Centralization and Decentralization in Administration and Politics: Assessing Territorial Dimensions of Authority and Power

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Throughout the world, diverse countries are implementing programs of decentralization as a means of promoting both democratic and developmental objectives. Unfortunately, however, scholarship has yet to offer a comprehensive framework within which to assess and reform central-local relations. This article seeks to overcome the “division of labor” that has long separated analyses of administrative and political structures, and to provide stronger conceptual vocabulary for describing and analyzing the complexities of centralization and decentralization in both administration and politics. After developing two distinct continua of administrative and political centralization/decentralization, the paper then combines them in a single matrix able to highlight the wide range of strategies and outcomes that emerge from the complex interplay of the two spheres. Depending on where a country lies within the matrix, it is argued, strategies of decentralization may do more harm than good. Strategies of devolution are especially problematic in settings with strong local bosses, and should never be attempted without careful analysis of the preexisting character of central-local ties.

In recent decades, the decentralization of governmental functions has at various times been declared “a very fashionable idea,” “the latest fashion,” and “a fashion of our time” (quoting, respectively, Kristol, 19; Conyers 1983, 97; and Manor, 1). As this trend has gained favor in both scholarship and policy circles, diverse countries are implementing programs of decentralization as a means of promoting both democratic and developmental objectives. According to a 1994 World Bank study, 63 of the world’s 75 developing and transitional countries with populations over five million profess to be involved in transferring political power to local government units (Dillinger, cited in Kingsley). This “wave of political decentralization throughout the world since the 1970s,” explains Larry Diamond (1999, 120–121), has been induced by a variety of pressures, including poor governmental performance, urbanization, democratic transition, shifts in international donor strategies, and societal demands.

Unfortunately, however, many of these initiatives often seem to rest more on faith than on strong conceptual foundations or careful analysis.
of historical and comparative experiences. While such classical theorists as Max Weber devoted considerable attention to territorial dimensions of authority and power, modern political inquiry is more likely to focus on power relations within particular institutions and among major social classes than on power relations as they extend across territories. Scholars of state formation provide valuable insights into historical processes of centralization, but the conceptual vocabulary for describing the complexities of centralization and decentralization in already established states is generally not well formulated. While “‘decentralization’ is an apparently simple term,” noted James Fesler in 1965, “the appearance is deceiving and often leads to simplistic treatments that generalize too broadly [and] start from a doctrinaire position predetermining answers to concrete problems. . . . [T]he tools of analysis we must use,” he lamented, “must be blunter than we should like” (536). Two decades later, another scholar observed that “[e]veryone knows roughly what ‘decentralization’ means, but defining it precisely presents problems because it can be used in a number of different ways and in significantly different contexts” (Conyers 1984, 187). Even today, unfortunately, scholarship has yet to offer a comprehensive framework to assist analysts and practitioners of development in both assessing and reforming central-local relations. As decentralization efforts continue to be undertaken throughout the globe, it is critical that political scientists develop clearer analytic guideposts for real world reforms.

Without denying the enormously positive results that can come from decentralization, faith alone is not a sufficient foundation for current policy initiatives. Indeed, recent experiences in such disparate settings as Brazil and Russia have shown that devolutionary strategies can at times have highly dysfunctional consequences.1 As this article will demonstrate, discerning analysis needs to replace one-size-fits-all prescriptions, particularly where powerful local bosses effectively challenge the authority of the central state. Drawing insights from literature on state formation, public administration, state-society relations, and democratic structures, I seek to provide a clearer analytic framework for understanding centralization and decentralization of administrative and political structures in both historical and contemporary polities. Before one can adequately shape decentralization initiatives or assess their impact on development and democracy, it is first necessary to define more clearly what is meant by the terms “centralization” and “decentralization.” My goal is not to provide a policy guide or to judge the impact of decentralization on development and democracy, but rather to build a stronger conceptual vocabulary for describing and analyzing the complexities of centralization and decentralization in both administration and politics.

I start my analysis with a differentiation of two commonly noted aspects of centralization and decentralization: that which exists in the administrative realm of civilian and military bureaucracies and that which exists in the political realm of legislatures, elections, political parties, patronage systems, etc.
The first section of this paper examines the “division of labor” that has long separated analyses of administrative and political structures and develops the basic distinction between authority and power as a means of promoting more comprehensive analysis of political-administrative systems. In the second section, I build an initial framework for examining centralization and decentralization in administration, while in the third section I build an initial framework for examining centralization and decentralization in politics. In each case, I demonstrate that a variety of factors must be considered in determining the degree to which any polity might be considered relatively more centralized or decentralized. The result is two distinct continua that summarize the various factors involved and provide a heuristic means of showing centralization and decentralization in each sphere. This enables analysis to go beyond the usual broad generalizations about the centralization or decentralization of the polity as a whole, and to develop more conceptually sophisticated means of differentiating the territorial dimensions of the administrative sphere from those of the political sphere.

The fourth section of this article combines the administrative continuum and the political continuum into a single matrix that allows for analysis of the complex interplay that exists between the two realms, and proceeds to provide synoptic demonstration of the applicability of this initial framework to a broad range of polities. While it is not possible to examine all the ways in which these structures interact, the more comprehensive approach found in my analysis does provide keener analytical tools for those who may seek to evaluate the conditions under which decentralization may realistically contribute to important democratic and developmental goals. In the fifth section, I draw on my framework to argue that strategies of devolution are especially problematic in settings where local bosses wield substantial power in the provinces, and should never be attempted without careful analysis of the preexisting character of central-local ties. In conclusion I propose further avenues of research, and emphasize the necessity of supplementing general observations with in-depth historical examination of the territorial dynamics of politics and administration in individual cases. By encouraging the development of a clearer conceptual framework, I hope to contribute to efforts to analyze and reshape relations between capital and countryside in disparate settings throughout the world.

Before proceeding, two important caveats are in order. First, while the focus of this analysis is limited to the territorial complexities found in the administrative and political spheres, I fully recognize that examination of any polity requires prudent attention to how both economic and sociocultural ties also exert powerful centripetal and centrifugal pressures that often vary greatly over time. Careful observers of a given country would be wise to adopt a more holistic view, and inquire not only into the administrative and political spheres but also into such matters as the regional distribution of economic activity and revenue capacity (see, e.g., Bennett; Malley; Shah; and Tilly), the degree to which
political-administrative boundaries intersect with ethnic distinctions, the territorial basis of ethnic demands in multinational states and plural societies, and territorial aspects of policy initiatives intended to conciliate ethnic diversity (see, e.g., Connor; Ghai; Horowitz; and Young). Second, this article does not attempt to resolve what are sure to be often very difficult problems of determining precisely where on the two continua (or the single matrix) a given polity should be placed. As with the concepts of state autonomy and state capacity (Skocpol), this initial framework seeks to chart the conceptual terrain but does not propose methods for definite measurement. Others are welcome to attempt such precision, but my suspicion is that B.C. Smith (1980, 139) was correct in asserting that the measurement of decentralization (and, one should add, centralization) “cannot be a precise exercise; rough judgements will have to be made.”

EXPLAINING (AND BRIDGING) THE ADMINISTRATIVE-POLITICAL DIVIDE

Scholars of public administration and scholars of politics all have a great deal to say about issues of centralization and decentralization, but unfortunately there is all too little interaction between their respective bodies of work. As Fesler (553) explained in his highly insightful 1965 analysis of decentralization, “The division of labor developed in the discipline of political science has tended to a division between those who study public administration and administrative law on the one hand, and those who study political parties, public opinion, electoral behavior, and legislative institutions and processes, on the other.” Sadly, this division continues to display some of the same problems Fesler (1965, 553) observed three decades ago: it “blind[s] each group to relevancies that the other might contribute” and “discourag[es] the development of scholars who would specifically blend the findings and approaches of the two fields.”

