization facilitates democratic equality.

This argument rests on the 'power-of-numbers' thesis (Abizadeh, 2021, pp. 751–752). The thesis is that it suffices to have the kind of political power relevant to democratic equality—that is, subordinating power—if some factor causes my preferences to correlate with those of most other people. This factor makes it likely that my preferences will happen to align with those of a majority, and so likely that I will be able to work with others to get what I want. Abizadeh's thought is that such a factor might be "language, ethnicity, race, class or geography" (Abizadeh, 2021, p. 750). These can make those in persistent minority likely to have different preferences from those in a persistent majority, which leads the former to consistently get outvoted. This underwrites Abizadeh's claim that the members of persistent minorities have less power than those of persistent majorities. Constraining what nationwide majorities are able to do by decentralizing political power can, Abizadeh thinks, address this issue.

I do not think this is a strong defence of decentralization. To begin with, the concern about persistent minorities can be captured in terms of democratic autonomy rather than equality. Persistent minorities have little opportunity to bring about outcomes they care about. That reduces their opportunities for autonomously authoring the world. So we can explain the plight of persistent minorities without Abizadeh's power-of-numbers thesis. The thesis lacks a solid motivation. Besides this, the thesis seems to me quite implausible. To see one kind of counterexample to it, suppose the governing party has subliminal messaging tools that influence 70% of people and I am in that 70%. In this case there is a factor, the use of such tools, that makes it likely my vote choice aligns with that of the majority. Abizadeh thinks that this gives me

subordinating power over those who are relatively immune to subliminal messaging (Abizadeh, 2021, p. 752). This seems false to me. I doubt that, in virtue of being especially susceptible to manipulation, I have subordinating power over free thinkers. So I think we should reject Abizadeh's thesis.¹⁹

How else might we argue from democratic equality to decentralization? One might observe that when there are more tiers of government, usually, more people hold political power. Political power is distributed among those elected to regional office. This, plausibly, constitutes a more egalitarian distribution of power. This line of thought seems to me correct, but I doubt it identifies a very weighty reason in favour of decentralization. The problem is that, in most cases, very few people can be elected to regional office relative to the size of the population. In the U.S., for example, the median state population is about 4.5 million people. Most people live in much larger states. Very few people can hold regional office in this context. So decentralization only softens the subordination of very few people via this mechanism. I know of no other promising arguments from equality to decentralization. Thus, I believe any connection between decentralization and democracy must instead proceed via autonomy rather than equality.

Still, egalitarian considerations matter to the proper form of decentralization. Many countries have decentralized asymmetrically. Some regions have more independence from the central government than other regions. In the U.K., for example, Scotland can set its own education, healthcare, and housing policy. But English regions cannot. Policy in, say, Yorkshire, is set centrally. Yet both Yorkshiremen and Scots have the same influence over central government. Such asymmetric decentralization generates a clear egalitarian problem. People in regions with more independence from the central government have asymmetric power over those in other regions. If asymmetries of power are antidemocratic, then asymmetric decentralization is antidemocratic. This supports the kind of symmetrical decentralization one sees in the United States or Australia rather than the asymmetric decentralization of the U.K. or Spain. Thus, egalitarian considerations do not identify a particularly strong case for decentralization, but they do affect what kind of decentralization we should support. They tell in favour of symmetrical decentralization.

The boundary problem

Let me turn to another democratic argument for decentralization. Michael Da Silva (2025a) suggests that democratic theorists' solutions to the boundary problem provide an argument for some degree of decentralization. The most prominent solutions here are the all-subjected and the all-affected principles. The former says that everyone subjected to a decision, in the sense of coerced as a result of it, should have influence over it. The latter says everyone affected by a decision should have influence over it.²⁰ Da Silva's key claim is that scalar versions of these principles are most plausible. The more one is subjected to a decision, the more influence one should have on it; the more one's interests are affected by a decision, the more influence one should have on it. The residents of a certain region are, in some sense, more subjected to and affected by policies that cover that region than by policies that cover other regions. Thus, if either of these scalar principles is true, the residents of a region should have more influence over the policies that primarily affect their region rather than over policies that primarily affect other regions.

To properly evaluate these arguments, we need to root solutions to the boundary problem in democratic values.²¹ The all-subjected principle seems to me most naturally rooted in democratic equality.²² The egalitarian justification rests on the observation that, when you are subjected to state coercion, those with power over the state have power over you. So unless you have the same amount of power over the state as them, you will be subjected to asymmetric power. Thus, being subjected to state coercion gives one a claim to equal influence over what the state does. This line of thought, however, does not support the scalar version of the all-subjected principle. For suppose you have power over decisions that coerce me, and I have power over decisions that coerce you. Here there is no asymmetry of power, and so no problem for democratic equality. Thus, if the basis for the all-subjected principle is a concern for equality, that need not

imply that we should have most influence over decisions that affect us most. The egalitarian motivation for the all-subjected principle does not support decentralization.

The all-affected principle, in contrast, seems to me naturally rooted in democratic autonomy. This justification for it rests on the observation that, when a decision affects us more, we tend to care more about it. So, giving us more influence over these decisions will often better facilitate our opportunities for autonomous authorship. We can go from this to an argument for decentralization. If we care more about decisions in our locality than do others, we should have more influence over them. This argument is very like the one I have advanced. My aim in this article is thus not to refute this line of thought, but to provide a deeper explanation of its premises. This argument from the all-affected principle to decentralization is, in my view, rooted in the nature of democratic autonomy.

