

Local Politics in Nations and Empires

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Harris School Valedictory Lecture, 7 October 2026



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CHICAGO

This paper was written for 2nd edition of *Handbook of New Institutional Economics*, edited by Claude Ménard and Mary M. Shirley.

https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-3-031-50810-3_9

<https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/niehandbk.pdf>

These notes are available at:

<https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/harrislecturenotes.pdf>

Local politics is fundamental in human societies (not just in federal democracies).
To understand any state in history, study the relationship between the state's national leaders and local leaders of communities in the state's domain. (See Figure below.)

Local politics has been a vital part of human life since long before any states existed. Humans evolved to live in **local communities** that maintain systems of ownership or usage rights, defining how individuals can exploit resources around them.

Individuals will not invest in improving local resources without confidence that their right to benefit from their investments will be **respected by their neighbors**. Such confidence has existed at least since first origins of agriculture (10k yrs ago). I have argued that systems of socially defined property rights may have characterized our species since bipedalism freed our hands to make things (>4M yrs ago).

A communal consensus about property rights over resources can be maintained only with some accepted **local leadership** to provide for adjudication of disputes.

Politics: Acceptance of leaders is a coordination game with multiple equilibria, as it can be dangerous to deny the authority of a leader whom everyone else accepts. Focal factors of culture & history may determine the realized eq'm. (Schelling 1960)

A local community's ability to protect its members and their property is necessarily limited by the possibility of **raiding** by people from elsewhere.

Alliances among local communities may also be very ancient, but 5k years ago the **first states** appeared with elites specializing in regional administration.

Wider states have established themselves by offering regional protection against intercommunal raids and taxing the surplus from regional peace. (Scott 2017)

Basis for a state, claiming a monopoly of force to replace intercommunal raiding

A state is a network of agents who can project force and implement state policies coherently in an extensive realm where people have submitted to the state's rule.

State coherence requires **national leadership setting incentives for state agents**, who have cut dependence on local interests in their home communities.

A national leader must maintain a reputation among the state's agents for rewarding their service appropriately, as monitored by a central council. (*APSR 2008*)

State agents can be seen as members of a special non-local community, using literacy to maintain personal relationships across extensive distances (since 3000BCE).

A prosperous state must protect property rights, but this problem has two sides.

Investors need protection from **theft by neighbors & expropriation by state agents**.

Property disputes among neighbors are generally managed in the local community.

National leaders must ensure that state agents will respect local property rights.

Secure property rights require cooperation between local leaders & national leaders.

In a strong state, local & national leadership can be positively aligned in two ways:

- by **top-down** influence of national leaders in local politics (*in autocracies*), or
- by **bottom-up** influence of local leaders in national politics (*in democracies*).

The state's provincial governors as itinerant mandarins

B. Anderson (1991) compared state officials' career paths to routes of religious pilgrimage that have created a sense of unity for adherents of global religions. He distinguished officials of absolutist states, always ready for reassignment anywhere in the realm, from feudal nobles, largely tied to their family's estate. Let me suggest that the basic distinction is not between absolutist & feudal regimes, but between two classes of agents in traditional monarchies: **mandarins & gentry**.

To assert state power across an extensive domain, rulers appoint **governors** to exercise broad delegated powers within a **province** of manageable size. Within a province, each resident would fear to disobey a governor's commands when everyone else in the province is expected to obey (in a coordination game). So a governor whose authority is locally accepted can normally maintain order with little action by the state's armed forces, which thus are freed to defend the frontiers. But if people got used to obeying a governor and forgot the source of his authority, he could effectively become an independent local ruler.

Thus, to maintain unity of the realm, it has been common practice for national leaders to transfer their governors regularly from one province to another. These cross-country transfers form the **circuitous routes of itinerant mandarins'** careers that Anderson saw as defining the unity of the realm.

Local gentry in traditional empires

The wealth of a province depends on people making **economic investments** there that may yield profits only over a long time horizon.

But regular movements of mandarin administrators imply that they cannot take a long-term perspective on the development of any one province.

(Making governors' rewards depend on results in their former provinces would induce problems of moral hazard in teams, which can misalign the center.)

So prosperity requires another class of agents (***gentry***) who have enough power to protect investments in a local district where they maintain a long-term presence.

A new state must **establish local order** in communities throughout its domain, as independent providers of local protection could become rivals for wider power.

The new state must fulfill promises to **reward key supporters**, including captains of its conquering armies and indigenous local leaders who accepted the new state.

