Local and regional democracy in European politics

Frank Hendriks, Anders Lidström and John Loughlin

Introduction

Subnational governments are generally underestimated as levels of government in the European context. There are almost 100,000 democratically elected units of local and regional self-government in the EU; not only do these units serve important functions in the everyday life of European citizens, but they also play a key role in the implementation and legitimation of national and European policies. Local and regional governments are the units of democracy closest to the people.

Most subnational governments in Europe have deep historical roots, often based on traditions of local rule, parish self-organization or city government dating back to the Middle Ages. With the arrival of the modern state from the sixteenth century onwards, these systems of government were absorbed into, and dominated by, what became the central governments of unitary states or the sub-federal units of federal states (Loughlin 2011b). Nevertheless, some of their traits have persisted over the years and are still visible in the ways in which subnational governments are organized. This would suggest that local and regional governments are subject to strong path-dependencies and institutional resistance, as suggested by historical institutionalism (Krasner 1984; Putnam 1993). This is also reflected in how democracy is coordinated at these levels. However, although path-dependency and stability are the dominant patterns, change may occur as the result of punctuated equilibria or critical junctures (cf. Thelen 1999; Pierson and Skocpol 2002; Peters 2012). Of key importance here are changes in the situations of nation-states themselves. Nation-states are still generally the principal actors within systems of governance, but they have become subject to pressures from above – from globalization and, in Europe, the constraints of European integration – as well as from below, as regions and local authorities have mobilized, becoming less dependent on and subject to their respective national governments (Hooghe and Marks 2001). In recent years, changes in the patterns of local government and democracy seem to have accelerated in a way that can only partially be accounted for by historical institutionalism. Sociological institutionalism, on the other hand, suggests that change is facilitated when the legitimacy of an institution is challenged (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott 2001).
In this chapter, we will outline the main traits of European local and regional democracy and investigate the extent to which traditional patterns of democracy at this level have persisted in recent years, as well as any new types of combinations that may have emerged among municipalities and regions.¹

Analytical framework

We will use two main sets of theoretical constructs in order to analyse the patterns of European local and regional democracy. Countries with various systems of local and regional government will be grouped together according to similarities in their organization, their main functions and their relationship with the state. These patterns are largely path-dependent and are based on the specific state traditions to which they belong. In addition, we will identify four different models of democracy that will be used to characterize how local and regional democracy functions within countries. To some extent, these are specific to each state tradition; however, there are also tendencies of change, signifying that models of democracy are being transferred between systems.

Systems of subnational government and state traditions

Each country has its own type of local and regional government, although in federal states such as Germany and Switzerland, there may be considerable differences between the different Länder or cantons. National systems often share common traits; in order to be able to identify more general patterns, it is convenient to group countries in broader typologies of subnational government (cf. Page and Goldsmith 1987; Hesse and Sharpe 1991; Lidström 2003; Heinelt and Hlepas 2006). These systems are differentiated on the basis of specific criteria, such as current commonalities or common historical traits (Lidström 1998). One very influential categorization was suggested by Hesse and Sharpe (1991). On the basis of the functional and political role of local government and its performance, the authors identified three main West European models: Franco, Anglo, and North- and Middle-European. Although this categorization has served as a useful tool in many subsequent studies, it has been criticized for not sufficiently taking into account the history of the systems and for placing the Scandinavian welfare democracies in the same category as the Middle-European federations (Lidström 1998).

Another frequently cited classification was suggested by Page and Goldsmith (1987; Page 1991) in their investigations of central and local government relationships. These scholars distinguished between a Northern and a Southern model, arguing that local government tasks, discretion and access to central government are fundamentally different in the north and the south. Although he bases his analysis on the Page and Goldsmith model, John (2001) finds that these distinctions are not so clear cut. In a later analysis, Goldsmith and Page (2010) also come to a similar conclusion themselves. Contemporary tendencies towards convergence have changed the picture as well (Goldsmith and Page 2010).

This overview builds on previous studies of systems of local government, but attempts to provide an analysis that both is more historically rooted and that recognizes the need to capture variation by identifying more models of local democracy. We will make a distinction between five clusters of countries: the British Isles (Ireland and the UK), the Rhinelandic states (Benelux, Germany, Austria and Switzerland), the Nordic states (Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway), the Southern European states (Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain) and the ‘new democracies’ of Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia). The main defining criteria for these systems involve
the type of state tradition that they reflect. The concept of ‘state traditions’ was initially introduced by Dyson (1980) and subsequently developed by Loughlin and Peters (1997). This is a useful starting point, since the state tradition will often establish sets of parameters that determine the conditions within which democracy is understood and practised at both national and subnational levels (see Table 23.1).

