

Is decentralization democratic?

Adam Lovett

Abstract: I argue that decentralization promotes democratic values. 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 allows citizens to jointly author their social and political affairs, and the authorship that contributes most to citizen autonomy is informed authorship on issues one cares about. The main empirical idea is that people know and care more about issues in their locality than in other localities. It follows that if we give people more influence over issues in their locality, this will increase the extent to which we realize democratic autonomy. That is exactly what decentralization does. So, all else equal, decentralized polities are more democratic than centralized ones.

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

1. Introduction

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

There is, however, also a contrary position. Irving Kristol, in the 1960s, stressed that “decentralization is one thing, democracy is another” (Irving 1968). More strongly, Daniel Keleman suggested that “there is an inherent tension between federalism and democracy” (Keleman 2006, 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, 100). Daniel Treisman claimed that any positive effect of decentralization on democracy is “at best weak

and contingent” (Treisman 2007, 184). So there is a tradition skeptical of any positive link between decentralization and democracy. There is no consensus.

Despite the dissensus, there is not much normative work on the connection between decentralization and democracy. There is some empirical work on whether decentralization causes democratic institutions to emerge or survive. But there is little work on whether there is any constitutive link between democracy and decentralization. My aim in this paper is to help rectify that shortcoming. Specifically, I will give a very simple argument that decentralization does promote democratic values. A core aspect of democracy’s value, I believe, is that it promotes autonomy. It facilitates a causal connection between what citizens want and what the government does, and that means democratic citizens rule themselves. This causal connection best promotes citizen autonomy when they have more influence over things they know and care more about. People know and care more about policies that affect their locality than policies that affect other localities. And so giving citizens more influence over local issues best promotes their autonomy. This is exactly what decentralization does. So decentralization promotes a core part of what makes democracy valuable—I take that to be tantamount to decentralization promoting democracy.

As far as I know, this simple argument has not been carefully articulated before. I’ll lay it out in detail in section 3. Much of the paper, however, will be devoted to objections to it. In section 4 and 5 we’ll discuss counterpoints in the theoretical literature: first, the worry that decentralization is objectionably counter-majoritarian and, second, the worry that decentralization is politically inefficacious. But the most serious worries can be drawn from a more empirical literature. In section 6 we’ll explore whether decentralization impairs democratic autonomy by obscuring who is responsible for what issues. In section 7, we’ll explore whether it impairs autonomy by generating coordination problems. And finally, in section 8, we’ll see how decentralization interacts with the second core aspect of democracy: equality. Overall, we’ll see that decentralization *is* democratic—that is, that decentralization can improve the realization of democratic values. But we’ll also see that democratic values support a quite specific kind of decentralization.

1. Background

Let’s begin by identifying the kind of decentralization I’m interested in. Many policies mainly affect people in one region 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 the government

spends on education can differ in Scotland and Wales. Policing polices policing differ between Bavaria and Brandenburg. Tax rates can also differ in different regions: income taxes in New York are higher than in New Orleans. Some policies, such as defense, usually affect everyone in a state roughly equally. But, in a cluster of areas, policies have much more localized impact. I'll say a state is decentralized insofar as policymaking in such areas is determined by the people in the territories it most affects, either directly via referendums or indirectly via local elections.

My main claim is that decentralization conduces to citizens' autonomy, since people know and care more about issues local to them and those of different regions. Citizen autonomy is, I think, intrinsically valuable. It's valuable for itself, rather than for its causal consequences. I want to sharply distinguish this claim from a different one in the literature. Some people think that decentralization contributes to democratic autonomy because it promotes citizen participation. J.S. Mill thought this was good "as a means of political instruction"—in order to educate ordinary citizens on political matters. But we might instead (I think more plausibly) think that participation is good as a means of facilitating democratic autonomy. Citizens cannot author government policy without participating in politics. If decentralization does promote participation, that tells in its favor. But this isn't my, and I don't think it 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 ground. This allows us to see how participation—for example, turnout—changes in newly enlarged municipalities compared to unmerged ones. Here the literature is unequivocal: there is less participation in larger municipalities (Lassen and Serritzlew 2011; Lapointe, Saarimaa, and Tukiainen 2018; Allers et al. 2021). Why is this then not a knockdown argument for decentralization? Because, in Joshua McDonnell's words, "there is considerable evidence of an exponential decrease in the effect of size as population increases" (McDonnell 2020). 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. Hence why turnout in regional elections tends to be about ten percentage points lower than in national elections (Daoust and Blais 2021, 256). So the participation argument provides some reason to empower ultra-local bodies, but very little reason to endorse decentralization to larger urban and regional bodies. For a broad argument for decentralization, we need to look beyond participation.