In order to promote sharper and more comprehensive analysis across both sides of this longstanding divide, it is important to highlight the fundamental distinction between authority and power. Put in most basic terms, the former refers to the formal roles conferred upon individuals in their official capacities, while the latter brings analysis into the far more informal means by which incumbents pursue “values, interests, and goals of their own choosing” that may diverge from the formal structures of authority (Rudolph and Rudolph, 198). Weber’s analysis of ideal types specified that, with the progressive emergence of the rational-legal state, formal structures of authority would undercut networks of power. “Bureaucracy is the means of transforming social action into rationally organized action . . . Where administration has been completely bureaucratized, the resulting system of domination is practically indestructible” (Weber, 987 [emphasis in original]). So effective is this domination, he claimed (987–988), that “[t]he individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of
the apparatus into which he has been harnessed . . . [and] is chained to his activity in his entire economic and ideological existence.”

In the real world, however, there is constant interaction between authority and power. Administrative structures can be conceived of in formal terms, for heuristic purposes, but it is clear that they are always—albeit in varying degrees—imbued with informal networks that display their own dynamics. Rudolph and Rudolph (208) have provided a corrective to Weber’s inattention to personal goals, emphasizing the degree to which informal networks of power and patrimonial features continue to pervade the formal structures of authority found even in modern bureaucratic organizations; indeed, “the struggle for power . . . is endemic in administrative relationships.” The stronger the patrimonial features, the more this struggle for power will undercut the formal rationality of structures of authority. As James Scott (1972, 92) observed of Southeast Asia over 25 years ago, “[n]ominally modern institutions such as bureaucracies and political parties . . . are often thoroughly penetrated by informal patron-client networks that undermine the formal structure of authority.”

Both sides of the administrative-political divide can share the blame for the deficiencies of current analysis. Scholars of public administration in developing countries often focus their attention on formal administrative structures, and have much less to say about informal networks of power and the impact of democratic institutions on the inner workings of a bureaucracy. Taken to the extreme, this allows one to understand only the functioning of administrative structures with a high degree of rational-legal authority that operate within an authoritarian political context. Needless to say, this is not a major category among present-day developing countries: patrimonial elements continue to be very strong in many settings, and a “third wave” of democratization has greatly reduced the number of authoritarian regimes (Huntington 1991). As explained below, however, the subfield of public administration has provided an enormous contribution in highlighting a clear distinction between two major types of administrative decentralization, deconcentration and devolution.

Scholars of legislatures, elections, parties, and patronage systems generally recognize that their mandate involves careful attention to both authority and power, as well as to the complex interactions between the two. However, while they may congratulate themselves for understanding that analysis of formal structures of authority comprises only a limited element of the world of political activity (i.e., government does not equal politics), their general inattention to territorial dimensions of power and authority provides little cause for praise. As Arthur Maass (10) observed in 1959, their focus is far more likely to be on the “capital division of powers” (how a system of governance is divided among officials and official bodies at the center) than to the “areal division of powers” (how a system of governance is divided among territorial units). In sum, neither
scholars of public administration nor scholars of politics have yet managed to construct clear comparative typologies to describe how political-administrative systems (complex amalgams of structures of authority and structures of power) are territorially organized and reorganized.

In the following two sections I will develop two distinct continua of administrative and political centralization/decentralization, and proceed in the subsequent section to put the two continua together in a way that permits analysis of the highly contrasting interactions of these two realms. As we shall see, a continuum of administrative centralization vs. decentralization can be built on the foundations of two literatures that, while they are in some ways closely related, very rarely interrelate: state formation and public administration. By contrast, the foundations for conceptualizing a broad continuum between political centralization and decentralization are surprisingly undeveloped.

CENTRALIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION IN ADMINISTRATION

Scholars of state formation have emphasized the inextricable link between the process of administrative centralization and the very creation of modern states. As Mann (1993, 55) emphasizes in a discussion that draws heavily on Weber, the modern state has come over time to “[embody] centrality, in the sense that political relations radiate to and from a center, to cover a . . . territorially demarcated area over which it exercises . . . some degree of authoritative, binding rule making, backed up by some organized physical force.” In his classic equation of war-making and state-making in Europe, Charles Tilly (15) highlights a general pattern in which “extraction and struggle over the means of war created the central organizational structures of states.” In early modern Southeast Asia, explains Victor Lieberman (485), one can note a “universal, if episodically and imperfectly realized, historic trend . . . to downgrade independent border states to tributaries, tributary states to provinces, and provinces to an administrative status more comparable to that of the closely watched imperial core.” Historically, the failure to adjust administrative structures to meet the demands of interstate competition has often proven fatal; indeed, the odds of failure have far outweighed the odds of success (i.e., more states have died than endured).

This body of scholarship also gives careful attention to specific historical techniques for creating centralized administrative apparatuses (see, e.g., Scott 1998, 1–83; Tilly, 100, 114; Weber, 1042–43). The single most effective strategy of centralizing rulers was prefectoralism, a system by which “the national government divides the country into areas and places a prefect in charge of each” (Fesler 1968, 374). Fesler explains that the prefect “represents the whole government, and all specialized field agents in the area are under his supervision” (1968, 374); “he is a ‘little king’” (1962, 120). While the prefectural system is most associated with the Napoleonic reforms, it later came to be the dominant mode of administration in
colonial settings, and has more recently been found in many postcolonial authoritarian settings. It is most effective in accomplishing such basic tasks as the imposition and maintenance of law and order and the extraction of revenue and resources (Callaghy, 106).

Whether or not prefectoral systems are adopted, there exists a range of other ways by which modern states may seek to impose their administrative authority throughout the territory. A central bureau, commonly the interior ministry, often claims a leading position among other national agencies by virtue of its jurisdiction over lower-level governmental units throughout the country. When appointments are made for local posts, a centralizing state commonly favors persons who do not have (and are not likely to acquire) close ties to their area of responsibility. To ensure their loyalty to the center, they may be chosen from other regions and/or inculcated into a bureaucratic elite culture very distinct from the societal groups they are to govern. A centralizing state will also commonly try to rotate personnel on a regular basis, and attempt to do so at the first hint that an official is seeking to build a local fiefdom. Finally, a centralizing state will seek to provide regular and extensive supervision of local governments, and take particular pains to ensure that anything having to do with revenue and coercive capacity is carefully controlled by officials loyal to the capital. One element of this supervision is likely to include the authority to unseat and punish local officials whose behavior is considered inappropriate or threatening for one reason or another. It is also common for the center to require local officials to obtain permission for a range of tasks performed at the subnational level, and insist on overturning or reversing those rulings and actions of which it does not approve.

