

Applying Lessons from Colonial America to Democracy Abroad

by Roger Myerson

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I want to start from EJ Dionne's new book *Our Divided Political Heart*. It is good to have a classmate who can summarize so many books in American political history for you! He argues that, since the Declaration of Independence, American political thought has been characterized by a tension between two principles: a love of individualism (*liberty* on the coin), and a reverence for community (*e pluribus unum*). At different times, each has been emphasized by advocates for business elites or populist causes.

But I would argue that we can find one coherent principle underlying the American Revolution. It was a Revolution led by provincial legislators with the guiding principle that *an assembly of representatives who are elected by their communities should have liberty to do what they want*.

Look again at the Declaration of Independence. After a few general words about individual rights, the main focus is on complaints of legislators. That the king has fatigued them by making them meet in unusual and uncomfortable places gets much more detailed discussion than some burning of towns.

As John Marshall noted, English colonial rule admirably laid the foundation for representative government in America. Why did the English do this, given that it would turn against them in 1776? From 1620 in Virginia, institutions of local self-government were granted to induce English settlers to come to America and to offer loyal service in local militias.ⁱ A formative transition was Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia in 1676.ⁱⁱ Before 1676, power in Virginia, as in many less-developed countries, became concentrated in the hands of a small privileged oligarchy, Governor William Berkeley's council and his sheriffs, and they simply stopped holding elections to the House of Burgesses for about 15 years. In 1676, the people's right to bear arms in local county militias was infringed by Gov Berkeley, and he ordered that the unauthorized militias' commander Nathaniel Bacon should be hanged. Whites and blacks then fought side by side in these militias to overthrow the colonial oligarchy. After Bacon's rebellion was suppressed, England divided power in the colony between governors sent from England and locally elected representatives from the towns and counties. But political gains for enfranchised citizens also separated them from the enslaved; Virginia's assembly passed racist laws denying legal rights to Indians and Negroes after Bacon's rebellion.

When I speak abroad about the secret of America's special political strength, this is what I tell people: The strength of this republic is deeply rooted in its unique political origin, created

not by an army or a tribe, but by the elected members of 13 separate provincial assemblies. This origin was vital for both establishing the new nation and making it durably democratic.

In 1776, every community had at least one local leader, its representative in the provincial assembly, who had a substantial vested interest in defending the new regime. This broadly distributed political strength was what made the American Revolution unbeatable, as England could not mobilize such wide political support without re-creating the assemblies.

Decentralized democracy made the new nation rich in local leaders who had held elected offices. We should understand that successful democracy requires more than just elections: For democratic competition to effectively benefit the public, voters must have a choice among candidates with proven records of public service, who have developed good reputations for exercising power responsibly in elected office. When such trusted leadership is lacking, democracy is inevitably fragile. This essential supply of trusted democratic leadership can develop best in responsible institutions of local government, where successful local leaders can prove their qualifications to become strong competitive candidates for higher office. The establishment of strong competitive democracy at the national level in America after 1789 depended on the large supply of potential candidates with proven records of public service in the 13 provinces.

America's history of democratic development from decentralized roots can offer practical lessons for supporters of new democracies in the world today.

When Iraq was occupied in 2003, among Paul Bremer's mistakes, the key may have been, not deBaathification nor dissolution of the Army, but his decree that banned local elections in Iraq. Bremer believed that institutions of local democracy must be based on a national constitution, even though it was clearly the other way around in American history.

The success of the Sunni Awakening in Anbar province in 2006 depended, not on the surge, but on the federal structure of Iraq's constitution. Sunni Awakening leaders anticipated that cooperation with American forces would position them well for political gains in Anbar's provincial government in the 2009 provincial elections. Imagine how different their position would have been if Iraq instead had a centralized presidential regime like that of Afghanistan today. Given the Shi'ite majority in Iraq, Sunni tribal sheiks in Anbar could not have expected any real influence in such a centralized system. Promises from American officers could not have given the Sunni sheiks any serious reason to risk their lives in defending a political system that had no place for them.

In Afghanistan, we have supported a presidential regime with power concentrated in the capital. It is not surprising that American forces have found many rural districts where nobody feels any personal political stake in the regime. (In contrast, local mullahs are regularly confident of a personal stake in Taliban power.) Carter Malkasian's recent book *War Comes to*

Garmser (in Helmand province) described a successful counterinsurgency strategy in which the essential key was to offer some real authority to selected local leaders. But with no constitutionally protected local autonomy, political manipulations in the capital could quickly undo the gains.

Egypt's troubled transition to democracy has not involved any decentralization of power. Local elections have been promised by Egypt's constitution but were not held, as those who hold national power (whether from the army or Islamists) have generally preferred to appoint the governors and mayors. When elections are held at both national and local levels, different factions can win a share of power in different regions, but only one candidate can win a presidential election. Without local elections, Egypt's new democracy has been a winner-take-all competition, and it is hard to build trust between different groups when only one of them can win the prize of power. So Egypt's centralized democracy has been perilously vulnerable to fears of another autocracy. Empowerment of trusted local leaders throughout the country could have reduced such fears. These questions must be decided by the people of Egypt, but America's leaders and diplomats have tried to encourage democracy there, and I worry whether they have gone beyond just urging that a president should be elected.

In summary, as an example of a good transitional regime for democratic state-building, I would recommend America's Articles of Confederation (1776-1788) which distributed power widely among thirteen locally-elected provincial assemblies. This decentralization of power admittedly created difficulties in financing the war effort, but its broadly distributed political strength was what made the American Revolution unbeatable. The wide supply of local leaders with established reputations for public service in elected office was the best guarantee that strong competitive democracy would endure here thereafter. Everybody understands that the Articles' weak national government was not suitable for the long run, but it was ideal as a transitional regime for the initial establishment of national democracy. The contrast is stark between these decentralized political structures of American history and the centralized regimes that America has often supported abroad.

<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/colonial.pdf>

ⁱ The discussion of the development of early colonial institutions in D. Acemoglu and J. Robinson's recent book, *Why Nations Fail*, is based largely on David Galenson's chapter in the *Cambridge Economic History of the United States*.

ⁱⁱ See Stephen Saunders Webb, *1676*.