I'll do a final piece of ground-clearing. One might wonder whether we can defend decentralization on more quotidian grounds. More specifically, one might think that decentralization leads to economic growth or better governance.

Unfortunately, here the empirical evidence is very much not unequivocal. Many studies find such connections, but many do not. The empirical literature speaks with discordant voices. To give an example, one recent survey found eighty-nine published tests on the connection between decentralization and economic growth. about a 25% found a positive relationship, 28% find a negative relationship, and 37% found no relationship (Canare 2021). The upshot of this is, as Daniel Treisman said some time ago, “to date, there almost no solidly established, general empirical findings about the consequences of decentralization” (Treisman 2007, 250). We don’t have good evidence that decentralization leads to good consequences of any quotidian variety.

In this context, it’s well worth exploring whether decentralization contributes to intrinsic democratic values.

3. Decentralization and Autonomy

Imagine we replaced our elected legislatures with an algorithm. Instead of representatives writing the laws, they were written by a computer program. And imagine this algorithm was impeccable reliable: when we input current conditions it outputs perfectly just laws. In our deeply unjust societies, there would be much to be said for adopting such an algorithm. Still, something would be lost were we ruled by an algorithm, rather than ruling ourselves. To see a less outlandish illustration of the point, imagine living in a country with an extremely detailed, unchangeable constitution. Even if this constitution laid down unerringly good laws, there is an objection to being ruled by “the dead hand of the past” (Jefferson 1789). It is better to decide ourselves on the laws that govern us, rather than having to defer to the decisions of our ancestors. These examples pinpoint one aspect of democracy’s value: democracy facilitates a distinctive kind of autonomy for its citizens.

What’s important to this value, to be clear, is not simply that what the state does matches what citizens want it to do. To see that, imagine that the state was ruled by a dictator with a penchant for representative surveys. The dictator constantly polled his subjects and reliably enacted their policy preferences. Among the things objectionable about this situation is that the citizens wouldn’t rule themselves, even though what the state does matches what they want. Self-rule requires a causal connection between citizen preferences and governmental policies, rather than mere congruence or correspondence between the two. The value identified in all these cases, a value I’ll call democratic autonomy, requires when citizens want public health, or tax cuts, or social security, these preferences lead to the corresponding government policies. It requires that citizen preferences cause, rather than merely match, government policy.

Why, exactly, is democratic autonomy valuable? The best way to explain this is, I think, to start with personal autonomy. 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 author your individual affairs. And that requires that there is a causal connection between what you want in these areas and what happens. Analogously, it is valuable for citizens to author their collective affairs. It is valuable for us to 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. And so it is valuable for us to author what the government does. And that requires that citizen's wants affect governmental actions.¹

We now connect this to decentralization. The key point is that such a causal connection is not sufficient for maximally achieving democratic autonomy. Two further factors condition the extent to which one achieves such autonomy. The first is knowledge. When one knows relatively little about one's options, one is not in a very good position to make an autonomous choice. We can see this in the case of personal autonomy. 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 imagine that I have no idea what either career path involves. I don't know that banking involves long hours but high pay. I don't know that academia involves intellectual freedom but poor job prospects. Here, I cannot make a very autonomous choice. My ignorance impairs my autonomy. The same is true when I'm making a choice in the ballot booth. The less I know about the options I'm deciding between—the impact of the different party's policies, for example—then the less I can make an autonomous choice. All else equal, the more influence I have on choice I know more about, then the more autonomous I am.

The second factor is how much one cares about a choice. When one cares relatively little about a choice between two options, the ability to influence which option is picked contributes relatively little to one's autonomy. Again, we can see this in personal cases. Suppose I don't care much at all about what shampoo I use. Then my ability to determine my shampoo doesn't contribute all that much to my authorship of my personal affairs. Yet, given I care enormously about what career I pursue, my ability to choose career matters massively to the extent to which I enjoy personal autonomy. The same is true when it comes to political decisions. My ability to influence choices I care more about matters more to my autonomy than my ability to influence choices I care less about. I might simply not care about

¹ This view is defended at length by Lovett and Zuehl (2022). For similar views, see (Stilz 2019; Wilson 2021).

whether park benches are painted green or blue—if so, my ability to influence the color scheme won't contribute much to my autonomy. I may care immensely that healthcare is provided publicly, and so my ability to influence this will matter more to my autonomy.