An initial distinction that may be made is between countries in the ‘Anglo’ tradition – the UK, Ireland (as well as the US, Canada, Australia, etc.) – and the countries of continental Europe. In the Anglo tradition, the ‘state’ as such does not exist in the same way that it exists in the European countries on the continent; that is, as an entity with its own legal personality. In continental Europe, the state as a ‘moral actor’ (or une personne morale, as the French call it) is capable of entering into contractual relations with other legal entities such as local authorities, universities or, indeed, private enterprises. In the Anglo tradition, one usually speaks of the ‘government’ or government departments rather than the state. Another important difference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Anglo-Saxon</th>
<th>Germanic</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Scandinavian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there a legal basis for the ‘state’?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State–society relationship</td>
<td>Pluralistic</td>
<td>Organicist</td>
<td>Antagonistic</td>
<td>Organicist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of political organization</td>
<td>Union state/limited federalist</td>
<td>Integral/organic federalist</td>
<td>Jacobin, ‘one and indivisible’</td>
<td>Decentralized unitary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of policy style</td>
<td>Incrementalist, ‘muddling through’</td>
<td>Legal corporatist</td>
<td>Legal technocratic</td>
<td>Consensual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of decentralization</td>
<td>‘State power’ (US); devolution/local government (UK)</td>
<td>Co-operative federalism</td>
<td>Regionalized unitary state</td>
<td>Strong local autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant approach to the discipline of public administration</td>
<td>Political science/sociology</td>
<td>Public law</td>
<td>Public law</td>
<td>Public law (Sweden); organization theory (Norway)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries</td>
<td>UK, US, Canada (but not Quebec), Ireland</td>
<td>Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Spain (after 1978), Belgium (after 1988)</td>
<td>France, Italy, Spain (until 1978), Portugal, Quebec, Greece, Belgium (until 1988)</td>
<td>Sweden, Norway, Denmark</td>
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Local and regional democracy in Europe

is that in the Anglo tradition government has traditionally been dominated by society, while in the continental tradition it is instead society that is dominated by the state. These differences have influenced other aspects of both approaches to understanding politics, policy and state–society relations. For example, in the Anglo tradition, and particularly in the US, politics is dominated by a pluralistic approach emphasizing the role of groups, with government departments being considered simply additional ‘groups’ along with the groups of civil society. Similarly, public administration is concerned less with constitutional-legal structures than with the power relations that exist behind these structures, as described in the theory of ‘intergovernmental relations’ developed by Wright (1978) and popularized in the UK case by Rhodes (1997). The continental European tradition of understanding politics and public administration, on the other hand, has its roots not in the ‘social sciences’ but in public law. This emphasizes the role of the state and parliamentary legislation in defining policy over and above society. The continental tradition was strongly influenced by both traditions of Roman law and the legacy of the Napoleonic code.

However, there are also interesting differences between the countries of Western continental Europe, which we have summarized under three broad categories: French, Germanic and Scandinavian. The contrasts here are most evident between the French and Germanic approaches. In each case, there is a distinctive understanding of the nature of the state and the nation, as well as the relationship between state and society. The Germanic tradition has more of a corporatist and organic character, with groups from civil society incorporated into the policy-making functions of the state itself. The nation is regarded as a corporate body based on a common language and culture that transcended the territorial fragmentation of the German lands during the nineteenth century. The French tradition is quite different, conceiving of the state as somehow embodying the nation, but viewing the nation as a collection of individual citizens joined together by a ‘general will’. Sometimes, German nationalism is expressed as ‘ethnos’, while the French understanding is expressed as ‘demos’. One is born into a specific German culture, whereas one may choose to become French. Of course, the two concepts became intertwined with the arrival of the modern nation-state, since Germanic ethnos also implies demos and French demos has evolved into ethnos, whereby French citizenship also denotes the adoption of French language and culture. The Scandinavian tradition stands somewhere between the Anglo and the Germanic, but bears some resemblance to the French tradition. Like the Anglo system, it has a tradition of self-reliant communities, resulting in strong local government; however, as in the German tradition, the Scandinavian countries feature a strong state with some corporatist elements. Like the French tradition, the Scandinavian tradition emphasizes central control and uniformity (Knudsen and Rothstein 1994; Hilson 2008).

State traditions also express distinct forms of territorial governance. The French tradition tends toward a high degree of centralization and uniformity, whereas the Germanic tradition is marked by organic federalism. The Anglo tradition, given its weak form of the ‘state’, has a pragmatic and ad-hoc form of territorial governance. The Scandinavian tradition, as mentioned above, features a strong central state but also strong local government.

The ‘new democracies’ are more problematic. Although in most cases they have been influenced by the four traditions, they are in fact quite heterogeneous (Swianiewicz 2014). While they all share a common history of communism and the transition to democracy, their pre-communist histories are quite distinct. Some of them participated in the historical evolution of Western Europe, such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of liberal democracy. Others, in contrast, formed part of the Ottoman or Russian Empires and did not experience these developments to the same extent (e.g. the protest movement of
the opposition in the Ukraine is a good illustration of a still problematic relationship with Russia due to its historical legacy; Guardian, 15 December 2013) Although these longer-term historical influences should not be exaggerated, neither should they be ignored; it may be the case that a particular country has historical memories, however deeply repressed, of democratic life, while others simply lack this background. This idea underlies the formation of the Visegrad group of countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), whose official website states: ‘The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have always been part of a single civilization sharing cultural and intellectual values and common roots in diverse religious traditions, which they wish to preserve and further strengthen’ (Visegrad Group 2013).

Furthermore, individual countries among the new democracies had ancient links and affinities to other European countries – Poland and Romania with France, Estonia with Finland, Hungary with Austria, etc. In many cases, these ancient links were revived with the fall of communism as the new democracies reached out to Western Europe (Ekiert 2003).

**Models of democracy**

In comparative politics, Lijphart (1999/2012) has made a fundamental distinction between majoritarian ‘Westminster democracy’ on the one hand and cooperative ‘consensus democracy’ on the other. He differentiates these along the federal–unitary and the politics–executive dimensions. Hendriks (2010) has amended and expanded the Lijphart scheme in order to allow the incorporation of subnational democracy. He distinguishes between four competing models of democracy by interrelating two basic distinctions.

