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What role do political institutions play in securing good governance? This timeless question has received renewed attention in many recent studies and is the focus of John Gerring and Strom Thacker’s *A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance*. In a crowded field, *A Centripetal Theory* is remarkable in two respects. The first of these is the authors’ concentrated focus on good governance as outcome of interest. Although a growing number of studies focus on the consequences of democratic institutions, most address only a narrow range of outcomes, be they economic, such as fiscal policy (e.g., Persson & Tabellini, 2003), or political, such as the relationship between citizens and their representatives (e.g., Powell, 2000). Far fewer studies take on the more distant association between institutional arrangements and unambiguously normative outcomes like “good governance.” Those that do, do so as extensions to some more proximal basic central investigation (e.g., Lijphart, 1999). Given difficulties in concept development, the incompleteness or timidity of previous attempts to link institutions to democratic quality is understandable. Gerring and Thacker’s attention to government performance thus is to be applauded.

Second, *A Centripetal Theory* is remarkable in the concision of its theoretical framework. Few books assimilate so many strands of democratic theory and contemporary research into so few pages to produce such a clear dichotomy. At the heart of Gerring and Thacker’s theory are the concepts of inclusion and authority. Political institutions, they maintain, should be designed to achieve these two goals. The polity must be inclusive enough to incorporate diverse interests, ideas, and identities into the political process. At the same time, the central state apparatus must have a degree of authority needed to ensure the execution and legitimacy of policy outcomes. These two concepts together produce four models of governance: anarchy (the absence of inclusion and authority), centralist (authority but not inclusion), decentralist (inclusion but not authority), and centripetal (both inclusion and authority). The introductory chapter catalogs the progenitors of and distinctions
between the last two of these ideal types. The authors highlight the extent to which decentralism has achieved a preferred status in Western political thought, noting that observers ranging from Blackstone and Locke to Montesquieu and Madison all espouse the virtues of decentralism as a check against the centralized, accountable, and corrupt power of an unchecked executive. And advocacy of decentralism remains strong, as illustrated by contemporary work on fiscal federalism, veto points, and horizontal accountability, and as advocated by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international development agencies. Centripetal ideas however are also woven into democratic theory. Emerging preferences for centralizing authority were signaled through 19th-century movements advocating institutional change, changes that amounted to forms of government that were unitary and parliamentary, with closed-list proportional representation (PR) electoral rules. These three constitutional factors, then, serve as the “prime movers” in the centripetal model of governance (p. 21).

The authors’ tracing of two dominant threads in constitutional design places the decentralist-centripetalist dichotomy on a stronger theoretical base compared to other empirical schema in the literature on comparative institutions. Centripetal theory appears more internally consistent than, for example, Lijphart’s (1999) consensus model or Henisz’s (2000) veto points model. Gerring and Thacker’s larger burden however is to find support for their claim that this nexus of institutional arrangements thought to affect factors deemed to have normative value. The burden is made greater in that outcome factors are not immediate (e.g., they do not immediately flow from institutions in the sense of Duverger’s Law). The goal of the study is instead to investigate more distal connections, linking centripetalism to indicators of good governance realized further downstream. These indicators are diverse and, we discover, include economic growth, infrastructure development, health expenditures, and democratic volatility. Why should unitarism, parliamentarism, and closed-list PR induce good governance whereas federalism/bicameralism, presidentialism, or majoritarian electoral rules should not?