To complete the argument for decentralization, we need to supplement these normative claims with some empirical claims. The first such empirical claim is that people know more about issues in their locality than issues in other localities. People in, say, New York know more about how building new subway stations will affect transport in New York than they know about how building new subway stations in Los Angeles will affect transport in Los Angeles. The quantitative evidence for this claim is a little indirect. There's evidence that people self-report more knowledge and understanding of the politics of smaller units than larger ones (Denters et al. 2014, 119–47). And people report not knowing the responsibilities of different tiers of government more often in less decentralized political systems (Däubler, Müller, and Stecker 2018). Both findings would be explained by the fact that national, centralized governments deal with a lot of regions, and people know less about other regions than their own. But, more importantly, it seems very plausible that people usually know more about how policies will affect their own locality than other localities. It is very odd to think that New Yorkers know more about Los Angeles than about New York.

The second empirical claim is that people care more about policy in their own region than in other regions. I don't have any survey evidence in support of this. But my own suspicion is that this is because it's so obvious as to not escape attempts at empirical validation. To see that, think about, for example, garbage collection. I suspect you care much more about how garbage collection works in your own locality than in one two hundred miles away. How often your garbage is collected, whether you have to separate out recycling, whether heavy goods will be collected at all, all matter quite a bit to your interests. Similar issues in some other municipality matter very little to your interests, and so I suspect you care about them less. The general mechanism here is that we tend to care more about things that affect us more. Government policies in our locality—healthcare policy, tax rates, schooling provisions—affect our interests more than those policies in other areas. And so we tend to care about them more. That's not to say we only care about what affects our interests. But it is to say we usually care about things more when they affect our interests.

We now show how these claims support decentralization. Decentralization gives people more power over policy in their own locality and less power over policy in other localities. People know and care more about policy in their locality than policy in other localities. So giving people more power over decisions in their own locality gives them more power over decisions they know and care more about.

And people draw the most autonomous authorship from influence over decisions they know and care more about. So giving people more power over decisions in their own locality gives them more democratic autonomy. For each person decentralization involves a trade of influence over decisions from which they draw little autonomous self-authorship for decisions from which they draw a lot of autonomous self-authorship. Decentralization promotes democratic autonomy.

It'll be useful to illustrate this with a toy model. Suppose there are ten governmental decisions you might have a say over. You know and care a lot about decisions 1-5. You know and care very 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 think you enjoy more authorship of your affairs in the second situation, because here you have more influence over decisions you know and care about. In other words, you enjoy more autonomy in the second situation. 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 know and care relatively less about. And it compensates us by giving us more power over decisions in our own locality (1-5). These are decisions we know and care much more about. So giving more policymaking power to localities—decentralizing—increases people's autonomy.

Let's clarify a couple of points about this argument. For a start, I've said that more power should be devolved to "localities." How big is a locality? In truth, I suspect the argument supports localities that are as small as possible. This is because I suspect that people tend to know and care more about smaller than larger areas, at almost any scale. But there are pragmatic reasons to avoid very small units of local government. Smaller government is often, for example, less administratively efficient (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew 2014). These pragmatic considerations are important, they vary by context, and so there is no context-insensitive answer to how large, all things considered, each locality should be. Second, I am presupposing that autonomy is scalar—that people can be more or less autonomous on a sliding scale, rather than simply being either autonomous or not autonomous. Third, the argument identifies a constitutive, rather than causal, benefit to decentralization. It's not that decentralization causes people to be more autonomous by, for example, fostering more participation. Rather, it is that if people do know and care more about local issues, then giving them more power of such issues—decentralizing—constitute more democratic autonomy.

For all that, the argument is relatively simple. If democratic autonomy is a central aspect of democracy's value, then this argument straightforwardly vindicates the claimed connection between decentralization and democracy. So, in the rest of the paper, we'll focus on objections to the argument.