At the other end of the continuum lie diverse types of administratively decentralized polities. This may result merely from the de facto lack of integration—or disintegration—of a polity. Weber’s analysis of patrimonialism provides valuable descriptions of some of the most common ways in which polities can be quite effectively carved up by the personal interests of those who staff the administrative apparatus, as when elites are able to monopolize control over local government positions and “extend the authority which they already exercise over their own dependents to all inhabitants of a given region” (Ertman, 8). Most threatening of all to a central ruler, logically enough, is the combination of both economic and military power in the hands of a single district official; particularly in outlying areas, such independence becomes increasingly probable and can often be passed on from one generation to the next (Weber, 1044, 1051). “[T]he patrimonial ruler cannot always dare to destroy these autonomous local patrimonial powers,” writes Weber (1055); in attempting to do so, the ruler “must have an administrative organization of his own which can replace them.” In general, fear of resistance and lack of an alternative apparatus led central rulers to compromise with these local lords (Weber, 1058; see also Weber, 1040).
In recent decades, a very different sort of administrative decentralization has been promoted in a variety of contexts, particularly in the developing world. This decentralization is systematic and planned, of a de jure rather than a de facto nature. Scholars of public administration commonly distinguish between two major types of administrative decentralization along territorial lines (even if the precise definitions tend to vary from one scholar to the next). The first type, *deconcentration*, involves an intranorganizational transfer of particular functions and workloads from the central government to its regional or local offices. The capital retains the major level of authority over the content of policies, even if the field offices and officers are given some discretion over how such policies are to be carried out (a local police officer, for example, must decide whether or not an arrest is to be made). The second type, *devolution*, involves a much more extensive transfer of decision-making authority and responsibility to local government units (commonly regions, provinces, and/or municipalities). The corporate status of these local bodies is commonly constitutionally guaranteed in a federal system, and legislatively granted in a unitary polity7 (Rondinelli, 189; Cohen and Peterson, 10; and Blair 1995, 3).

Analysis of the process of de jure decentralization also requires understanding the basic manner in which administrative structures have been and are to be territorially divided. “All except the tiniest countries have a national government and local governments,” explains Fesler (1973, 4); most have at least one intermediate level of provinces, states, or regions. As such, an important question of decentralization, whether deconcentration or devolution, involves specification of which level is to be strengthened. It is quite possible, for example, that “decentralization” could build up the provinces at the expense of both the national and the municipal levels of government. This process may lack a name, but it does exist as an empirical reality.8

One further important consideration in assessing efforts to decentralize administrative structures relates to what Fesler (1973) concisely refers to as “area” versus “function.” There are inherent, universal, and irreconcilable tensions, he argues, between two “strikingly different ways of defining the parts into which the whole can be divided”: area-based specialization (as in prefectoral systems, where prefects are responsible for implementing all aspects of national policy within their subnational units) and function-based specialization (when each national department maintains its own field staff of specialists, responsible for implementing the particular programs of that functionally defined department throughout the country) (Fesler 1973, 4). Conflicts between area and function exist within any system (regardless of which tendency may be dominant), and one can find many variants that combine elements of both major models (Fesler 1973, 4–6). The implications of this distinction will be discussed further below; while further comparative research is needed, I will suggest that the impact of de jure decentralization in a primarily area-based
system differs in quite fundamental ways from that in a primarily function-based system.

These insights from scholarship on state formation and public administration provide the conceptual tools for building a heuristic continuum along which territorial dimensions of administrative structures can be placed in comparative perspective. At either end of the continuum, Fesler (1968, 371) explains, are polar extremes that do not exist in the real world: “Total decentralization would require the withering away of the state, whereas total centralization would imperil the state’s capacity to perform its functions.” We lack any single term for the center of the continuum, he further notes, as well as for the “centralization-decentralization” continuum as a whole (1968, 371). The utility of the continuum, however, lies in its ability to capture variation (whether cross-national or diachronic) among particular administrative systems. Lexical deficiencies can be largely overcome simply by noting that a system is, in comparative perspective, either more or less centralized or more or less decentralized. Even if judgments are unlikely to be “a precise exercise,” as explained above, it is critical that they build upon careful study of the historical specificities of any given polity.

In constructing a continuum that summarizes the various factors discussed above, we can say that toward the centralized side lie prefectoral systems, and toward the decentralized side lie administrative systems with strong and autonomous “local patrimonial powers” and/or systems in which high levels of authority and responsibility have been devolved (not merely deconcentrated) to the local (not merely the provincial) level. In making further assessments, one must examine the overall degree to which central governments are able to impose their administrative authority over regions and localities through such means as 1) the creation of strong and effective ministries of the interior; 2) the capacity to appoint and rotate personnel and to inculcate their loyalty (and thus prevent the creation of local fiefdoms); and 3) the ability to control and/or supervise the activities of regional and local units and officials, particularly in fiscal and coercive matters (in simplest terms, one must assess who controls the money and the guns). It is important to emphasize that the placement of a particular administrative system on the continuum requires careful comparative historical analysis.

If the world consisted only of authoritarian governments, the administrative continuum would provide a generally adequate framework for assessing the territorial dimensions of a given polity. In order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the degree of centralization or decentralization in most present-day governmental systems, however, one must examine both its administrative and its political elements.
CENTRALIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION IN POLITICS

To the extent that scholars have attempted to examine political aspects of centralization and decentralization, frameworks from public administration have commonly served as the starting point. Most notably, scholars of “democratic decentralization” have modified administrative concepts to include attention to elected bodies and popular participation at the local level. Such an approach is found in two recent political analyses of decentralization, one written for the World Bank and the other for the U.S. Agency for International Development (both donor agencies that have taken the lead in promoting decentralization in developing countries). In the first, James Manor (6–8, emphasis added) uses the terms “devolution” or “democratic decentralization” to describe “the transfer of resources and power (and often, tasks) to lower-level authorities which are largely or wholly independent of higher levels of government, and which are ‘democratic’ in some way and to some degree.” Election of local officials is the standard form of local democracy, but it may also include other less conventional arrangements that promote popular participation at the local level.

In the second, Harry Blair modifies such public administration concepts as deconcentration and devolution “to include [major] elements of democracy,” the most important element of which is subnational governments that are popularly accountable and accessible (both through elections and through lobbying or advocacy activities) (Blair 1996, 4). The conventional taxonomy of decentralization, he writes (4; emphasis in original), does not imply any necessary democratic component, understandably enough insomuch as it came into being as part of the theory and practice of public administration, long before democracy appeared as a major component of the international development agenda in the mid- to later 1980s. . . while the devolutionary variant implies a degree of democracy, it does not require that the local bodies receiving newly decentralized authority be democratically constituted at all.

In “amending” the old classification and promoting “decision-making within democratically elected local governments,” Blair uses the terms “democratic decentralization” and “democratic local governance” (Blair 1996, 4).

Together and separately, these analyses represent a quantum leap over much of the public administration literature that preceded them. In terms of integrating spatial dimensions of political structures with the more well-developed literature on spatial dimensions of administrative structures, however, they display three fundamental problems. First, the admirable goal of modifying public administration frameworks to incorporate political aspects of decentralization often ends up conflating the distinct (albeit closely interacting) realms of administrative and political centralization/decentralization. As this article seeks to demonstrate, the analytical solution is first to conceive of two separate continua (one in the
administrative sphere and the other in the political sphere) and then to assess the wide range of strategies and outcomes that emerge from the complex interplay of these two spheres. The second problem is closely related to the first: in promoting “democratic decentralization,” both analyses tend to focus on the presence and character of local-level democracy, and largely ignore the national political environment in which such structures exist. As I will argue below, a construction of the continuum of political centralization versus decentralization requires careful analysis of political institutions at both the local and the national level.

The third problem with the “democratic decentralization” literature is a commonly implicit—and sometimes explicit—association of democracy and decentralization. As one scholar of democratic decentralization summarizes this logic, “the closer representative government is brought to the citizens of a society, both spatially and physically, the more it approximates ‘real’ democracy. Conversely, the more distant and less accessible representative government is to the citizenry, the less it is democratic” (Barkan, 1). If the goal is to build analysis rather than propagate faith, it is essential to move beyond the association of authoritarianism with centralization and democracy with decentralization. For example, a warlord-ridden authoritarian polity is likely to be far less centralized, both administratively and politically, than are many well-functioning democracies. It is also important to recall that in the American South a generation ago central action was necessary to confront local interests who used the rhetoric of “states’ rights” to curb civil rights and perpetuate undemocratic electoral structures (see Holmes and Sunstein, 56–57). The process of decentralization may sometimes promote democracy, but it is quite easy to conceive of an “autocratic decentralization” in situations where authority is devolved to authoritarian enclaves at the local level. Conversely, centralization may sometimes promote authoritarianism, but (as analyzed further below) certain centralizing measures can at times be an effective force for democratization.