The first distinction is between aggregative and integrative democracy, which essentially concerns how democratic decisions are taken. Are they taken in an aggregative (majoritarian) process, in which a simple majority eventually wins, even if this majority is opposed by sizeable minorities? Or are decisions taken in an integrative (non-majoritarian, deliberative) process, in which there is an attempt to reach the widest possible – ideally complete – consensus? The second distinction is between direct and indirect democracy. This involves the question of whether citizens take decisions themselves or select representatives who ultimately take the decisions. The four models are summarized in Figure 23.1.

**Pendulum democracy** refers to the model of democracy in which political power alternates between two competing political formations and their leaders – like the pendulum of a clock. Its best-known manifestation is the so-called ‘Westminster’ model. Pendulum democracy is fundamentally indirect and representative in nature. Citizens periodically cast their votes and hand over decision-making powers to their elected representatives. Decision-making is largely majoritarian and aggregative: the winner takes all in constituencies, because of the ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system, and the government is monopolized by the winning party, even if its majority is minimal. In pendulum democracy, broad-based citizen participation is limited to the brief period of elections. To the extent possible, elected politicians rather than citizens take charge of policy implementation, policy preparation, agenda-setting and political control. **Voter democracy** combines aggregative decision-making with direct popular rule, unmediated by political representation. Citizens participate in voter democracy by casting their votes in plebiscites, either on a small scale (e.g. assembly meetings) or on a large scale (e.g. referendums). An example is the New England town meeting, where citizens take decisions on public matters in assemblies. A more large-scale manifestation of this type is the California-style decision-making proposition (referendum), in which a simple majority decides binary questions (for or against a particular proposition).
Participatory democracy combines direct self-governance with integrative decision-making. It is illustrated by classic as well as contemporary cases of ‘communal’ self-rule, involving ‘communicative’ and ‘deliberative’ citizen governance. In a participatory democracy, a minority would never be simply overruled by a straightforward numerical majority; the intention is to include minorities, rather than exclude them. Counting heads only takes place in the final stages of decision-making (if at all) and serves to confirm shared views rather than to take decisions. Decision-making is first and foremost a process of engaging in thorough, preferably transformative, and usually lengthy deliberations in search of consensus. In a participatory democracy, everyone has the same right to raise and debate an issue, and relationships are largely horizontal, open and ‘power free’.

Consensus democracy refers to a general model of democracy that can be found in historically divided societies such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Austria. Consensus democracy is basically indirect and integrative. Representatives of groups and sections of society are the prime decision-makers. They act in an integrative and consensus-seeking manner, usually in a conference-room or round-table type of setting. Collective decision-making largely takes place through co-producing, co-governing and coalition-oriented methods and aims to establish consensus and broad-based support. Preferably, the majority will not overrule substantial minorities by simply counting heads; the goal is to build policies on a broad platform of support, both politically and socially.

Democratic practice is the result of a dynamic process of push and pull between these models of democracy. Pendulum democracy may be most prominent in some countries, and consensus democracy in others (Lijphart 1999/2012), but these models are never exclusive or uncontested. Enduring democratic systems, ‘vital democracies’, are usually hybrids of different models (Hendriks 2009, 2011).
Varying patterns of subnational democracy

In this section, we will investigate subnational democracy in clusters of European countries, using the conceptual coordinates outlined in the previous section. We should stress that these are ideal types; that is, theoretical types with which there is a greater or lesser correspondence in reality. Even France and Germany – the archetypal ‘Napoleonic’ and ‘Germanic’ states – do not correspond completely to their respective ideal types. France was influenced by German administrative theory towards the end of the nineteenth century, while parts of Germany (Bavaria, for example) were influenced by the French Napoleonic occupation after the French Revolution (Loughlin and Peters 1997; Loughlin 2001). At the level of country groups, many nuances could be added to the patterns that we identify.

The Rhinelandic states

The Rhinelandic countries are all clearly and strongly influenced by the Germanic state tradition. Some combine this with Napoleonic influences that can be traced back to French occupation during the nineteenth century. The Low Countries became unitary states during this period, with meso-institutions that came to resemble the French departmental (départements) and prefectoral (préfets) systems: the Netherlands adopted a variant with provinces (provincies) and communes or municipalities (gemeenten); Belgium, created in 1830, was at first modelled on the French Jacobin state, with provinces and communes dominated by French-speakers and no concessions to the Flemish-speaking community; Luxembourg, understandably (given its diminutive size), also adopted the French unitary model. However, in all three cases there was also a ‘Germanic’ influence (Toonen et al. 1994; Witte et al. 2000; Dumont et al. 2011). The Netherlands remained a unitary state in formal terms, but also a highly decentralized one, still influenced by the (con)federal traditions that had been in place from the period of the United Provinces until the French occupation. Riven by linguistic conflict ever since its establishment as a country, Belgium has slowly evolved, first into a regionalized unitary state by the 1960s and then into a fully fledged federal state, somewhat influenced by German federalism. Clearly, the federal states of Germany, Austria and Switzerland are also included in this tradition (Lauber 1996; Kriesi and Trechsel 2008; Benz and Zimmer 2011; Vatter and Stadelmann-Steffen 2013). In the cases of Germany and Austria, federalism was imposed by the victorious allies after the Second World War, but both countries could draw on much older federalist traditions dating back to the Holy Roman Empire and the strong local polities that existed up to modern times. Except for the small ‘local state’ of Luxembourg, all the Rhinelandic states have comparatively strong meso-governments, with intertwined local and national tiers of government.