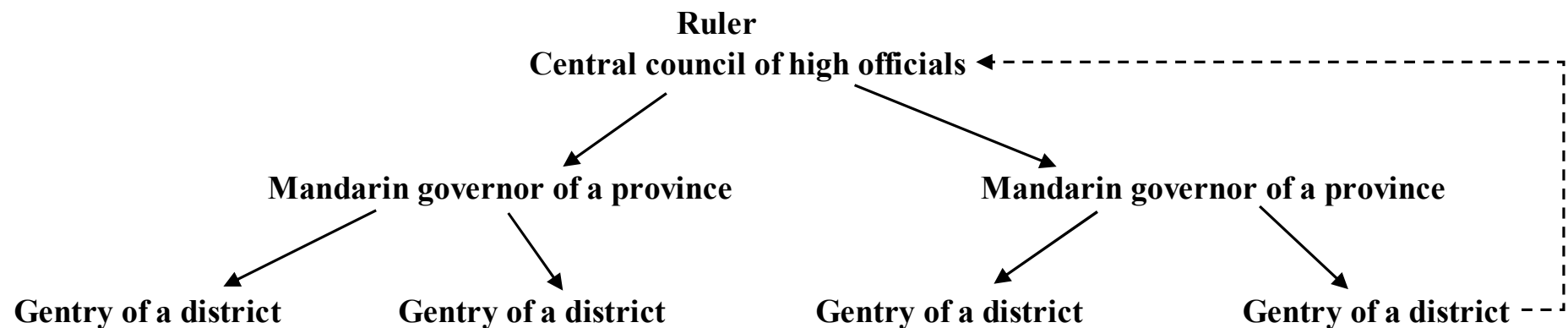
Both problems can be solved by granting these supporters property rights & authority (as gentry) in a district where they will be expected to maintain order.

So in traditional autocracies, national leaders grant privileges to favored individuals, and communities accept such **residents with central connections** as local leaders.

(Top-down certification of local leadership.)

Locally managed districts within centrally administered provinces

Local resident **gentry** need some **local organization** for appealing to the ruler's central court when a governor's actions threaten their basic property rights. But as the ruler's appointed representative, a mandarin (itinerant) governor must have substantial power to command the resident gentry in a province. To ensure that any group of gentry can be supervised by a governor, the gentry should be organized in **local districts** that are contained within a governor's province.



Structure of power in a simple autocratic empire

Anthropologists Flannery & Marcus (2012) identify states by a **4-level hierarchy** of communities: (1) capital city, (2) provincial cities, (3) district towns, (4) villages.

In the **Roman Empire**, imperial governors supervised provinces containing towns with local councils, which had primary responsibility for order & taxes in their districts, and which could complain to the Emperor about a governor's actions.

Example: the Spanish Empire in America (Haring 1947):

Conquistadors always established a town, with members of the expedition forming a **town council** (*cabildo*), which became self-perpetuating as old members named new ones, with the provincial governor's approval.

The town was an organization of local gentry to maintain local order & property rights for its members, including landowners in the district around the town.

The town's militia would be the primary force for containing any uprising of indigenous people, while greater imperial forces could be called from afar.

Towns were supervised by an appointed provincial governor, who was a mandarin functionary from Spain or elsewhere in the empire.

This system was derived from the Roman Empire's system of locally responsible town councils that could complain to the Emperor about a governor's actions.

Towns of Spanish Empire could appeal disputes to the ***audiencia*** (administrative court) of a wide region (several provinces), and to the king's council in Spain.

Members of an *audiencia* were jurists exercising broad powers as a group, so that mutual monitoring could reduce the moral hazard of distant delegation.

Successful states depend on local elites' ability to trust the basic parameters of their relationship with the state's central administration.

Such trust requires widely shared expectations that may take years to develop.

When the Spanish Empire dissolved, **territories of the new states** were generally defined by the **familiar jurisdictions of the Empire's regional audiencias**.

Feudalism and absolutism differing in the centralization of power and rents

Machiavelli noted that some kingdoms were **easily invaded but hard to conquer**; others were **hard to invade but easily conquered** after a successful invasion. This distinction can be derived from the relative strengths of the local gentry and the central mandarin administration of a kingdom (**feudalism** to **absolutism**). A stronger (more feudal) gentry retains a larger share of local revenues, leaving less resources for the central government's defense of the kingdom's frontiers; but then a successful invader would still face continuing resistance from local leaders defending their privileges of power.