With the limitations of previous approaches thus highlighted, it is now possible to examine which types of political structures are most associated with centralization and which are most associated with decentralization, and proceed to build a continuum of political centralization and decentralization that is able to summarize major factors involved and thus graphically display both cross-national and diachronic variation. I will do so by offering a series of questions useful both in analyzing particular polities and in moving toward the comparative goal of placing polities on a continuum of most centralized to most decentralized. It is important to stress the preliminary character of this inquiry; the weakness of existing conceptualization of territorial dimensions of politics necessitates much theoretical brush-clearing, and in the end I will only be able to propose an initial framework of analysis that will require testing and refinement through comparative research.
As noted above, analysis of the centralization versus decentralization of a given political system requires examination of a range of local and national political factors. To begin, we can draw on the insights of scholars of “democratic decentralization” and their focus on the character of local politics, and ask the following questions:

1) Are local executives appointed by the center or elected by popular vote? As noted above, a major concern of public administration is the degree to which decision-making authority is devolved to the local level. From a political standpoint, this needs to be complemented by careful attention to the character of the local government. Local officials appointed by the center are likely to be part of a larger national hierarchy reaching from the capital city to the periphery, especially if they are readily subject to transfer by the center (indeed, their mentality may be far closer to that of a bureaucrat than a politician). By contrast, officials elected by popular vote have far greater potential to represent local interests. In each case, however, other political dynamics can serve to counter these generalizations. An appointed official able to control significant electoral and/or coercive resources, for example, will have considerable bargaining power vis-à-vis the center. Conversely, an elected official’s tendencies to support local interests may be neutralized by the centralizing influence of his or her political party.14

2) Are there effective mechanisms for popular participation at the local level, either through elections or via less conventional means (e.g., institutional innovations for encouraging input from non-governmental or popular organizations)? High levels of participation can be expected to assist efforts to promote local interests vis-à-vis the center. An independent and well-developed local media, of course, can greatly assist the development of popular participation at the local level.

3) Are there municipal, provincial, state, and/or regional legislative bodies with substantial decision-making authority? The greater the scope for such local decision-making authorities, and the more institutionalized such bodies become, the more local interests can assert their own needs as against those of the center.

4) On a more informal level, is there a concentration of socioeconomic and/or coercive power in local patrons and bosses, and how do these power-holders affect the character of ostensibly democratic institutions? In particular, to what extent do local power-holders influence the election of national legislators, governors, mayors, and local legislators? The greater the concentration of local power, the more difficult it will be for the center to impose its will on the localities and regions. Weber, it will be recalled, expected the combination of economic and coercive roles in single individuals to promote a tendency toward decentralization.
In addition to focusing on the character of local politics and political structures, it is essential also to inquire into the territorial character of national politics:

5) **Is there a national legislature with significant decision-making authority?** Quite obviously, a polity that concentrates authority solely in the executive is far more centralized politically than one in which authority is shared between the executive and legislators. While this criterion does not inherently address territorial dimensions of authority, the potential for representation of diverse territorial interests is certainly heightened by the existence of a functioning legislature. Fesler (1965, 554; emphasis added) observes that democratic governments generally exhibit a “remarkably decentralist feature,” in that “‘national’ legislators have their political base in local constituencies.” It is necessary to go further and assess the degree of “local-ness” introduced by national democratic structures. The following three questions explore how the shape and character of legislatures and electoral systems affects links between legislators and their constituencies.

6) **If there are effective legislative bodies, do they function within a parliamentary or a presidential system?** According to Walter Bagehot, British parliamentarism “is framed on the principle of a single sovereign authority”; American presidentialism, on the other hand, is based “upon the principle of having many sovereign authorities” (quoted in Huntington 1968, 111). As a result, Huntington (1968, 108) explains, the British parliament is conceived more as “the collective representation of the nation,” while the American Congress is viewed more as “a collection of representatives of individual constituencies.” In the American presidential system, one finds an “intense localism” long since rejected in Westminster parliamentarism: the president is expected to represent the interests of the community as a whole, while legislators’ loyalties are to lie mainly with their constituencies (1968, 108). In sum, the potential for representation of diverse territorial interests is generally heightened by a presidential system that divides legislative authority among distinct branches.

7) **Are national legislators elected or appointed?** It seems quite apparent that, other things being equal, those appointed by the center will have far less allegiance to local concerns than those who are elected.

8) **To what extent does the electoral system provide for representation of local or regional interests in the national legislature?** A system of proportional representation (P.R.) in which the entire country is a single district provides no formal scope for representation of local or regional interests. (In addition, centralist tendencies will be strengthened to the extent that the national party determines the
selection and ranking of candidates in the P.R. system.) A single-
member district plurality electoral system, on the other hand,
provides considerable potential for representation of local and
regional interests.

9) Are political parties organized along national or local/regional lines, and
what is their level of internal cohesion? National political parties, par-
ticularly if they are cohesive and well disciplined, will have the
potential to serve as a centralizing force and curb localist tenden-
cies. One example is Khrushchev’s Soviet Union: although the
union republics were formally autonomous and there was a trend
toward administrative decentralization, the dominant, union-wide
political party (operating according to principles of “democratic
centralism”) could be counted on to “hold disintegrative tenden-
cies in check” (Fainsod, 126–27, 222, 364). Early postindependence
Nigeria offers a marked contrast, as the “close identity between
region, party, and ethnicity” established in the late colonial years
remained a problematic legacy after 1960 (Diamond 1995, 422). The
eventual emergence of parties able to claim broader cross-regional
support came about gradually through very conscious efforts to

10) To what extent are administrative structures insulated from party
patronage? Where party patronage and spoils effectively permeate
administrative structures, the character of central-local ties may be
significantly different than that one finds in settings with a strong
“constituency for bureaucratic autonomy” (Shetter, 28). In Italy,
Putnam (19) explains, patronage practices “allowed local elites
and national deputies to bargain for local interests against national
directives in return for electoral and parliamentary support. Politi-
cal channels to the center were more important than adminis-
trative channels.” Similarly, patronage-based American political
parties in the late 19th century promoted the “broad dispersion of
particularistic benefits downward to the localities at a time in
which social interactions and economic conflicts were becoming
increasingly national in scope” (Skowronek, 39). In short, demo-
cratic political systems with a strong element of patronage may
provide important informal avenues for the promotion of local
interests, and at the same time undercut the supervisory capacity
of the center. Shetter explains that the historical timing of the cre-
ation of modern bureaucracies and the emergence of mass political
participation is of critical importance in determining the relative
strength of a “constituency for bureaucratic autonomy” versus a
“constituency for patronage.” To state his nuanced argument in
simplest terms, if the formation of a “constituency for bureaucratic
autonomy” has preceded the mobilization of a mass electorate (as
in Germany), parties will be unlikely to control the administrative
structures through spoils and patronage; if the timing is reversed (as in Italy), patronage-ridden administrative structures are the probable result (21–60).\textsuperscript{15}

Using this framework, one can examine the particular features of a given political system and roughly determine its placement on a continuum of relatively more centralized versus relatively more decentralized. As with the counterpart continuum of administrative centralization/decentralization, of course, such a determination requires careful comparative and historical analysis.\textsuperscript{16} In general terms, however, one can expect a highly centralized political system to be one in which one finds some extensive combination of the following features: 1) local and regional officials are appointed by the center; 2) there are few avenues for political participation at the local level; 3) subnational units lack their own legislative bodies; 4) there are no local bosses to challenge the authority of the center; 5) decision-making authority at the capital is concentrated in the executive (or, if there is a national legislature, it has little real say); 6) the legislature (presuming it exists) has been established as part of a parliamentary structure, not a presidential one; 7) a significant proportion of national legislators are appointed by the center; 8) there is a P.R. electoral system (and selection of candidates within this system is determined by a national political party); 9) all political parties are national in scope, and capable of enforcing national-level decisions and strategies throughout the country; and 10) bureaucracies are well insulated from systems of patronage.