4. Majority Rule

Let's start off by considering some objections people have actually made to decentralization. Probably the most prominent one is that it 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 won't get their way over local issues. Suppose that, in the United States, a national majority opposes cannabis 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 given to people in each locality, the less power does a national majority have to set local policy.²

To address this worry, we have to understand just how majority rule connects to democratic values. To maximize democratic autonomy, all else equal, we want to maximize the number of citizens who make a causal contribution to policy. Majority rule is generally more likely to do this than empowering a specific minority. That is because, when you vote against a policy, or party, you don't make causally contribution to the policies enacted by the winning party. So if, for example, we gave those with college degrees extra votes, then often we'd get policies that only a minority contributed to. Thus, typically, we should opt for majority rather than minority rule. The case for majority rule is that it often promotes democratic autonomy. But it is a massive overgeneralization to think that this means democracy requires majority rule in all circumstances. Democracy is about promoting democratic autonomy, and majority rule doesn't always promote democratic autonomy.

Why does majority rule sometimes fail to promote autonomy? Because autonomy is not just about having a causal influence over policy. It is about having a causal influence over policies one knows and cares about. So when a specific minority cares and knows much more about some policy area(s) than does a majority, it will maximize democratic autonomy to allow that minority to set policy rather than to allow the majority to set policy. 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 regional or local polices. People tend to know and care about policies that affect their locality much more than those that affect different localities. So the basic argument for majority rule—

² For discussion of this worry about decentralization, see (Dahl 1983; Kelemen 2006; Abizadeh 2021).

that it often promotes democratic autonomy—is undercut in cases of local policies. In these cases, decentralization promotes democratic autonomy.

5. Congruence

Let's turn to a different objection to decentralization. Daniel Treisman (2007, 180–82) suggests that, when voters care a lot about local policy, then decentralization won't have any consequences for what policies get enacted. Why so? Well, he assumes that policy in each locality different along a single dimension, and voters vote for the party with the policy platform closest to their preferred policies. In this Downsian setting, the winning party in each region will be that party that the median voter in that region prefers. The crucial further point is that, even in extremely centralized polities, parties can advance different policies for different regions. And so the winning party in a centralized polity will propose, for each region, the local policies preferred by the median voter in that region. These are also the policies that would get enacted if local elections determined local policymakers. Thus “electoral competition drives governments to choose the same local policies under centralization and decentralization” (Treisman 2007, 182). Decentralization won't change what policies get enacted.

As a descriptive matter, this seems implausible. Policy in the U.K. before devolution, for example, seems much more uniform than after decentralization. Probably, the Downsian assumptions are a gross simplification of voting behavior in actual democracies. But let's leave these empirical qualms aside. Our discussion in section 3 allows us to identify Treisman's normative mistake. Treisman is thinking that the value of “respecting majority preferences” (2007, 180) consists in citizens getting what they want. He is thinking that it consists in correspondence or congruence between the preferences of ordinary citizens and the policies of government. But, as we've seen, this is incorrect. The really important thing about respecting majority preferences is that it often helps establish causal connection between what people want and what the government does. Without the causal connection, there is no authorship of policy. What we want is not just for policy to match people's preferences, but for people to have as much a causal contribution to policies they know and care about as possible.

Decentralization, even if it didn't affect what policies got enacted, would affect the nature of these causal contributions. When a number of people vote for a winning party, they share the causal contribution to that party's victory. The more voters vote for that party, the less a contribution each individual voter makes. In centralized electoral competitions, each voter shares their causal contribution with very many others. In elections to smaller regions, each voter shares their influence with fewer other voters. And so each voter makes more of a contribution to the

policies of the winning party. If it's more important to make more of a causal contribution to policies one knows and cares more about, then decentralization promotes democratic autonomy.

6. Clarity of Responsibility

I've suggested that decentralization is valuable, in part, because it means that people have more influence over the issues they know 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 have to coordinate in order to supply some policy effectively. If there is a policy failure, then one might worry that voters won't know whether this is the responsibility of local or national government. That will detract from their ability to make an autonomous vote choice in elections, and so detract from their authorship of government policy.

