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The Three Worlds of Multilevel Democracy: Local Linkages, Civil Society and the Modern State

Jefferey Sellers, Anders Lidström and Yooil Bae

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The Three Worlds of Multilevel Democracy develops and applies a novel theory of democratic governance. This theory incorporates micro-level patterns of governance and civic organization at the local scale into a comparative macro-analysis of national democratic institutions. Institutions and politics at the micro-level of cities and communities provide the basis for a new perspective on national state-society relations. We demonstrate how these local patterns have developed through historical processes that were often distinct from those that gave rise to national democratic institutions, and analyze how they have shaped democratic institutions at the national level. These local patterns continue to account for significant cross-national contrasts in the quality of democracy and the performance of policy.

The theory of multilevel democracy draws on top-down accounts of state infrastructural power, on bottom-up accounts of local empowerment and fiscal federalism, on principal-agent analyses of democratic accountability, and on more general theories of institutionalism. Based upon a synthesis of these theories, we elaborate three distinct alternative models of institutional infrastructures for multilevel democracy:

1. a Local Elitist type in which local political, social or economic elites occupy the pivotal positions;
2. a Civic Localist type in which civic formations in local society play the critical roles;
3. and a Nationalized type that integrates local civic participation and governance into national policies and political organizations.

Through cluster and principal components analysis of an original cross-sectional database of institutional, fiscal, administrative, legal and survey indicators, we proceed to show that this typology captures the main varieties of local institutions and civic patterns among twenty-one contemporary developed democracies. Classifications of both governmental institutions and civil society yield similar groupings of countries. Local Elitism is the predominant type. Anglo-American democracies and Switzerland share Civic Localist characteristics. The Nordic democracies and the Netherlands correspond most closely to the Nationalized type. Survey evidence about the operational realities of local governance and intergovernmental relations confirms that practices in each group of countries correspond to what the models predict.

Next, the analysis turns to the origins and development of these multilevel systems. Their emergence follows distinct trajectories from the evolution of democracy at the national level. Their origins trace back to divergences in the process of early state formation. The precursors to multilevel democratic institutions differed in how far local institutions incorporated societal groups beyond elites into the process of local governance, and how firmly local participatory institutions were embedded in the peak institutions of emerging states. These precursors continued to influence the subsequent formation of multilevel democratic institutions.

Across most of the developed world, the introduction of systems of local government and territorial administration in the nineteenth century laid the foundations of contemporary local governance. In Local Elitist countries these territorial reforms generally preceded national democratization, and reinforced the position of elites. In Civic Localist countries, however, these developments followed national democratization, or played out in tandem with it. In Nationalized countries local government preceded full democratization, but provided local participatory

opportunities for groups beyond elites. Along with existing state institutions, rates of urbanization and threats to elite rule influenced these developments. Many of the same influences contributed to cross-national contrasts in the formation of organized civil society over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Local states, as elements in the wider political order of nation-states, helped shape the different varieties of civic, economic and political organization that emerged in each type of setting.

A final formative stage in the development of local governance infrastructures was the institutionalization of new domains of policymaking and implementation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In each type of institutional infrastructure, the policy state assumed a characteristically different form that reflected established local institutions and patterns of civic organization. In the Local Elitist countries, new policymaking institutions strengthened the position of elites and state administrative hierarchies. In Nationalized infrastructures, they reinforced the already strong role of local governments with responsibilities and capacities to make policy, and created new bases for institutional integration between local and national levels. In Civic Localist settings, they established new administrative hierarchies that sometimes reinforced and sometimes marginalized local participatory institutions.

The last chapter draws on a total of 50 indicators to compare policy performance and the quality of democracy under each type of multilevel democratic system. Measures employed include citizen assessments from the International Social Survey Program, the World Bank Governance indicators, local elite surveys and specific indicators of social, economic and environmental policy performance. In the Local Elitist countries these indicators demonstrate consistently weaker policy performance and lower democratic quality. In the Nationalized countries both policy performance and democratic quality are consistently high. In the Civic Localist countries policy performance remains mixed despite strong support among citizens for the quality of democracy. We argue that the theory of multilevel democracy provides a more accurate explanation of these differences in performance than previous explanations based on national democratic institutions, welfare states, or varieties of capitalism. Recent developments in each set of countries continue to reflect characteristic tendencies of each model.

A postscript to the book, to be elaborated in a second volume, considers the lessons from the analysis for building multilevel democratic institutions in the contemporary developing world. Local Elitist infrastructures of government there have been perpetuated through decades or even centuries of rule from the top down. However, in a number of developing countries, civic mobilization poses growing challenges to local elites, and more robust forms of multilevel democracy have begun to emerge.