Conversely, one can expect that a highly decentralized political system will have a significant combination of the following features: 1) local and regional officials are elected by popular vote; 2) there are numerous and well-institutionalized means by which political participation can flourish at the local level; 3) local governmental units have well-established legislative bodies able to assert their interests vis-à-vis the center; 4) throughout the provinces, local bosses with high concentrations of socioeconomic and coercive power challenge the authority of the central state; 5) there is a national legislature with extensive decision-making authority; 6) the legislature is one branch of a presidential system of government; 7) all national legislators are elected, not appointed; 8) there is a single-member district plurality electoral system; 9) all political parties are local in scope and have little control over either their membership or candidates and officeholders who run for election and gain office under their banner; and 10) bureaucracies are thoroughly penetrated by systems of patronage.\textsuperscript{17}

ANALYZING (AND INTEGRATING) THE ADMINISTRATIVE AND THE POLITICAL

As argued at the outset of this paper, analyses of the administrative and political realms tend to coexist without interrelating; one still finds today the same “[neglect of] the interplay between administration and other
elements of the political system” lamented by Fesler (1968, 376) three decades ago. As an example of the need to analyze this interplay, Fesler (1965, 554) explains that “it is conceivable that decentralist legislative and political portions of the system make almost irrelevant the centralist qualities of the administrative portion of the system.” Fesler seems not to have adopted a framework that allows for a more comprehensive approach, but he does assert (1965, 554) that narrow examination of only certain portions of a political-administrative system “is clearly an inadequate way of gauging the degree of centralization or decentralization of the total governmental system.” In other words, even though he displays great awareness of the ongoing interplay of politics and administration, Fesler seems not to have provided a model able to integrate such key actors as elected officials (mayors, governors, and both national and local legislators) and the representative institutions, political parties, and patronage networks to which they are connected.18 Moreover, his valuable assertions on the need to examine both administrative and political institutions seem not to be integrated into his seminal insights on the basic distinction between area and function.

Picking up from where Fesler left off, this analysis provides a more integrated framework within which to understand how both administrative and political structures contribute to the territorial dimensions of polities. As I have shown, the first step is to conceive of two separate continua of centralization versus decentralization, one for the administrative sphere and one for the political sphere. The next step is to combine them, for heuristic purposes, on a simple two-by-two matrix (with administrative centralization vs. decentralization on the horizontal axis and political centralization vs. decentralization on the vertical axis). As with the two continua, the placement of cases requires careful comparative and historical analysis, and there will be inherent difficulties in achieving precision. While it is not possible to examine all the ways in which administrative and political structures interact, a few examples are found in the following matrix and developed briefly below to illustrate the wide degree of variation that does exist.

Even if this analysis does not resolve empirical difficulties, the disaggregation and subsequent integration of analysis of the administrative and the political spheres does encourage far greater conceptual clarity about issues of centralization and decentralization. Analysis can move beyond commonly used blanket generalizations about the character of a polity as a whole, and more clearly distinguish the territorial dimensions of the administrative sphere from those of the political sphere. Using this matrix, one can discuss two distinct types of variation: that which exists between states, and that which exists within the same state across time. In undertaking these comparisons one should note that this matrix does not pretend to capture all elements of variation in political-administrative systems. Moreover, as I emphasized at the outset of this paper, truly comprehensive analysis of the territorial dimensions of any polity must
examine not only administrative and political structures but also the impact of economic structures and social-cultural characteristics.

Another major omission from this matrix relates to a very important but all too often neglected element of differentiation among political-administrative systems—that between relatively more bureaucratic and relatively more patrimonial administrative systems. If one were to try to plot both modern-day Germany and modern-day Nigeria together on this matrix, it would be essential to not ignore this basic difference in the character of their administrative systems. As the analysis above emphasizes, relatively more rational-legal states have much greater capacity to supervise and control their peripheries than do those with strong patrimonial features.

With these difficulties readily acknowledged, it is now possible to survey briefly the examples found in the matrix. In the upper left quadrant are cases where both administrative and political structures are highly centralized. If we focus on the period after Suharto consolidated his New Order regime in the 1970s, Indonesia can quite clearly be placed in the upper reaches and left side of the quadrant: structures of a largely prefectoral character under a strong Home Ministry (with many military officers serving as governors) ensured a high degree of administrative control from Jakarta, as did the enforced loyalty of civil servants to the regime. Many aspects of the political system were also strongly oriented toward the more centralized end of the continuum: appointed (not elected) local and regional officials, few opportunities for popular participation, weak local councils, a low degree of local bossism, little real decision-making authority for a national parliament with a substantial minority of appointed members...
and a system of proportional representation for those who were elected, and highly circumscribed and centralized political parties (Emmerson; Malley; see also Sutherland; Anderson 1983).

To illustrate the lack of clear correlation between centralization and authoritarianism, it is also important to point out that Margaret Thatcher’s democratic Great Britain seems to fit well within the upper left quadrant, even if it is not an extreme case. Historically, key elements of the British political system have been very centralized, beginning with the bedrock principle of “parliamentary sovereignty” and extending to quite cohesive and centralized political parties as well as a strong “constituency for bureaucratic autonomy” whose emergence came prior to the extension of universal suffrage (Shefter, 51). This has been balanced by a strong tradition of local political participation, elected local officials, and well-established local councils. On the administrative level, Britain as a whole does not have a strong prefectoral tradition, and local governments have enjoyed a well-established role and considerable discretion over local revenue and spending. In the 1980s, however, London began to intervene more extensively in many matters that had previously been controlled at the local level, most notably in financial affairs (Stewart; Byrne, 347–48). As part of this “attack on local government,” one tier of local government was even abolished (Byrne, 347). In terms of the matrix, Thatcher’s reforms shifted Britain both upward and to the left.

An example of a country in the upper right quadrant is post-1979 China, where there has continued to be a high level of political centralization amid a process of administrative decentralization. Communist Party officials retain a dominant role in determining national policy, there are ongoing restraints on local political participation, and the scope of authority of legislative bodies remains highly circumscribed. While there are many ways in which the political system is changing at both the national and the local levels, the major priority of the leadership is to build party strength while keeping a tight rein on the character and pace of political reform (see Pei). On the administrative level, however, a high degree of decentralization has “[pushed] both decision-making discretion and financial responsibility downward, away from central ministries and offices in Beijing and out to intermediate and lower levels of the state hierarchy” (Shue, 73). The relationships between the center and subnational levels of government “have not only changed dramatically, but have done so in ways that are difficult to undo” (Montinola, Qian, and Weingast, 53).