Although based on a Germanic tradition, the Rhinelandic states have increasingly come to resemble ‘hybrid states’, combining and connecting different models, albeit often around a dominant core model. We see this not only in terms of state traditions, but also in their models of democracy. All Rhinelandic states display strong inclinations towards consensus democracy, some more pronounced than others. Switzerland and Belgium are ‘prototypes’ of consensus democracy in Lijphart’s formal analysis of democratic patterns (Lijphart 1999/2012). Taking informal patterns of democracy into account, the Netherlands can also be seen as a strong and classic case. However, this consensus democracy is found in combination with elements of other models of democracy, including the theoretically opposite model of voter democracy. In Switzerland, Germany and – to a lesser degree – Austria, strong expressions of voter democracy (binding referendums and initiatives) are combined with equally strong instances of consensus
Local and regional democracy in Europe

democracy (coalition politics, elite accommodation and pacification). In Belgium and especially the Netherlands, the use of the advisory (local) referendum is on the rise. Directly aggregative opinion polls, consumer surveys and the like are playing an increasingly important role in all Rhinelandic countries; these indications of popular opinion are non-decisive but are influential all the same. Some elements of pendulum democracy can be discerned in Germany’s adversarial ‘two-and-a-half party system’ and in the tendencies towards political polarization exhibited by most Rhinelandic countries (Benz and Zimmer 2011). The directly elected mayors found in Germany, Austria and Switzerland imply competitive elections for political office. The Netherlands and Belgium, however, have been hesitant to move in this direction.

In general, we can state that consensual patterns in the Rhineland have been challenged by majoritarian inclinations, but have certainly not been eliminated. Consensus democracy itself remains firmly established and confirmed by elite-driven practices of ‘multilevel governance’ (along vertical state–state lines) and ‘interactive governance’ (along horizontal state–society lines). Institutions of participatory democracy – equally integrative but more direct and citizen oriented – are often incorporated to compensate for the elite bias in consensus democracy. Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands seem to lead the way here.

The British Isles

The UK and Ireland are both vivid expressions of the Anglo tradition in subnational governance, characterized by a relatively insulated two-tier local government system, a comparatively centralized unitary state and a rather weak meso-level of government (Ashford 1981). The UK has been described by Loughlin (2001) as a ‘hyper-centralized’ state, with centralization growing apace with the establishment of the post-war welfare state but, somewhat ironically, also during the neo-liberal reforms of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. Thatcher had sought to achieve ‘less state’ and ‘less bureaucracy’ but succeeded in creating one of the most centralized and bureaucratically interventionist states in the developed world. Local government was one of the sectors that suffered most under Thatcher’s centralization, as she believed it to be among the worst examples of inefficient and wasteful government. Some modifications of this tendency towards hyper-centralization were introduced with the devolution reforms of Tony Blair’s New Labour government elected in 1997 (Flinders 2010). This process of devolution included the establishment of a parliament in Scotland and assemblies in Wales, Northern Ireland and London, but an attempt to create elected regional assemblies in England failed in 2004. There were also renewed attempts to implement a ‘new localist’ agenda by reviving partnerships with local authority associations in all four regions of the UK, and by allowing local authorities to introduce certain reforms, such as elected mayors and new types of executives (initiatives that have been spurned by most local authorities). With devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the UK has introduced some elements resembling the Germanic federal tradition (but also influenced by the Spanish model), albeit at the fringes of the state. The English ‘mainland’, however, continues to resemble the classic ‘dual polity’, with centralization in London, on the one hand, and local autonomy in designated areas, on the other (John and Copus 2011). In its degree of centralization and concentration of power, Ireland even exceeds the UK; however, this is not surprising given the size of the country, which could be regarded as similar to a large region. This factor was quite important during the years leading up to the Celtic Tiger economic boom, when the Republic was indeed considered a single Objective One Priority region by Brussels (the same status as Northern Ireland). This allowed the Department of Finance in Dublin to play a key role in the distribution of Structural Funds, thus reinforcing the centralized
character of the state. In any case, it is only very recently that Ireland has begun to take local government reform seriously in a manner that strengthens these institutions (Callanan 2005; Loughlin 2011a).

In terms of democratic models, both the UK and Ireland are clearly defined by pendulum democracy, the best-known expression of which is Westminster democracy – referring to the sovereign, bipolarized, Houses of Parliament in the centre of London (Lijphart 1999/2012). Pendulum democracy continues to dominate, despite some recent selective insertions of consensus democracy: certain instances of decentralization and devolution (mentioned above), some proportional representation (PR) elements (on the fringes of the UK, not on the English mainland) and coalitions at the local level (growing to one-third of local governments in the UK). In the Republic of Ireland, which features a Single Transferable Vote (STV) PR electoral system, coalition governments are more common at the national level, which does occasionally allow smaller parties such as the Labour Party or the Greens to participate in government. Nevertheless, Irish politics is still dominated by two large parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the successors of the two sides that fought each other during the 1922–3 Civil War. The central position of Fianna Fáil was undermined when the party was punished for its role in and reaction to the 2008 financial crisis. However, it is unlikely that it will be replaced as one of the two dominant parties by either the Labour Party or by Sinn Féin; in recent years, it has been making a recovery (Farrell et al. 2012).

