

# THE STRENGTH OF AMERICAN FEDERAL DEMOCRACY

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



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*The institutions received from England were admirably calculated to lay the foundation for temperate and rational republics.*

*The materials in possession of the people, as well as their habits of thinking, were adapted only to governments in all respects representative; and such governments were universally adopted.*

*The provincial assemblies, under the influence of Congress, took up the question of independence; and many declared themselves in favor of an immediate and total separation from Great Britain.*

John Marshall (1844)

## **A nation established by thirteen provincial assemblies**

The extraordinary development of small English settlements to become the richest and most powerful nation on earth was based on the strength of a political system that was introduced early in colonial history, embraced by later immigrants.

But reformers who sought to apply American political principles in other countries often found that something essential could be lost in their translation abroad, when they neglected the decentralized federal nature of American democracy.

The United States of America was established as a independent nation by a congress of delegates from thirteen provincial assemblies, each of which consisted of representatives who were elected by their communities.

The strength of this republic is deeply rooted in its unique political origin, created not by an army or a tribe, but by the locally elected members of thirteen separate assemblies.

The 1776 Declaration of Independence consists largely of legislators' complaints. The charge that the king has fatigued legislators by making them meet in unusual and uncomfortable places gets more discussion than some burning of towns.

## **Colonial origins of representative government**

Institutions of local self-government were introduced from 1620 to induce English settlers to come to America and to offer loyal service in local militias.

Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia (1676) opposed oligarchic rule without elections. Restoration of the vindictive governor prompted capital flight and disinvestment. The British imperial government then supported the rights of the elected assembly, after Bacon's rebellion showed dangers of a strong local governor.

Rebellion of Massachusetts militias (1689) followed a suspension of the assembly and scandals of officials demanding bribes to re-confirm settlers' land claims. A multitude of small independent farmers (Jefferson's ideal) could not develop individual plots of land securely without any political voice or representation.

During the Seven-Years War (1754-63), the British government realized its colonies would provide more resources for the imperial war effort when treated like allies than when treated as subordinates whose resources could be commandeered.

But with heavy war debts after 1763, Parliament asserted its right to tax Americans, who resisted any taxation that was not approved by their own representatives. To defend the privileges of their local political autonomy, 13 autonomous colonies came together in 1776 to declare their independence as United States.

## **Benefits of decentralized federal democracy for the new republic**

America's growth and development has always been guided by the basic principles of representative democracy and a federal division of power between national and subnational governments.

These principles were vital both for establishing the new nation and for making it durably democratic.

Decentralization of power admittedly created difficulties for financing the war effort during the American Revolution.

But decentralization also gave the revolutionary movement a broadly distributed political strength that was essential to its ultimate success.

In 1776, every community had at least one widely respected leader, its local assembly representative, who had a substantial vested interest in the new regime.

The successful establishment of strong competitive democracy at the national level in America after 1788 depended on the large supply of potential candidates with proven records of public service in the thirteen former colonies.

*State governors met demand for anti-Washington presidential candidates until 2016.*

Democracy at the national level has also helped to strengthen local democratic competition, as America developed a strong system of national parties that endorsed candidates for local offices.

## **Applying ideals of democracy abroad without decentralization**

Leaders of the French Revolution looked to the American Revolution as their model. In 1789 they turned for advice to Thomas Jefferson, then America's minister to France, planning a constitutional monarchy with elected national legislature, with provincial assemblies sending delegates to an advisory Senate.

But plans for provincial assemblies came to nothing in the National Assembly. Nobody in France's central leadership had any real interest in creating new provincial assemblies which would demand a share of power.

De Tocqueville (1835): The French Revolution "declared itself the enemy at once of royalty and of provincial institutions... Its tendency was at once to republicanize and to centralize."

But plans to decentralize power to new provincial assemblies in America's unsettled western territories won strong support in Congress soon after the Revolution. The states opposed other states' expansion, or Congressional rule in the territories. So decentralized federal democracy, once established in America, created political forces for sustaining and extending itself.

## **Extending democracy at home with federal decentralization**

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 created, in each territory, a legislature with locally elected representatives, to be supervised by a federal governor with veto power until the assembly could apply for admission as an equal state.

(America's idealized reconstruction of the colonial institutions it developed from.)

By 1830s, the number of American states doubled, American population tripled. American federal democracy became an engine that could attract new citizens from around the world and with them could populate new communities and states across the entire continent.

Local elections facilitated entry of new immigrant groups into the political system.

Compared to other countries with more centralized or less democratic political systems, common citizens in America could generally feel more confident of basic legal protection for their personal investments in the new country.

Responsible officials of state and municipal governments, being accountable to their communities, had both the power and the motivation to undertake the local public investments that were essential for developing a prosperous community.

## **The inconvenience of decentralization for national elites**

Although decentralized federal democracy has proved politically stable and economically beneficial in America, many nations since the French Revolution have instead been drawn to centralized democracy.

When a transition to democracy begins with elections only at the national level, the winners acquire both an interest in centralizing power around themselves and a strong electoral mandate to lead any consideration of further reforms. So the introduction of political decentralization then becomes much more difficult.

Egypt's elected national leaders after 2011 wrote a constitution which allowed them to retain control over all local administration.

Such centralization might have seemed convenient for the short-term interests of the new national leaders, but it left Egypt's new democracy perilously vulnerable to fears of another autocracy, which could have been reduced by empowerment of different groups in local governments throughout the country.

In 2002, America supported the creation of a new centralized presidential government in Afghanistan.

With power concentrated in the capital, there were many rural districts where nobody felt any personal political stake in the government, and so its authority could be maintained only with support from foreign forces.

## **Federalism and the people**

Democratic competition in America's federal system has been strengthened by the ability of successful local leaders to compete for higher offices, and by the ability of national parties to sponsor candidates for local offices.

Responsible local governments have had the power and incentive to make the local public investments that are essential for developing a prosperous community.

The security of local democratic rights has encouraged common citizens to make their own investments in this prosperity, drew immigrants from the world.

For people who are unfamiliar with federalism or democracy, the benefits of federalism may be harder to appreciate than those of democracy.

In a federal democracy, voters must appreciate that their elected national leaders need supreme power to serve the broad interests of the whole country, but that their elected local leaders also need some autonomous power to provide local public services for their communities (*axiomatic in America before 1776*).

America was indeed greatly blessed that it had elected local governments exercising autonomous powers long before its first independent national government.

The key lesson of American history is that vigorous democratic development can depend on a balanced federal system in which the people elect responsible local governments as well as their sovereign national government.