Proceeding to the bottom left quadrant, one finds a combination of administrative centralization and political decentralization. This is not an unusual situation; as noted above, Fesler uses this example in urging greater attention to the interplay of administration and politics within “the total governmental system.” Within this quadrant, one can find countries in which central administrators promote formal procedures seeking to encourage greater accountability to the center, but both the
prerogative of a strongly territorially based legislature and an entrenched system of political patronage mean that decentralized patterns of power predominate. Authoritarian Brazil (1964–1985) provides a useful example. Administratively, this time saw a centralization of finance and policy-making and increased intervention of Brasilia at the state level (Hagopian, 44; Roett, 6). On the political continuum, however, the story is far more complex. Unlike certain other authoritarian counterparts elsewhere on the continent, Brazilian military rulers kept legislative bodies in place and held elections for all local and many state and national offices. While there were, of course, severe constraints on the authority of elected officials and bodies, their continued presence provided numerous opportunities for the endurance of the traditional political elite. As Hagopian (49) explains, this elite “controlled the national electoral network of the progovernment party, which was itself an impenetrable amalgam of private support networks of local bosses and state oligarchs.” In fact, important aspects of the military leaders’ strategies actually strengthened the position of the oligarchy (Hagopian, 52–53).

A second case is present-day democratic Thailand, where the recent rise of bossism has moved the country from the upper left to the lower left quadrant. In the late 19th century, King Chulalongkorn centralized the realm through a prefectoral system (Bunnag), and civilian and military bureaucrats in Bangkok very much dominated the kingdom into the early postwar years, to the point that it came to be labeled a “bureaucratic polity” (Riggs). While administrative structures remain quite centralized, the ability of “rural godfathers” to seize new parliamentary opportunities in recent years has shifted considerable political power away from Bangkok and toward the provinces (see Anderson 1990; Sidel 1996). Even the formerly insulated ranks of the top economic policy making agencies have felt the infiltrating influence of provincial parliamentarians and businesspersons (Phongpaichit and Baker, 349–50).

Finally, in the bottom right quadrant of the matrix one finds countries in which both politics and administration are decentralized. An extreme case is post-1991 Somalia, where a collapsed state fails to embody centrality (to recall Mann’s discussion of the modern state) and is so thoroughly challenged by the power of heavily armed clans that even the capital itself has been overwhelmed by “chaos and anarchy” (Adam, 78). Also within this quadrant but by no means an extreme case (i.e., considerably up and to the left) is the post-1986 Philippines after the fall of Ferdinand Marcos. Postwar Philippine administrative structures have often required central approval for even the most trifling of local decisions, but there is no tradition of prefectoralism and the center has a weak capacity to supervise provincial and local officials (Hutchcroft 2000). Even with this weak tradition of centralism, a sweeping decentralization initiative since 1991 has devolved considerable responsibility and authority from Manila to local government units. On the political side, the Philippines has many of the major features of a decentralized system: election of local officials, well-entrenched provincial
councils, a strong tradition of bossism, an often assertive legislature operating in a presidential system, single-member district plurality electoral rules (for the lower House), weakly institutionalized parties (almost always organized, however, along national rather than regional lines), and a longstanding spoils system through which Congress exerts a great deal of control over the bureaucracy.23

DECIPHERING DECENTRALIZATION

Through this survey of the four quadrants of the matrix, I have sought to portray the large degree of variation that exists in the interplay of administrative and political systems. At the same time, a more general lesson emerges from the framework: depending on where a country lies within the matrix, strategies of decentralization may do more harm than good. Strategies of decentralization are most logical, naturally enough, in policies that were formerly administratively and politically centralized. The devolution of authority to local governments being undertaken by Tony Blair’s Labour Government would move Great Britain rightward on the matrix; the creation of regional assemblies moves it downward (to a much more politically decentralized position than it occupied in the pre-Thatcher years).24 Administrative reforms in the late Suharto years moved Indonesia somewhat to the right, and the extensive reforms in post-Suharto Indonesia raise the possibility of moving the country toward a much less centralized position on the political continuum (O’Sullivan; Malley).

Of particular concern, by contrast, are strategies of decentralization in countries that lie in the bottom portion of the matrix, most especially if 1) they are in the bottom right quadrant and/or 2) their structures display heavily patrimonial features. Put in simplest terms, “there can be no sound decentralization until there has first been centralization” (Appleby 1945, 46). Where local bosses wield substantial coercive power, devolution may end up promoting forces hostile to democracy, while certain measures of centralization (e.g., curbing private armies) may actually promote democracy. Similarly, developmental objectives may be hindered by programs that merely end up strengthening those who already monopolize local resources—and the central government may be the only institution in the entire country able to democratize access to resources at the local level.

The decision to decentralize a polity, administratively and/or politically, is an inherently political process, commonly involving such diverse interests as national leaders, rival national politicians, central bureaucrats, local leaders, and external donors. Ideally, however, strategies of decentralization should rest on a solid understanding of the preexisting character of ties between capital and countryside. Unfortunately, the current “fashion” of decentralization often leads to a presumption that it is a valuable goal in itself, and there is often a failure—due in part to the
weakness of existing conceptual vocabulary—to assess adequately the political-administrative system that is the object of reform. Sadly, Fesler’s (1965, 549) sardonic commentary on certain knee-jerk impulses bears repeating today: “[D]ecentralization is not so absolute, so unmixed, a good that one’s responsibility as a political scientist can be discharged by operating from the premise of ‘the more decentralization the better’.”

In terms of the matrix, it is important to know which quadrant a country lies within before determining whether decentralization should proceed; if it is to be pursued (and there are certainly many settings in which various combinations of administrative and political decentralization can promote valuable democratic and developmental goals), one must determine how it should best be crafted.

Many, of course, would find problematic the assertion that centralization can in some instances actually promote democracy. In Developing Democracy (1999), Diamond presents what is probably the most articulate and well-reasoned “case for decentralization” in the current literature. He surveys five ways in which decentralization can “deepen and consolidate democracy in larger states” (121): by nurturing democratic values, increasing accountability and responsiveness to local interests, providing new channels of access for those who have formerly been marginalized, promoting checks on the power of the central government, and giving opportunities for oppositions to have some chunk of political power (1999, 121–132). He then proceeds to acknowledge five “pitfalls of decentralization” (132), including its potential to: create or deepen local enclaves of authoritarianism, encourage intolerance toward minorities, exacerbate inequalities, promote redundancy and waste, and foster greater ethnic or national consciousness (1999, 132–38, 155–57). He further notes that decentralization faces many important challenges, including weak state capacities at all levels, shaky financial viability of local government units, difficulties in determining the optimal size of local government, and problems overcoming the legacies of authoritarianism (1999, 138–145). Amid this carefully balanced analysis, he very explicitly shows (1999, 160) how decentralization is no panacea, singling out the case of post-1985 Brazil as a prime exhibit of failure.

Nevertheless, underlying Diamond’s analysis as a whole is a clear presumption that decentralization is the correct strategy. Even if he acknowledges that decentralization may exacerbate such major problems as “authoritarian enclaves,” the converse argument (that measures of centralization may in certain cases actually lead to preferable outcomes) is unfortunately given little validity. In other words, while Diamond does take analysis far beyond the more faith-based work of other advocates of decentralization, residual faith nonetheless seems to color the character of his prescriptions. He does imply at one point that “culture and politics” may not always favor devolution, but overall he asserts that “the solution to the pitfalls and pathologies of decentralization is not centralization but empowerment”—through broader local participation, transparent
governmental procedures, and a free press—and “balance”—to ensure that central governments can intervene at the subnational level to protect minority rights and the rule of law (1999, 120, 137). As he concludes (1999, 159; emphasis added), “Centralized government may or may not be more efficient, but it is intrinsically less democratic. Only if political power over certain issues and government functions is devolved to lower levels of authority, democratically elected, can government be truly responsive, representative, and accountable.”