Democracy in the British Isles tends to be defined as party-political representative democracy. In recent years, however, there have been attempts in the UK to introduce elements of participatory democracy at the local level. Several referendums have concerned the introduction of directly elected mayors. In addition, some local governments have arranged referendums on a voluntary basis, although these have merely been consultative instruments, initiated by local authorities rather than citizens (John and Copus 2011). In Ireland, various methods of fostering citizen participation and engagement have been suggested. Local referendums are not institutionalized in Ireland. Although there are expressions of alternative models of democracy, pendulum democracy still remains the overriding democratic form (Callanan 2005, 2011).

The Nordic states

These countries – Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark – are largely consistent with the so-called Scandinavian state tradition, which itself is a mixture of elements with connections to both the Anglo tradition (demarcated local autonomy, strong unitarism, weak meso-level) and the Germanic tradition (decentralization, organicism, legally protected subnational government). The Nordic states do not have the strong tradition of fully fledged meso-government found in the Rhinelandic states, where it is comprehensive and multipurpose. On the contrary, despite the strong position of local governments in the Nordic states, these units have operated within tight parameters defined by either the central government or the national parliament. The subnational systems have a few distinctive but interrelated features that make them stand out in comparison to the rest of Europe (Sellers and Lidsström 2007). Local governments in the Nordic states have considerable financial strength, as they are the main providers of welfare services. Citizens trust their local authorities more than in other countries, and the level of corruption is low.

Two recent trends are worth noting in this regard. First, in the late 1980s and early 1990s there were attempts to decrease this central control in the experiments known as the ‘free commune’. This reform, which began in Sweden and was subsequently adopted in slightly altered versions by Denmark, Norway and Finland, allowed local authorities to free themselves from
central control in specified policy areas such as education or child-care. This was subsequently ‘mainstreamed’ and now forms part of the Nordic approach to local government (Baldersheim and Ståhlberg 1994).

The second significant development, again adopted in different versions by the various Nordic states, was the establishment of ‘regions’ (Bukve et al. 2008). Beginning in the 1990s, and undoubtedly under the influence of a perception that this was a necessary element of European integration, the Nordic countries experimented with regions (with each country adopting a different model). Finland has retained its system of indirectly elected regional administrations, although the island of Åland has its own elected council and enjoys a semi-autonomous status (Sjöblom 2011). Denmark recently created larger but financially underprovided regions. Sweden has discussed replacing its county councils with a smaller number of directly elected regions responsible for more extensive functions, but a large-scale reform seems unlikely (Lidström 2010). In Norway, several proposals for new regions have been considered, but no clear direction can be detected (Blom-Hansen et al. 2012). Despite the tendency towards regionalization, Hörnström (2010) has found that regional elites in the Northern periphery still expect the central government to redistribute. All of the countries in this group exhibit expressions of consensus democracy, with organicist and neo-corporatist approaches to collective decision-making; however, generally speaking, this tendency is less pronounced than in the countries in the Rhinelandic group. All four cases appear to be moderately consensual (multiparty systems, but often a dominant party or two; coalition governments, but also single-party or minority governments) and relatively majoritarian (unitary welfare states, geared at uniformity rather than heterogeneity) (Arter 2006). Thus, with respect to the models of democracy, we again discern the hybrid pattern that we have seen expressed more prominently in the previous two groups: consensus democracy, but not as deeply entrenched as in the Rhineland, combined with some elements of pendulum democracy, but not to the extent seen in the British Isles.

In general, subnational democracy in the Nordic countries takes the form of party-political representative democracy. Finland may be a partial exception, with its much stronger element of personalized voting at all levels of government: the voter chooses a specific candidate and cannot simply vote for a party (Sjöblom 2011). In all Nordic countries, turnout in elections is emphasized, but in this respect Sweden stands out, with comparatively high levels of participation, around 80 per cent. However, participation here is boosted by the country’s joint elections day: Sweden is the only European country where local elections are always held on the same day as national elections. In the other Nordic countries, turnout in local elections is between 60 and 65 per cent (Lidström 2003).

Direct democracy and citizen self-determination are not deeply rooted in the Scandinavian states. The Nordic countries display almost the same variety of participatory initiatives as the Rhinelandic states – citizen panels, citizen juries, citizen surveys, deliberative hearings, youth councils and the like – but their institutionalization is notably less advanced, more comparable to the situation in the British Isles. Indeed, Karlsson (2012) suggests that participatory initiatives have had little impact on representative democracy in the Swedish municipalities. Voter democracy by way of (local) referendums is more advanced in the Nordic countries than in the British Isles, but tends to be non-binding. The strong tradition of well-organized political parties has blocked attempts to introduce forms of democracy (for example binding local referendums) that would challenge the position of the parties. Nevertheless, a citizen initiative was introduced in Sweden in 2011, which is likely to strengthen direct democracy at the expense of representative democracy. As in many other countries, there is a fair amount of New Public Management (NPM) type consumer polling and preference counting, but it is safe to say that aggregative patterns of democracy have not crowded out the primarily integrative political culture.
Danish municipalities have indirectly elected mayors, but there has been little discussion about, or evidence of preference for, the direct election of mayors (Aars 2009).

