

PLURALISM AND DECENTRALIZATION IN AMERICAN POLITICS*

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It is an honor to write about a subject deep to my heart. I have a triple interest in my subject. First, it is about my own country and I want to make it a better place for myself and children. Second, I am a political scientist by trade and want to study how to understand and to avoid conflicts in society. Third, I am a biased practitioners of politics as an elected member of the Utah State House of Representatives.

Let me first define what I mean here by pluralism. All societies are plural in the sense of being made up of people with different interests, values, and associations. Even in Asian society where there is essentially a common race, culture, and language, farmers have different interests from shopkeepers, Christians have different interests from buddhists or Confucianists, and higher educated people have different cultural values from those who leave school earlier. America is plural in a much broader sense. Being made up of all the races there are and a good number of the religions of the world, you just multiply the diversity of interests to a greater extent.

Let me give you examples in brief of how that diversity of interest is spread through the United States by broad regions. If you will refer to Table One you can see some generalizations about the differences of regions. You can also see that individual states are also quite different

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from each other.

Such pluralism of interest is not new to the United States. Puritans settled Massachusetts, Catholics Maryland, Quakers Pennsylvania, Dutch in New York and so. Businesses and occupations differed as well. This diversity plus animosity towards centralized government under the British Crown created a conflict situation in which the representatives of the states demanded a reasonable amount of decentralization within a

Table 1

Regional Diversity in the United States
(Examples Only)

Northeastern States:

Heavy Industries, Labor Unions, Ethnic Diversity, Catholics, Jews — Liberal Democrat

Southern States:

Textiles, Weak Unions, White Protestants, Black Rural Populations, Low Education —Conservative Democrat

Midwestern States:

Grain Farming, Industry, Labor and Farm Unions, White Protestants, Black Cities —Mixed Republican and Democrat

Mountain States:

Light Industries, Mining, Weak Unions, White Protestants and Mormons, Blacks, Indians and Mexicans, Senior High Education—Leaning Republican

Western States:

Cattle, Diversity of Industry and Occupation and Unions, High Education, Mixed Religion and Races, Leisure Life—Mixed Republican and Democrat

State Differences

Hawaii: Polynesians, Anglos, and Asians.

Minnesota: Scandinavians.

Utah: Strong Mormon religious influence.

Florida: Oriented to tourism.

Michigan: Automobile industry.

West Virginia: Coal mines.

Nevada: Legalized gambling.

Pennsylvania: Steel Industry.

Georgia: President Carter.

federal framework.

A federal system is definable as one in which rights and powers granted to the local governments are *irrevocable* — once given they cannot be taken back without agreement of the parts. Unitary forms of government, on the other hand, may grant rights or powers to local government, but they are always *revocable*. England is such a unitary government. Japan, which I have been comparing this year, speaks of a “principle of local autonomy” in its constitution, but it falls short of federalism by making the enactment of local autonomy subject to laws made at the center.

In spite of the irrevocable rights of the American states, they are still part of “an indestructible union” made up of “indestructible states”— as Chief Justice Salmon Chase termed it in 1869. The National Constitution is the indestructible link between the two levels, but each level was intended to be an independent entity in certain spheres of the lives of the people. Each level had its own legislature, courts, and executive and each state even has its own constitution. Thus we have both strong national and strong state governments.

The national government in Article I, Section 8 of the U. S. Constitution is granted 17 specific grants of power related to needs of the whole —foreign policy, defense, debts, post office, interstate commerce, coining money, and general welfare of all the people. It is also given an 18th general grant of power to do whatever is “necessary and proper” for doing the other 17 things. In event of conflict with the states, the national government and its laws were to be considered supreme.

The states reaffirmed in the Tenth Amendment that those powers not delegated to the national government would remain with them, and, in most cases, these continue to be the case. In my role as a Utah State legislator, we act under our own constitution and without reference to the national government we make laws related to property and its use, offense against people or property, marriage and divorce, regulation of business, labor, and industry, education, welfare, health, roads, bridges, and canals. We control and organize local governments (and within the states we are more like a unitary government relative to our counties, cities, and towns).

Thus, in the beginning there was a fairly equal partnership of state and national governments, with powers divided as above, and shared in

some areas—both tax and both spend for general welfare. It is difficult, as you know, for power to remain perfectly balanced. Several events have occurred over the years to gradually give the national government a more dominant position — but I must warn that the states have generally been considered to have expanded in their functions in the state; the fact is that both levels were growing. It might be argued that this twin governmental growth was really at the expense of the people who had to obey and pay for two expanding governments.

I'll just briefly list the factors strengthening the national government. You are probably acquainted with these in general. First, when disputes arose between the center and the states, the arbiter was the National Supreme Court and it generally ruled in favor of the national government. Perhaps the most important event was the Civil War which settled the point that the union must be indestructible—the states can act independently in their sphere, but they cannot secede. A third factor was the Fourteenth Amendment following the Civil War. By requiring states to provide equal protection for all citizens, it has set the stage for the national government and the Supreme Court to require states to protect civil rights of Blacks, both in education and in segregation of public facilities.