How does decentralization obscure who is responsible for policy? One way it can do this is by generating conflicting reports on whose actions really led to a policy outcome. Bargaining between different tiers of government over the policy might happen behind closed doors. Different actors might have different things to say about the course of such bargaining. This, however, seems much more likely to happen in systems of shared rule than of self rule (León and Orriols 2016). Shared rule means that local and national governments share responsibility for certain policy areas (Hooghe et al. 2016, 23–26). Self rule means that local government has complete responsibility for some policy areas and the central government some responsibility for other policy areas. Shared rule can make it impossible for ordinary citizens to work out who is responsible for a policy failure (or success). But when policy responsibility is clearly delineated, it is less likely that citizens will be unable determine such responsibility. This way in which decentralization can obscure responsibility, then, provides an argument not against decentralization *per se* but just against one kind of decentralization. We should opt for self rule rather than shared rule. The best form of decentralization clearly defines which level of government is responsible for which policy area.

There is a second way in which decentralization can obscure who is responsible for policy. It can provide ammunition for motivated reasoning. Voters are often motivated to interpret information in a way that shows their party in a good light (Lenz 2012; Lodge and Taber 2013). When the party in power at local and national level 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'll tend

to think that the failure is due to national government. If they are co-partisans with the national party, they will tend to think that the failure is due to the local government. Decentralization often, perhaps most often, destroys voter's knowledge of responsibility because it allows them to fool themselves into thinking their co-partisans are not responsible for policy failures (Golder et al. 2017, ch.7; León and Orriols 2019).

This is a serious worry about the argument for decentralization. To respond to it, we need to sharpen our understanding of democratic autonomy. So far, I've talked about it as a value. This naturally tends one to understand its significance in terms of well-being: people's lives are better when they are autonomous. This is part of how we should understand autonomy, but not the only part. Autonomy is also important as a source of rights. It's not just that my well-being is improved by being the one to decide who to marry, what career to pursue or where to live. I also have a right to decide these things. And I have this right even in cases when my having decision-making power doesn't actually improve my well-being. Suppose my parents are justifiably confident I'm making the wrong romantic decisions—that my choice of partner will make me miserable. Still, they may not forcibly intervene in my choice. I have a right to marry who I want, even when I make a bad choice. Like many rights, the right here is a right to an opportunity. I don't have the right to marry any person in particular. My beloved can turn down my proposal. But I have the right to the opportunity to marry them. I have the right to propose marriage and carry it out if my proposal is accepted.

The same is true for democratic autonomy. Not only is it good for us to be the authors of our social and political affairs. We have a right to the opportunity for such authorship. Concretely, we have a right to institutions that help maximize our opportunity to author our social and political affairs. This allows us to see how the argument for decentralization survives the concern about clarity of responsibility. Insofar as my knowledge is impaired by decentralization, it is impaired by my own doing. It is impaired because I fool myself into thinking that my party is not responsible for the policy failures it is responsible for. But this doesn't impair my opportunity to attain political knowledge. Motivated reasoners are, generally speaking, perfectly able to not engage in motivated reasoning. They often do so when one gives them small monetary incentives (Prior and Lupia 2008). And so the way in which decentralization impairs democratic autonomy does not impair the opportunity for democratic autonomy. The case for decentralization thus largely survives the worry about clarity of responsibility.

7. Coordination Problems

Imagine that most people in the country want to raise national welfare spending, but they also want to pay less taxes themselves. Overall, they prefer increased spending to paying less taxes. A worry about decentralization is that it makes 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 a lot of different regions, no regional electorate that 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 on with “less taxes” in its platform. And so all regional electorates opt for lower taxes, and so they don’t get their first choice—more 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. The worry is that such problems lead to races to the bottom on taxation and spending, to lax environmental and working conditions regulation, to excessive debt, and so on (Rodden and Wibbels 2002; Volden 2002; Cai and Treisman 2004).

What, exactly, is the issue such coordination problems pose to achieving democratic autonomy? They are two issues. First, how autonomous a choice is affected by how many adequate options one has. If one has few adequate options, then one’s choice is of diminished autonomy. Coordination problems mean it is very difficult to pick some adequate options. That reduces the number of options citizens have, and so diminishes the autonomy of their choices. Second, how much successfully bringing about an option contributes to someone’s autonomy is a function, in part, of how much they desire that option. Coordination problems make it impossible for us to choose people’s most desired option. And so they mean we’re at best lumbered with a less desired option, and so an option that contributes less to our autonomy. So coordination problems impair our authorship of our social and political affairs.