The Southern European states

Even though this group is more diverse than the previous ones, some general patterns can still be discerned. All of the Southern European states developed in the Napoleonic state tradition, which continues to be highly influential; the small islands of Malta and Cyprus are exceptions and special cases, due to the influence of British administrative practice as well (Loughlin and Peters 1997; Loughlin 2001). All the countries in this group share a history of strong centralization and concentration of political and administrative power. The regional state representative – the prefect – has traditionally played an important role. Through deconcentration, decentralization and even (quasi-)federalization in recent decades, a few of the Southern countries have adopted elements that bear some resemblance to the Germanic state tradition. We see this in Spain, Italy and (to a lesser degree) in France. Portugal and Greece have remained clearly centralized unitary states. Although Portugal’s 1974 Constitution does make provisions for autonomous regions, this has only been applied in the cases of the Azores and Madeira (Magone 2011: 396–400, 404). An attempt to extend this to mainland Portugal was defeated in a referendum held in 1998. In the Greek case, the adoption of elected prefects has entailed some modification of the centralized character of the state. On the other hand, Greece, like Portugal, still remains highly centralized and dominated by the national political parties. Malta is a special case because of its tiny size; local government in any meaningful sense of the term has been established only comparatively recently and seems to be primarily concerned with minor issues. Cyprus remains a complicated special case; its centralized nature clashes with the country’s Greek/Turkish subdivision. The Southern European states face the challenge of overcoming a Napoleonic bureaucratic system that sometimes has difficulty adapting to new challenges of governance. At times, the institutional inertia means that institutional reforms – both political and administrative – are blocked by the system’s preservation of previously existing institutions alongside the new ones. The worst case here is France, where there is a plethora of subnational governments and administrations: 22 regions, 100 departments and over 36,000 communes with about 500,000 local politicians (Loughlin 2007; Cole 2008). One problem found in Italy, Greece and Portugal is the persistent clientelism whereby local favours are distributed on the basis of patron–client relationships of support. This does not always result in a strong local civil society of active citizens.

With respect to models of democracy, Cyprus remains a special case, being the only country in this group to have tried consociational democracy of the Rhinelandic type (the 1960 settlement even drew on Swiss experiences). France, Greece, Portugal and Malta continue to display strong inclinations towards pendulum democracy, especially in the majoritarian party-political landscape. On the aggregative–integrative dimension, France still leans to the majoritarian side, although centralization and concentration of power have become less pronounced since the 1980s (Loughlin 2007). Italy and Spain have become highly complex mixtures of pendulum democracy and consensus democracy. Italy used to be exceptional in this group for its consensual tendencies on the executives–parties dimension, but the country has switched to a more majoritarian, polarized, adversarial mode, not only nationally but also subnationally. The old system of Italian politics that had been dominant since the Second World War, in which the Christian Democrats ruled in coalition with other parties and the communist left was kept out of government, came to an end in the 1990s with the mani pulite reforms. These reforms, led by crusading magistrates, resulted in many politicians landing in jail and the decimation of the traditional political parties. It is debatable, however, whether the reforms
Local and regional democracy in Europe

actually fundamentally changed the country’s political system (Bull and Rhodes 2009). Nevertheless, the reforms did have an impact on the subnational system; the introduction of directly elected mayors and regional governors has fortified pendulum democracy at the subnational level as well. Unlike Italy, Spain has never been strongly consensual in the executives–parties domain; however, like Italy, it has become somewhat more consensual on the federal–unitary dimension through the process of regionalization, which in the case of Spain was influenced by the German model of ‘cooperative federalism’ (Putnam 1993; Magone 2009: 340). Spain experienced a transition to democracy from the centralized Franco dictatorship that had operated as though the nationalities (nacionalidades) of Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia did not exist. The Spanish transition was marked by regionalization (in the form of Autonomous Communities), democratization and Europeanization, all three of which were seen as interdependent (Magone 2009). In all the Southern European states, indirect democracy is much more important than direct democracy, and political leadership is significantly more important than active citizenship. Voter democracy through (local) referendums is less advanced than in the Rhinelandic group or even the Nordic group. The modest referendum culture of the British Isles is most comparable to that of the Southern European group, although some countries in this group (Italy, Spain, France) have done more to enable future referendums on subnational matters than others (Cyprus, Malta, Portugal, Greece). In general, participatory democracy in Southern European governance has traditionally been weak at the subnational level; it is still relatively weak in comparison to the Rhinelandic states, but less so in comparison to the British Isles and the Nordic States. Particular regions in certain countries – mainly Italy, Spain and France again – display significant patterns of participatory democracy: participatory planning in Grenoble, participatory budgeting in Seville and deliberative regional planning in Tuscany are cases in point (Cole 2011; Piattoni and Brunazzo 2011).

The new democracies in Eastern Europe

The new democracies of Eastern and Central Europe share a common background of communist dictatorship for varying periods. They also share the common experience of the transition to democracy and preparation for and accession to the European Union. During the period of communist dictatorships, they were ruled by party apparatuses and systems of administration that were also under party control. The legacy of this period was political systems marked by high levels of centralization and uniformity. Local government, in most cases, was simply nonexistent, but there were local administrations in place to ensure obedience to the dictates of the central party. To some extent, these states were influenced by French Jacobinism, for which both Marx and Lenin had a great admiration; Lenin and Stalin also displayed an enthusiasm for the Terror. The latter predilection played a significant role in producing another important legacy of communism: the destruction of civil society. Democracy is not merely a set of procedures; it is also underpinned by a set of values: the importance and dignity of the individual, the rule of law, the right of assembly, freedom of thought, opinion and expression, etc. All of these were denied and trampled upon by communist systems. This has meant that the transition to democracy and market economies has been difficult for many of these states, as citizens often lacked any memory of democratic life. It had to be invented from scratch.