The deeper explanation makes a difference. Most importantly, it makes clear that the all-affected principle is not a complete solution to the boundary problem. That we care about something does not guarantee we can enjoy much autonomous authorship of it. It might be impossible for us to easily learn about it. Many other factors might matter to our opportunities for autonomous authorship.²³ So a more complete solution to the boundary problem is more complicated. We should draw the boundaries of a polity in a way that maximizes people's opportunities for autonomous authorship. What those are will depend on what people care about, what they can easily learn about, and perhaps other things besides. So we can, as Da Silva suggests, get an argument for decentralization from the ideas behind the all-affected principle. But those ideas show the shortcomings of the principle itself. A deeper explanation of the democratic case for decentralization focuses on the values that underwrite the all-affected principle.

Conclusion

Let me sum up. There is, currently, dissensus about how decentralization connects to democracy. I have argued that, if part of democracy's value inheres in autonomy, there is a straightforward way to resolve this dissensus. We have more opportunity for autonomous authorship of our social and political affairs when we have more influence over issues we care and can easily learn more about. Generally, people care and can easily learn more about policy issues that affect their locality than policy issues that affect other localities. So we give people more opportunity for autonomous authorship by political decentralization. We should, I have suggested, enable people's opportunities for autonomous authorship. So we have a simple democratic argument in favour of decentralization.

Notes

1. The topic is almost entirely absent from recent foundational work in democratic theory, either in an egalitarian vein (Christiano, 1996, 2008; Kolodny, 2014, 2023; Viehoff, 2014, 2019; Wilson, 2019) or in an autonomy-based vein (Chapman, 2022; Lovett & Zuehl, 2022; Pettit, 2012; Stilz, 2016, 2019; Wilson, 2021; Wodak, 2024). The work cited above (Kelemen, 2006; León & Orriols, 2016; Treisman, 2007) is primarily empirical in orientation. When it comes to philosophical work, (Latimer, 2018, 2023, ch.6; Abizadeh, 2021; Da Silva, 2025a) are the best recent examples of work that does discuss the connection between democracy and decentralization at length. I discuss each of these in the article. Weinstock (2001) discusses the issues more briefly, and so I do not discuss his views in detail. Meanwhile, some normative theorists (Føllesdal, 1998; Jewkes, 2016; Somin, 2013) mount non-democratic arguments for decentralization and so are not part of my focus.

2. A different view is that decentralization will promote Millian "experiments in living" (Jewkes, 2016). This does not seem to me plausible: people do not appear to choose more diverse lives in, say, Spain or Germany than in Italy or France. For a more systematic critique of these diversity arguments, see Da Silva (2025b).

3. For contemporary work on this, see Allers et al. (2021), Lapointe et al. (2018), Lassen and Serritzlew (2011), and McDonnell (2020).

4. This is contrary to the view in, for example, Bagg (2024) and Przeworski (1999).

5. This example is discussed by Lovett and Zuehl (2022) and Zuehl (2016). For a similar case, see Chapman (2022, pp. 215–219).
6. This is the kind of theory advanced by Lovett and Zuehl (2022). For somewhat different views, see Chapman (2022), Stilz (2019), Wilson (2021), and Wodak (2024). I believe all these views are compatible with the central argument in this article.
7. This is broadly the conception in Raz (1986).
8. For more on this, see Gunnemyr (2025).
9. For this kind of point, see Achen and Bartels (2016), Brennan (2016), Lovett (2024), and Somin (2013).
10. This is Raz's (1986, pp. 390–395) view.
11. For this point, see Lovett and Zuehl (2022, p. 481).
12. For more on social identities, see Achen and Bartels (2016, chap. 8) and Tajfel and Turner (2004). The background picture is that we form group identities easily and that they have a powerful influence on our behaviour.
13. Of course, experts sometimes know better than local people how certain policies will affect a region. In some cases, this can provide an instrumental reason to empower experts. That is largely orthogonal to my concerns. My focus is on whether local or national electorates should have more power, not on the degree to which power should be given to experts.
14. The observation originates with Downs (1957, chap. 12).
15. This point descends from at least Hayek (1945), but for especially vivid illustrations see Scott (1998).
16. For discussion of this worry about decentralization, see Abizadeh (2021), Dahl (1983), and Kelemen (2006).
17. Canada employs such payments effectively (Bickerton & Gagnon, 2013).
18. In Switzerland, for example, initiatives have this form (Stadelmann-Steffen & Leemann, 2023).
19. For a more detailed critique of the power-of-numbers thesis, see Ingham and Kolodny (2023). Abizadeh tries to make lemonade out of the counterexample in the text: he suggests that this explains why the manipulated followers of a populist leader sometimes feel empowered (2021, p. 752). I think a simpler explanation is that such populist leaders claim they are responsive to their followers and that, if these claims were true, their followers would be empowered. In other words: I doubt there is lemonade to be made here.
20. For discussions of each, see Goodin (2007) and Abizadeh (2008), respectively.
21. For a similar point, see Bengtson (2022).
22. For a very similar view, see Beckman and Rosenberg (2018).
23. I discuss some possibilities in Lovett (in press).

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