It is true that certain aspects of centralization are appropriately associated with authoritarianism (as the extreme case of political centralization, outlined above, demonstrates). Other aspects of centralization, however, are quite compatible with democratic principles—e.g., the politically centralizing character of parliamentary government, P.R. electoral systems, and cohesive national political parties. Moreover, a polity that is extremely decentralized politically may exhibit strikingly undemocratic features, most notably the prevalence of local bossism. In these instances, it may be necessary to go against the prevailing doctrine and acknowledge that certain measures of centralization are essential to the process of democratization.

Even where decentralization is the chosen strategy, Fesler (1965, 549) emphasizes, central action is the key to success:

[O]ne of the most curious aspects of decentralization is the responsibility that a national government must assume to assure realization of the goals that decentralization, as doctrinally advocated, is supposed to serve. National legislation, overriding local objections and implemented by national administrative action, is often required to democratize the selection of local officials, to establish viable units of local government with the size, resources, and diversity of interests that are preconditions of effective local self-government, to recruit and train skilled staff for local administration, to minimize corruption and regularize fiscal practices, and to provide grants from national revenue to help finance the more impoverished communities. The paradox is often by-passed by the congratulatory thought that this is all for the good end: decentralization.

For those countries that begin strategies of decentralization without a strong foundation of prior centralization, the tasks at hand may be insurmountable.25

On a somewhat more technical note, strategic crafting of decentralization initiatives also requires consideration of Fesler’s basic distinction between area and function. The impact of administrative decentralization in a primarily area-based system will provide different opportunities for mechanisms of local political participation than will administrative decentralization in a primarily function-based system. Prefectoralism, it will be recalled, has a strong association with authoritarianism: the prefect represents the entire government within an area, and the major tasks are generally revenue extraction and the maintenance of law and order. Devolution of authority within a prefectoral system provides a ready means by which local democratic structures can take over the “generalist”
responsibilities formerly overseen by the prefect; decentralization of a function-based system does not prevent local political participation, but it will necessarily involve a much narrower segment of the citizenry (e.g., as found in the citizen boards affiliated with soil conservation districts in the United States). Ironically enough, it may be the case that the most well-developed form of administrative centralization—prefectoralism—provides an excellent foundation for the subsequent emergence of local democracy.

Regardless of the precise historical circumstances that precede a process of decentralization, it must be recognized that the emergence of local structures of governance cannot be analyzed separately from those that have developed at the center. As Francesco Kjellberg argues in his analysis of Western democracies, the development of both local government and increasing central government interest in local affairs has been part of a more general historical expansion of state structures. In the process, “local government was more and more entwined with the domain of the central government” (Kjellberg, 43). Viewing central-local relations as an interconnected system of governance, he (45) proceeds to highlight three sets of values that underlie the concept of self-government: 1) to give local communities the liberty—or autonomy—to establish their own priorities; 2) to encourage the active participation of citizens in local affairs, “both [as] a goal in itself and [as] an instrument for strengthening democracy in society at large”; and 3) to promote efficiency, in part on the principle that local communities will have the greatest capacity to deal with local issues. These values are persistently rivaled, however, by the need for “central steering” to support national goals: upholding the rule of law, ensuring that public funds are efficiently utilized, promoting equity across regions, and maintaining macroeconomic stability (i.e., guarding against profligate local governments). Kjellberg (40–50) thus reminds us that in shaping relations between capital and countryside there are no easy answers and there is no point at which a stable equilibrium of power and authority is likely to be achieved.

CONCLUSION

All democratic states share a dilemma: how to shape their political-administrative systems in ways that promote both the values of local governance and the goals of the national community. For many, decentralization has become a one-size-fits-all prescription worthy of adoption across a wide variety of national contexts. In this article, I have developed an initial framework that moves discussion beyond statements of faith and the residuals thereof and toward more careful assessment of the territorial dimensions of power and authority. Drawing from diverse strands of scholarship, I began by building two distinctive continua of centralization versus decentralization, one for the administrative sphere and one for the political sphere. Attempting to overcome what has been a longstanding
division of labor between the study of administrative and political systems, I proceeded to integrate the two continua into a single framework able to demonstrate critical elements of interplay between these two spheres. This framework not only encourages sharper comparison of the enormous variation that exists in territorial dimensions of political-administrative systems, but also highlights the simple (but often neglected) need to shape strategies of reform that are carefully attuned to the preexisting character of central-local ties. Especially where local bosses exert a great deal of coercive and socioeconomic power in the provinces, I demonstrate analytically, strategies of devolution need to be approached with extreme caution.

Issues of centralization and decentralization are indeed complex, and it is impossible to demonstrate the countless ways in which administrative and political structures actually interact along territorial lines. The analysis of this article does not seek to deny these complexities through the creation of a parsimonious model with little relation to empirical reality. Instead, my strategy has been to create an initial conceptual framework intended to provide clearer conceptual vocabulary for analyzing the great variation that does exist. In addition, my objective has been to promote keener evaluation of the conditions under which decentralization may realistically contribute to important democratic and developmental goals. Further research is needed to be able better to specify and to weigh the relative importance of elements of variation on both continua in greater detail (even if precise measurement is likely to remain an elusive goal), and to better understand the highly contrasting character of interplay between the two spheres. Most of all, this initial framework of analysis requires testing and refinement through careful historically grounded and comparatively attuned research into central-local relations in individual states. Much remains to be done, but this framework is intended to provide a useful foundation for further work. If contemporary reforms are to succeed, they must rest not merely on faith but also on discerning analysis. Political science can no longer afford to be caught flat-footed in its failure to provide useful conceptualization of territorial dimensions of authority and power—particularly as decentralization initiatives proceed the world over.

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Notes

1. In Brazil, excesses of decentralization have been blamed for the severe fiscal imbalances that contributed in fundamental ways to recent economic woes (Diamond 1999, 137; Rohter; Willis, Garman, and Haggard, 23). Governors and mayors, who are themselves pivotal figures in electoral networks that project local power to the national level, routinely challenge the authority of national executives. Problems of rural violence plague many areas, as central government agrarian reform programs are held hostage by local landlords and their private squads of “pistoleiros” (Human Rights Watch). In Russia, early optimism over the devolution of power to the provinces has been replaced by concern over “the regionalization of autocracy”: local leaders have become adept at strong-arming opposition groups, manipulating democratic processes (especially in rural areas), ignoring central policy directives, withholding revenue from the center, and circumventing constitutional processes (Hale; Stoner-Weiss).

2. Fesler’s work provides some of the most valuable foundations upon which the current analysis rests. As we shall see, however, he left certain important questions unanswered. It is also important to emphasize that throughout the analysis that follows I heartily concur with Cohen and Peterson on the need to build on literatures from earlier times in creating an analysis relevant to the present. As they assert (2), “Dismissing [older literature] and starting afresh, as seems common in the mid-1990s, is both lazy and wrong-headed.”

3. Michael Mann’s (1986, 1993) work helps to provide clearer analysis of the origins of the authority-power distinction and highlight the ways in which the quest for power long preceded the development and institutionalization of structures of authority. As Mann (1986, 15) writes, “the driving force of human society is not institutionalization. History derives from restless drives that generate various networks of extensive and intensive power relations.” The most important networks, moreover, relate to the four major sources of power: ideological, economic, military, and political. Institutionalization does result, but network formation continually outpaces it; within the “interstices” of institutions there continues to be the constant creation of new networks of power (Mann 1986, 15–16, 537).