The transition to democracy was assisted by a number of countries and agencies. In the long run, one important influence was the European Union, which quickly realized that the future of the new democracies lay within its own system (Baldersheim et al. 2003). After the initial euphoria that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, there was some hesitation on the part of Western elites when they saw the scale of the problems
faced by the new democracies. It soon became clear, however, that there was no realistic alternative to further enlargement. Following the success of the Maastricht Treaty and the Single Market project, the Union began to prepare for eventual enlargement with the Amsterdam and Nice revisions of the Treaties. In order to ready the new countries for accession, the EU established a number of programmes such as PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies, later applied to the other East and Central European [ECE] countries) and CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stability in the Balkans) to help them to reform their political, administrative and economic systems (European Commission 2013). The EU also drew up the Copenhagen Criteria, which were in effect conditions of democratic practice and market-based economic activity that the candidate countries would have to fulfil in order to achieve membership status in the EU. Implicit in these criteria was a model of liberal representative democracy quite different from what the countries had experienced under communism.

These contextual factors meant that there was a certain general similarity in the new systems the countries adopted. However, the EU refrained from prescribing the specific institutional expression their democratic systems should establish – federal or unitary, regionalized or decentralized. In effect, although the new democracies do have in common the features outlined above, they are, in practice, a relatively heterogeneous group, reflecting their varying historical experiences before communism. Some, such as Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and western Poland, had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Others, such as Bulgaria, Romania and parts of the Balkans, were part of the Ottoman Empire. Certain regions of Poland were under Prussian rule, while other areas were under Russian imperialist rule. The background of the Baltic States is also quite diverse.

From the point of view of state traditions, the French Napoleonic tradition is clearly dominant. This may result from long-standing affinities between France and countries such as Poland and Romania (part of la Francophonie) dating back to the pre-communist era. In addition, during the nineteenth century France was held up as the exemplar of the modern progressive state and was admired as such by nationalists in the Balkans and Central Europe. Marxism-Leninism also admired the French Jacobin tradition, and this undoubtedly influenced the form of the communist state.

Practically all Eastern European countries introduced ambitious reforms after the fall of communism, seeking to improve their subnational democracy and self-government (Baldersheim et al. 2003). These reforms included amalgamations (or, in some cases, divisions) of municipalities, the establishment of regional levels of government, the decentralization of functions from central to local levels, improvements in managerial skills and the establishment of new forms of citizen participation. Although there are examples of successful reforms, the general lesson to be learned from these countries is that subnational democracy can only be improved marginally by administrative reform; substantial changes require more fundamental societal transformations. There are many obstacles to success. Local authorities usually have sparse resources and limited financial autonomy. The party systems of the new democracies, 20 years after the transition, are still not fully consolidated, as they had to be completely reinvented after the fall of the old regimes. One general tendency has been the proliferation of political parties, many barely sustainable and short lived. This, in turn, has meant the dominance of coalition governments. On the other hand, some aspects of pendulum democracy are also evident, with coalitions of right and left emerging and usually alternating in power following the introduction of competitive elections. At the local level, parties are present but are often weakly organized. Although turnout in the first local elections tended to be high, it has now stabilized at much lower levels. The instrument of local referendums has turned out to be inefficient, as they have
Local and regional democracy in Europe

often failed to engage the required share of citizens. This lack of citizen engagement reflects more fundamental problems of distrust among the general public of local decision-makers, weak civil societies and the persistent menace of corruption (Letki 2004). Given the extraordinary degree of neutralization of local civil society under communism, it comes as no surprise that there is weak citizen participation at the local level (Linz and Stepan 2011).

Subnational change: common themes

Discussions about the transformation of subnational governance are often highly idiosyncratic, driven by specific institutional or situational challenges in the various countries. Nevertheless, there are some general themes that have driven reform agendas in many, if not most, European states. We identify and discuss four of these: multilevel governance, interactive governance, the local referendum and the elected mayor.

Multilevel governance

This concept refers to the interactions across the different levels of governance – European, national, regional, local – that are increasingly interconnected and interdependent. The concept was originally developed to describe the evolving relations between the European Union and subnational authorities (Marks 1992), but it has increasingly been used to analyse interactions between levels of governance both within and between states (Baldersheim and Ståhlberg 2002; Bache 2008; Enderlein et al. 2010).

The European institutions and the EU member states are dependent on each other to function, and there is a need for collaboration with regional and local actors within the various countries. Multilevel governance is a pragmatic response to these situational and institutional challenges. However, it does have certain implications for the practice of democracy at both national and subnational levels. Multilevel governance entails all the disadvantages of intergovernmental networks, due to its strong reliance on professional dealmakers and experts from umbrella organizations.

At the same time, however, new methods for local and regional governments to exert influence over EU issues have been developed. The Committee of the Regions, featuring representatives from subnational governments in all member states, was established in the Maastricht Treaty. Although its role is primarily consultative, this institution has highlighted the importance of the local and regional levels vis-à-vis the EU. In addition, subnational governments are represented in Brussels by regional information offices and by their national Local Government Associations.

This does not mean that subnational governments are equally positioned in Brussels, however: regions with legislative powers seem to have a slightly stronger position due to their unique role as the implementers of EU legislation (Scully and Wyn Jones 2010).