We defined gentry as a class of individuals with local community roots and sufficient voice in the state for confidence of their rights being respected by state officials. In **dysfunctional regimes** that lack any such institutions for protecting rights of individuals in remote provinces, there will be regions without such gentry, where local investment will be small and vulnerable to state predation.

*Conversely, with democratic institutions that give political voice and protected rights to all **citizens**, the concept of "gentry" as an exclusive class could become obsolete.*

Representative assemblies in early modern states

National leaders are generally averse to developing institutions that make themselves more dependent on bottom-up approval from representatives of local elites.

But when **representative assemblies** were introduced in 1200s, they made local elites more willing to trust & support national leaders, thus strengthening the state.

The **early English Parliaments** gathered representatives from town councils and rural gentry, who had basic responsibility for local order and tax collection.

Kings (from Edward I) found that demands for new taxes yielded more revenue when approved by Parliament, after it reviewed complaints about abuses by royal agents.

Parliament soon approved the accession of a king (Edward II→Edward III), granted funds for military operations that shifted the balance of power against France.

Around 1600, England, Spain, and Poland all had national representative assemblies.

In **Poland's Sejm**, only the rural gentry had representation; towns had no votes.

Spain's Cortes had representatives from major towns that governed rural districts.

Only in England (& Netherlands) do we find towns that were represented in the national assembly but did not control the agricultural land around them.

For the local leaders in a town that did not control a wider region, the main source of local wealth was the town's reputation as a good place for people to do business.

With national political influence, such towns could support policies that enabled them to assure good protection of property rights for their residents.

So the **empowerment of towns** in early modern England was well designed to make them engines of economic growth (*as in China recently*).

Democratic extension of political rights: from gentry to citizens

Democratic extension of political rights can give more people confidence in the state's legal protection and their ability to invest securely in economic growth.

Adam Smith (1776): political & legal rights that gave farmers confidence to invest did more for the wealth of England than all its good regulations of commerce.

Miracles of modern economic growth have been based on people throughout a nation confidently investing to improve themselves and their communities.

Some have assumed that national elections suffice for successful democracy, with local authorities accountable only through appointment by elected national leader. But representative institutions of national democracy developed first as institutions to give local leaders more bottom-up influence in national politics.

Contrast the **American Revolution** for defense of provincial powers, the **French Revolution** against royalty & provincial institutions.

Political decentralization can strengthen a democratic state.

Local accountability can provide better incentives for **local public investments**.

Decentralization gives local leaders **a stake to defend the state**; people are more willing to fight for a state when their community leaders have a positive role in it.

Autonomous local governments reduce barriers to entry in national politics, as successful **local leaders can become competitive candidates for higher office**.

But **international aid** can be a force for centralization of power in poor countries, as aid becomes a resource that helps national leaders govern without local support. Centralization of authority often seems more convenient to foreign donors.

*In the language of the American Revolution, **the people** who formed the fundamental basis for the new nation were understood to be the enfranchised inhabitants acting together in their local communities.*

If this understanding had been applied in Afghanistan before 2021, interveners for democratic state-building might have had more appreciation for the autonomous authority of traditional village institutions, instead of trying to establish a centralized state without any role for locally accountable leadership.

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Electromagnetic telecommunication reduced administrative network costs (>1844), and the class of literate administrators grew with availability of global information.

Now A.I. further reduces costs of centralized administration in government & firms, but by reducing the need for humans in national administrative elites.

What could ensure that political & economic systems will serve the interests of humanity at large when these systems are managed by a narrow elite with A.I.?

In the long run, the defense of people's interests will depend on people's innate talent for organizing local groups and networks from personal interactions.

This ability to share information and organize community action is what originally enabled humans to dominate the world, even before the first states.

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"In England, a lease for life of forty shillings a year value is a freehold, and entitles the lessee to vote for a member of parliament; and as a great part of the yeomanry have freeholds of this kind, the whole order becomes respectable to their landlords on account of the political consideration which this gives them. There is, I believe, nowhere in Europe, except in England, any instance of the tenant building upon the land of which he had no lease, and trusting that the honour of his landlord would take no advantage of so important an improvement. Those laws and customs so favourable to the yeomanry have perhaps contributed more to the present grandeur of England than all their boasted regulations of commerce taken together." (*Wealth of Nations*, Book III, Chapter 2, p. 415)