To address this formidable question, Gerring and Thacker assert that political institutions are connected to quality of governance through three causal mechanisms. The most important of these is party government. Federalism adversely affects internal party coherency. Unitarism, on the other hand, facilitates the predominance of national power over regional power bases, which in turn yields incentives for coherent partywide policy. Parliamentarism also fosters party strength because the executive is chosen from the legislature and parties direct and constrain individual preferences over this choice. Finally, closed-list PR increases party strength through a selection process that minimizes incentives for personality-based politics. In short, strong parties mean that particularistic interests get converted into coherent, policy-motivated ideologies. This argument is a familiar one to political scientists, comparatists, and Americanists alike. Gerring and Thacker’s value-added is to draw on these insights to use party strength as a (the) critical mechanism linking X (institutions) to Y (quality of governance).
The authors’ reasoning supporting their other causal linkage mechanisms is not as impressive. The second casual mechanism is conflict mediation, which in practical purposes pertains to the polity’s capacity to handle identity-based (mainly ethnic) conflicts. Good governance requires conflict mediation that is fostered by centripetal rules. This is so, argue the authors, because nonunitarism (federalism and bicameralism) ossifies conflicts and works against efforts to include all groups in the national policy process. While this reasoning is plausible, it is less clear why the other two factors, parliamentarism and closed-list PR, are superior at managing conflict. Presidentialism may not be damning for ethnic conflict, especially if one entertains the many variations within presidential regimes such as the effects of election cycles and presidential coattails on party unity. And to the extent it puts upward pressure on the number of party competitors, closed-list PR may be more likely to produce antisystem parties that in turn contribute to electoral volatility. The last linkage mechanism is policy coordination. Centripetal institutions allow for the flexible administration of public law, which is preferable to rule-based approaches advocated by decentralist arguments. Here however, the authors grant little weight to parliamentary government’s tendency to often be unstable and dissolve easily—such volatility, all else equal, should not malign presidential regimes having higher bars for censuring the executive.

The authors’ empirical strategy is to develop separate measures for the indicators of centripetalism. Unitarism, parliamentarism, and closed-list PR are each measured on 3-point scales. Scales are then combined additively and a “stock”-based measure of centripetalism is created. Measuring the concept of interest, good governance, of course invites discussion and debate. Just what is “good governance”? The authors at times maintain it is to be expressed as process, other times as policy, and still other places as outcomes (pp. 101-103). Adding to the complexity, good governance is classified not only as political processes/policies/outcomes but as economic and humanitarian ones as well. The result is a set of 11 indicators that as a whole does a good job of tapping all aspects of governance that it intends to. The reader however can’t help but wonder whether certain indicators are more central to governance than others.

The theory is tested by regressing these 11 indicators on centripetalism and its components using a series of large-N cross-national panel regressions from the 1950s to 2000. Most of the variation, as the authors note, is captured spatially rather than longitudinally within a single country. Summary tables and analyses of cumulative effects all add up to support the conclusion that “the preponderance of the evidence . . . rests in favor of centripetal institutions, rather than decentralized ones” (p. 117).

In the course of their analysis, Gerring and Thacker make several choices that invite skepticism—skepticism that the authors are eager to address (indeed, most of the penultimate chapter is devoted to a defense of research design and empirical specification). Is centripetalism adequately represented by three indicators, unitarism, parliamentarism, and closed-list PR? Can each of these be expressed using simple 3-point scales (a valid point in light of the authors’ criticism of Henisz’
[2000] coding techniques; pp. 184-185)? Why, after convincingly arguing its importance in the causal story, is party government not included in the empirical tests? And why is this very short book limited to testing its argument only one way, using time-series cross-section analyses of highly aggregated macro indicators? This last question is the most important of the bunch because additional analyses—longitudinal analyses to capture pre–20th-century developments (see Boix, 2003), targeted comparative case studies, more disaggregated analyses of a subsample of countries, and so on—could go some way to addressing other concerns. An attempt to empirically model strong party government systems would be particularly helpful.

These criticisms however should not detract from the utility of this study. As the authors frequently remind us, the book’s goals are modest and the evidence is selective. Conclusions are more suggestive than definitive. In this sense, this thought-provoking work can most fruitfully be used as a point to pause and reflect on what we know about the consequences of political institutions and where we should go in the future. Others should build on Gerring and Thacker’s research to work toward the kind of refinements and reassessments that have followed other, similarly thought-provoking works in comparative social science.

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References


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Struggles over property rights have been one of the most contentious issues faced by African governments in the past few decades. They are a defining characteristic of the ongoing clashes in Zimbabwe, and they constituted a major feature of the postelection violence that occurred in Kenya. In other African countries, land