Fourth, the national government has also used its power to regulate interstate commerce to become involved in regulation of labor, of working conditions, and of quality of goods. Each of these steps was a centralization of powers originally in the states and in some way ignored the pluralism of the states and regions—perhaps on purpose.

Additional steps to centralization have been various assistance programs to education, beginning prior to the 19th Century. The 16th Amendment probably has been the key factor, because it allowed the national government to levy direct income taxes, vastly expanding its abilities to raise and disburse funds—which they began to do immediately at the request of the states. Grants were given for education, public health, and highway building.

The Great Depression of the 1930's made the states even more dependent upon the national government for more and more grants of money to help in many areas of state responsibility—upgrading police departments, expanding welfare, education for handicapped children—literally

hundreds of programs. Each program included some requirement for the states to pass certain laws or else not receive the money. National bureaucrats came to check up and oversee programs.

World War II and the Cold War created a situation where an even larger number of grants could be made in the name of national defense. I studied Chinese and Japanese languages under a National Defense Grant. The expressways across the United States are 90% national funds and called "defense highways". The peak of grants was under Presidents Johnson and Nixon. Under Nixon they began to just give money, without strings or programs—called "revenue sharing", but every year attempts are made to attach strings—particularly for women or minority groups. Today, I estimate that some 40% of the expenditures in my state are from the national government. In Japan it is about 70% and they speak of "30% autonomy". Do we have 60% autonomy? I don't believe autonomy can be divided. The Chinese characters for autonomy "自治" literally mean rule over oneself. Can you rule yourself only 60%?

There are good arguments for national government programs— (1) priorities can be established to aid areas and states in real need; (2) it supplements weaker local tax systems; and (3) it provides more uniform services in education, welfare, health and safety throughout the country.

On the other hand, in so doing it has: (1) created programs that are often in direct conflict with each other (highways to help the middle class leave cities and urban renewal to get them to move back); (2) created far too many programs and most are not really successful; and (3) created a huge overarching national bureaucracy, assuming that they know better than state officials what is good for everyone.

There is a mood abroad in America that there has been too much movement toward the national government. There is still a great deal of pluralism. Each state and region has its unique needs and values. I would like to present here the argument for some decentralization of the American system—some of which I believe apply equally to unitary systems as well.

First, strong national government creates conflicts between itself and the people. This conflict can be reduced by decentralizing the authority over the people. This is particularly true where the people are pluralistic in nature. I understand that even the Soviet Union is granting some

rights to its diverse races to maintain some elements of their culture and traditions. They would have even more conflict if they did not do this. Not all conflicts can be decentralized. The rights of Blacks or the freedom of slaves would never have come this way because the local white leaders would not give up their own privileges voluntarily.

Second, decentralization distributes power out over many leaders and is a check on tyranny at the center. An American governor or mayor is by no means a subordinate to the President. The political meaning of pluralism is that power is distributed among competing groups in society. While the Democrats may control the national government, Republicans may stay alive by controlling state governments.

Third, decentralization allows almost a million Americans to hold public office—and broader participation is a further means of reducing conflict in a society. If a person is desirous of participating, there is no question he can find the opportunity. I first held a minor party office as chairman of my voting district. Then I ran for and won a position (by election) to my city board of education. Later, I ran for the State House of Representatives. Each step prepared me for the next. I will probably not go further, but many like myself try for state office or the U. S. Congress from this level. So it is also a training ground for other offices.

Fourth, decentralization of government has also kept the political parties decentralized. Each party has a national, state, county, and local level and each level is quite independent in choosing candidates at the own level and even making policy statements. This reinforces the influence of the local people on their local government.

Fifth, government remains closer to the people if it is decentralized. The most common daily needs of people—their health, education, safety, and welfare is in the hands of people they know and see to some extent. This level of government should be more responsive and responsible.

Sixth, decentralization is recognition of the plural and diverse nature of values and needs in complex societies, and it promotes the continuation of such diversity. If we want to keep our societies lively and interesting, then we need to encourage and cultivate rather than stifle the unique differences encountered. I chose Utah for my home because it is different from California or Florida where I have lived.

Seventh, decentralization promotes innovation in solving problems, whether unique to a state or common to all. With fifty states working on the problems of decaying cities or control of crime, solutions are more likely than if only one central government bureaucracy tackles the problem. Furthermore, some states have problems not encountered in other states, and freedom to handle those problems is essential. Once states solve problems, they exchange information through conferences and so-called "model laws", which other states can adapt to their needs. Recent "model laws" have been adopted in my state on consumer protection, safety and traffic, and probate of estates, but each was altered to suit our needs.

Finally, decentralized government is smaller and so it is more manageable. The hierarchy of government from the top in Washington to the towns of rural Utah is too extended. As much as possible, that town should handle its own money. The old Han dynasty bureaucracy where all of China was decentralized under the benevolent guidance of relatively few central bureaucrats is perhaps a good model in modern times as well.

I am personally working towards my state having more control over its own state level needs—uniform quality education, well paved roads, quality welfare, and employment stability. And I work to encourage our counties and cities—and our autonomous school boards—to have control over their sphere of services, without state interference. I really believe our quality of life will improve and our levels of political conflict will go down, and the real purpose of government is to manage conflict.

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