4. In analyzing the distinction between authority and power, it is important to emphasize that one should not expect a clear association of authority with administration and power with politics. Administrative structures are based on notions of formal authority, but commonly contain within them extensive networks of power (especially where patrimonial features are particularly pronounced). Political structures also rest on strong notions of formal authority (e.g., constitutional authority, legislative authority, and the authority that the leadership of a political party may claim over its rank and file), but—as the term “power politics” implies—the quest for power in political structures is probably less likely to be constrained by the institutionalization of authority than is the quest for power in administrative structures.

5. In fairness, most scholars of public administration do not reach such extremes. Neither, however, do they tend to give a comprehensive picture of the complex interactions of authority and power within political-administrative systems.
6. This is not to discount the many insights of the comparative federalism literature (see Elazar for a concise summary). Rather, it is to assert the need for more basic understanding of the terms “centralization” and “decentralization.” In any case, as many scholars of comparative federalism would agree, the distinction between unitary and federal systems fails to account for either the enormous variation found within each of these categories or the considerable overlap that exists between them (Smith 1985, 12–15).

7. A third category of administrative decentralization is delegation, of less importance to this study because it tends to have the least relevance to territorial dimensions of authority. Definitions diverge widely among the three scholars cited in this paragraph; Cohen and Peterson define it as the transfer of tasks to state-owned enterprises, regional development corporations, or private firms.

8. A useful (albeit awkward) term for this process might be “midlevelization.” For an example, see Robert Putnam’s analysis of the strengthening of Italy’s regions (18–62).

9. The latter is defined as “a system in which authority is devolved to local bodies that are accountable and accessible to their citizens, who in turn enjoy full human and legal rights in exercising political liberty” (Blair 1996, 4).

10. This is apparently not a new problem. Long ago, J.G. Bulpitt (281) lamented the way in which “[i]n political science local government is usually studied in a vacuum. . . . generally little thought is given to local government’s relationship with the overall political system which it inhabits.”

11. In criticizing the large element of faith that pervades discussion of these issues, my intent is not to excise normative considerations from analysis. Clearly, normative goals are going to be at the center of any shaping or reshaping of governmental structures (see King and Stoker). Rather, my intent is to encourage the development of a stronger analytical foundation upon which such normative judgments can be made.

12. Paul Appleby (451) forcefully argues that democracy and decentralization “have no definite relationship at all.” In imposing their power over a wide area, Appleby (451) points out, empires were decentralized and yet not democratic. He (443) rejects the term “democratic decentralization,” since it promotes the “assumption . . . that decentralisation axiomatically enhances democracy” and perpetuates the “notion rather common among citizens of democratic nations that ‘centralisation’ is evil, while ‘decentralisation’ is good.” Instead, Appleby (443) urges use of the term “decentralised democracy,” because it “correctly [assumes] that democracy has first been achieved through the establishment of a centralised governing institution designed to operate under popular control.” In his view (447), these central institutions must be maintained if democracy is to continue to be responsive to the needs of the nation as a whole. Fesler (1965, 545) similarly emphasizes that local as well as national governments take a variety of forms, and neither “has a distinctive impulse toward the democratic form”; J.G. Bulpitt sharply asserts that “the location of decision-making does not tell us everything about the nature of the decisions being made” (299; emphasis in original).

13. Because of the weaker theoretical foundations upon which analysis of the territorial dimensions of politics must rest, this discussion is structured very differently than the above analysis of the administrative sphere. Instead of encouraging a fresh integration of existing frameworks, as above, I am seeking to construct a new framework by surveying broadly the range of ways in which particular aspects of a political system may promote either centralization or decentralization.
14. These judgements require nuanced understanding of the political dynamics in particular settings, as Richard Snyder demonstrates in his analysis of the “upward accountability” and “downward responsibility” of governors in Mexico (1999: 186–88).

15. This is not to imply that the presence of a strong “constituency for bureaucratic autonomy” is necessarily associated with a centralized polity. Indeed, within the administrative structures there may be significant de jure devolution of authority and responsibility to the local level. Rather, the point is that particularistic demands of political parties on bureaucracies may provide important means of promoting local interests; to the extent that they do, this should be classified as a distinct element of political decentralization.

16. Not all of these indicators need to be present for a system to be labeled “highly centralized” or “highly decentralized” on the political continuum. In fact, some elements of the above framework are likely to be mutually inconsistent. For example, it is difficult to conceive of a polity in which there is a high level of popular participation as well as a high level of coercive power in local bosses.

17. Contrary to assertions that centralization is associated with authoritarianism, it should be noted that only five of the ten characteristics of a highly centralized political system are intrinsically antidemocratic (specifically the first, second, third, fifth, and seventh elements). The other five are quite compatible with democratic principles. Contrary to assertions that decentralization is associated with democracy, it should be noted that one of the ten characteristics of a highly decentralized political system—the fourth, regarding the prevalence of local bosses—is intrinsically anti-democratic, and another—the ninth, relating to regionally based, weak political parties—will probably promote an extremely dysfunctional democracy. The problem of local bosses is discussed further below. On how weak parties contribute to problems of governability in democratic settings, see Huntington (1968) and Kohli.

18. Similarly, a 1962 United Nations study for developing country officials begins with the ecumenical assertion that a given country’s “system of decentralization is a mosaic composed of many elements,” both administrative and political (United Nations Technical Assistance Programme, 9). It proceeds, however, to focus far more on the former than the latter, and provides no framework for examining interplay between the two.

19. This variation could be captured through construction of a three-dimensional model, but such models are inherently awkward when reproduced on the two-dimensional printed page.

20. It should also be noted that cross-national comparison is complicated by the great deal of variation that likely exists among the agencies of any given state in 1) the degree of administrative centralization and decentralization; 2) the degree to which political officials and bodies exert a centralizing or decentralizing influence; and 3) the degree to which more “rational” or more patrimonial features predominate. As with judgments about state autonomy and state capacity, characterization of the territorial dimensions of an entire political-administrative system must be made with great care. This analysis does not pretend to have resolved the difficulties, only to have sharpened the conceptual distinctions necessary for making such judgments.

21. Because these examples are presented in briefest outline, with the primary goal of illustrating a broad range of variation, advance apologies are offered to the reader for the injustices to empirical reality that inevitably result.

22. For an impassioned discussion of Margaret Thatcher’s disdain for local government and support for centralist policies, see Jenkins.
23. The Philippine Senate has 24 members who are elected nationally. This does not promote the same sort of bailiwick mentality that pervades the House, but it does produce a large number of potential rivals to the incumbent president, and thus encourages the emergence of often very assertive opposition to the Palace. On bossism in the Philippines, and the bossism model in general, see Sidel (1999).


25. Diamond agrees that weak central states present major challenges to decentralization, but does not proceed to provide a cautionary warning to leaders of such states that may be contemplating strategies of decentralization. Only in regard to “a few countries, such as Brazil” does he suggest that enhancement of state capacity depends upon strengthening the center vis-à-vis subnational levels of governments (1999, 139).

26. Support for this notion of “central steering” can actually be found in the work of J. S. Mill, who is most commonly cited as a fervent supporter of decentralized governance: “The principal business of the central authority should be to give instruction, of the local authority to apply it . . . When we desire to have a good school, we do not eliminate the teacher” (118–19). In a similar vein, Holmes and Sunstein (58) conclude that “[e]qual treatment before the law cannot be secured over a vast territory without relatively effective, honest, centralized bureaucratic agencies capable of creating and enforcing rights.” On the threats that decentralization may pose to macro-economic and other objectives, see Prud’homme.

References