It strikes me that this is most serious problem with decentralization. But there are fixes to this problem. One approach 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. 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. These happen because people move area. High earners are incentivized to move to low tax areas while welfare beneficiaries may tend to move to more higher spending areas. This makes it financially onerous for any locality to create a high tax, high spending regime. One

solution to this problem involves equalization payments based on fiscal capacity and need. These are block grants from the central government that are lower when a locality contains more taxable income, and higher when it contains more spending need (e.g. in terms of health needs). These mean people's mobility 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, together, 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. A similar device is national referendums with double majority requirements. 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. Regional electorates have an incentive to vote for policies that would like nationally, even when they would benefit from regional defection from such policies. Yet the double majority requirement reduces the risk that referendums will be used to overrule people on local policy. The beauty of all these device is that they take away each localities ability to defect from the collectively deferred policy, and so they solve the coordination problem. It seems, then, that the coordination problems created by decentralization are superable.

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That completes my defense of the argument for decentralization from democratic autonomy. I think this is a strong argument—decentralization very plausibly increases the autonomy of ordinary citizens. In one important respect, it is therefore more democratic. We now turn to how decentralization interacts with a different aspect of democracy's value: equality.

8. What about equality?

Democracy is not only because it enables ordinary citizens to be autonomous author of government affairs. It is also valuable because it is distinctively egalitarian. Democratic equality is usually now understood in relational terms. Think about the relationship of master to slave, lord to peasant, or husband to wife in a patriarchal marriage. These are all relationships of subordination or domination. And they're all intrinsically objectionable. These relationships seem to be in part constituted by asymmetries of power. The slave is subordinated to the master in part because the master has asymmetric power over the slave. So we all have a right against being subjected to asymmetries of power. Democracy helps eradicate asymmetries of power. It does this because, in a well-functioning

democracy, everyone has one vote. Insofar as the important political decisions are made by voting, this gives everyone equal power. The second part of democracy's value, then, is that it helps minimize relationships of subordination.³

How does this value connect to decentralization? There is a straightforward argument for decentralization from democratic equality. When there are more tiers of government, usually more people hold political power. Political power isn't concentrated just in the hands of the national legislatures and executives but is distributed also among those elected to regional office. This, plausibly, constitutes a more egalitarian distribution of power. This argument is straightforward, but I don't think it identifies a very weighty reason in favor of decentralization. The problem is obvious: in most cases, very few people can be elected to regional office relative to the size of the population. In the US, for example, the median state population is about 4.5 million people, and most citizens live in much larger states than that. Very few people can actually hold regional office in this context. And so decentralization makes relatively little contribution to democratic equality.⁴

Nonetheless, equality still matters to the proper form of decentralization. Many countries have decentralized asymmetrically. That means 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 generally cannot—their policy is set centrally. Yet both English and the Scottish people have the same influence over central government. Both have a single vote in national elections.

This kind of 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. Both English and Scottish have equal power over the central government, but the central government has more power over English people than Scottish people. And Scottish people have asymmetric power over English people. If asymmetries of power are antidemocratic—and I believe that they are—then asymmetric decentralization is antidemocratic. This supports favoring the kind symmetrical decentralization one sees in the United States or Australia rather than the asymmetric decentralization of the U.K. or Spain. The simplest way to do this is to give each area a regional parliament with the same powers as every other area. So egalitarian considerations

³ For this kind of view, see (Anderson 1999; Kolodny 2014; 2023; Viehoff 2014; 2019; Lovett and Zuehl 2022). For a related view, see Christiano (1996).

⁴ For a different argument see Abizadeh (2021). Abizadeh's argument, though, rests on a particular thesis—the “power of numbers” thesis—which I believe to be false. But exploring this thesis would take us too far afield.

don't, I think, identify a particularly strong case for decentralization. But they do affect what kind of decentralization we should support.

9. Conclusion

Let me sum up. There is a straightforward case for decentralization. People know and care more about issues in their own locality than in other localities, and so giving them more power over such issues gives them more autonomy. But we've seen that the kind of decentralization new should support is quite specific. To avoid obscuring who is responsible for policy failures and successes, we should avoid shared rule by local and national governments—different areas of authority should be clearly delineated. To bypass coordination problems, we should institute devices that allow local government to bind themselves conditional on other local governments agreeing to be bound. And, to avoid generating inequalities between those in different regions, decentralization should be symmetric rather than asymmetric. It turns out, then, that how decentralization connects to democratic values molds the best kind of decentralization.

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