Interactive governance

This refers to a form of policy-making that has been developed in order to overcome the weaknesses associated with both representative democracy and ‘network governance’ by decision-making experts (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999). ‘Participatory’ or ‘deliberative’ democracy, which are variants of interactive governance, are often geared towards ‘bringing the citizen back in’, or at least attempting to make and maintain connections between local and regional policy-makers and citizens. Initiatives include neighbourhood councils, participatory budgeting, participatory regional planning, citizen assemblies and various forms of e-participation.
This participatory discourse can be found in all of the country groups that we have identified. Although it appears that participatory approaches are more readily accepted in the Rhinelandic group of countries than in the new democracies of Eastern Europe, participatory discourse is somewhat on the rise even in the latter group. The British Isles, the Nordic group and the Southern European group lie between these two positions on the continuum, with some countries in the Southern group – Italy, Spain and France – remarkably active in this field. Quite rarely, participatory democracy gains an autonomous position vis-à-vis the established systems of representative democracy. At best, citizens are ‘brought in’ via participatory extensions to the established model of representative democracy.

The local referendum

Whether to allow referendums, how to deal with them appropriately and how to combine them with representative democracy are issues under discussion almost everywhere in Europe. In most European countries, heeding the voice of the people in this direct fashion is still a controversial idea that is only gradually gaining acceptance, with substantial opposition. The most prominent exception is, of course, Switzerland, the world champion in organizing referendums at all levels of government. Not only at the national level but also at subnational levels of decision-making, Swiss citizens have the last word in mandatory referendums (for ‘constitutional’ matters), optional referendums (for ‘normal’ legislation) and popular initiatives (for citizen-initiated calls to action).

The results of direct voting in Switzerland, Germany and Austria are binding, which is not the case in other local referendums in most of the other European countries. An exception to the rule is the UK system of referendums that have been held to determine whether a local community wants a directly elected mayor. Apart from these cases, local referendums are government initiated and advisory, although councils may feel morally obliged to respect clear and valid referendum outcomes.

Over the last 30 years, local referendums of one type or another have spread to an increasing number of countries. Many of the newer democracies have established referendum rights, first in Southern Europe, then later in Eastern Europe. In many of the latter countries (for example Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia), referendums may be binding under certain conditions (Schiller 2011).

The directly elected mayor

The type of leadership developed in local councils clearly has a significant effect on the shaping of local democracy (Wollmann 2008). However, there is considerable variation among the European countries in this regard (Kersting and Vetter 2003; Berg and Rao 2005; Denters and Rose 2005). The directly elected mayor is potentially a strong expression of pendulum democracy: candidates for a political office at the highest level must compete for electoral support, and only one candidate can win. Countries with directly elected mayors are now the majority within Europe. The number of directly elected mayors grew considerably in the 1990s, when, after reunification, all German Länder opted for the model, with the Austrian Länder and the Italian government following suit. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, most of the new democracies in Eastern Europe also formalized the directly elected mayor in new legislation. Most of the Napoleonic countries have long traditions of indirectly elected mayors that play a key role in local, regional and sometimes even national politics. The remaining group of countries with
Local and regional democracy in Europe

no council-elected or directly elected mayor is now relatively small. Mayors in the Benelux countries are formally appointed by the central government but with extensive local influence. In Scandinavia, with the exception of Denmark, this position is nonexistent; instead, collective forms of local decision-making dominate.

Conclusions: persistence or change in local and regional democracy?

Following historical institutionalism, with its emphasis on path-dependency, one would expect to see a great deal of continuity and not much change in the institutions of subnational democracy in Europe. This theory would predict institutional change to be the exception and institutional stability the rule. However, from the perspective of sociological institutionalism, it would be less surprising to see political institutions change in periods of significant technological, economic or social shifts, in particular those that concern the legitimacy of the institutions of democracy.

What do we see in the empirical realities of subnational democracy in Europe? On the one hand, there are countries that exhibit comparatively limited pattern-changing reforms and relatively high levels of institutional stability. This group includes Switzerland, Austria and Luxembourg (in the Rhinelandic group); Sweden, Norway and Finland (in the Nordic group); Portugal, Greece and Malta (in the Southern group); and Ireland (in the British Isles). Indeed, there have been institutional changes in these countries, but they have primarily constituted variations on the same theme, rarely pattern-changing reform.

On the other hand, there are also European countries that have undergone significant pattern-changing reforms in subnational democracy, displaying much less stability and much more change than the former group. Here we could point to all the ‘new democracies’ in Eastern Europe, the slightly older ‘new democracy’ of Spain and also to founding countries of the EU such as Germany (significant shifts towards more direct democracy), Belgium (wholesale federalization) and Italy (democratic reform and a new party system).

Finally, there are country cases that fall between these two extremes. One good example is France, which has transformed itself into a decentralized and (to a large extent) regionalized unitary state, with some additions of participatory democracy, but also exhibits many institutional continuities. A similar process has taken place in the UK. Regionalization in Denmark has attracted a fair amount of attention because the 2007 reform was remarkably swift and far-reaching, but it has not had much effect on the country’s governance tradition or its pattern of democracy.

Hence, within the set of European countries, as well as within particular country groups, both historical and sociological institutionalism would find supporting evidence: there are many path-dependent, stable institutions, but there has also been extensive institutional change and reform. The complexity of these developments underlines the need for a renewed research agenda on subnational democracy. There are almost 100,000 units of subnational government in Europe, but the activities taking place in these arenas tend to be overlooked in overall European decision-making. Comparative studies of subnational systems should be employed in order to fully grasp the significance of this often neglected level of governance.

Note

1 This chapter is based on the Oxford Handbook of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe, which we jointly edited (Loughlin et al. 2011). With experts from all countries covered, we analysed subnational democracy in the 27 EU countries, plus Norway and Switzerland. We acknowledge the input of all 47 authors who contributed to the Handbook.
Bibliography


Frank Hendriks, Anders Lidström and John Loughlin


Local and regional democracy in Europe


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