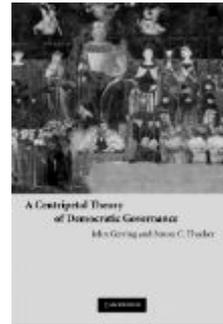


John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker, 2008, *A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 248 pages.

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The literature on good governance lacks empirical analyses that focus on the impact of complex institutions on political outcomes. John Gerring and Strom C. Thacker bring a valuable contribution to alleviate this theoretical gap with their recently published book, *A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance*. It opens with acknowledging the general observation that the theory of decentralism is considered to be the model for good governance by a variety of actors (p. 2). Decentralism is an old paradigm dating back to the Greek and Roman Antiquity and has become “the reigning paradigm of good governance at the turn of the twenty-first century” (p. 9).

The centripetal model of governance is developed in contrast with the decentralist model. The analysis is framed in the larger context of other models of governance along the lines of two main dimensions, *inclusion* (that the authors define as the capacity of the political institutions to “reach all interests, ideas and identities”) and *authority* (defined as the capacity of the political institutions to provide an effective constitutional mechanism for reaching and implementing agreement): anarchy, centralist, decentralist, and centripetal models of governance (p. 15). The focus is on institutions at national level and in democratic polities.

In developing the argument for a theory of centripetalism, the authors start from the assumption that good governance within democratic polities can be reached only through *inclusive* and *authoritative* national institutions. A centripetal model of governance has the following institutional features: “a unitary (rather than federal) constitution; a parliamentary (rather than presidential) executive; a closed-list PR electoral system (rather than single-member district or preferential-vote systems); the power to dissolve parliament (no fixed terms); no incumbency limits; few elective offices; congruent election cycles; strong parties; multiparty (rather than two-party) competition; and popular referenda only at the instigation of the legislature (or not at all)” (p. 16).

The book tries to empirically analyse the causal mechanism between centripetalism and good governance. In doing so, it tries to identify the connections between the centripetal institutions and party government, conflict mediation and policy coordination. These three types of elements are “critical” for the link between centripetal institutions and policy making. After detailed elaboration of this path, the authors point on the centripetal institutions to be more successful in achieving good governance than decentralist institutions. And they try to test this empirically.

The main hypothesis is that centripetal polities produce better governance than decentralist polities do. In this sense, both centripetalism and good governance are defined through a complex of elements. The independent variable, centripetalism, consists of three institutions: unitarism, parliamentarism, and closed-list PR electoral systems. The dependent variable, good governance, is defined by eleven elements grouped into three policy categories: political development, economic development, and human development. At their turn, each of these composing elements are analysed and encoded for the empirical analysis. For example, the three categories of elements defining good governance are measured through other indicators: political development through tax revenue, telephone mainlines, participation, democratic volatility; economic development through trade, per capita income, growth volatility; and human development through the indicators of infant mortality, health expenditure and total schooling (pp. 85-142).

The empirical analysis reveal that fifty years of full centripetalism may have the following direct impact on the political development: an increase in tax revenue, more telephone mainlines, greater voter turnout, and a drop in the democratic volatility. From the economic development perspective, the results show a drop in import duties, a rise in trade, and higher per capita income. From the human development point of view, fifty years of fully centripetal institutions are associated with a drop in infant deaths rate, greater health expenditure etc. (pp. 152-153).

This book is specific, complex and relevant. It is recommended to a specialized audience interested in the topic of the theory of good governance, in general, and to the way it practically relates to centralism, in particular. As the authors acknowledged “[i]n contrast to most contemporary work on the problem of governance, our endeavor is ambitious, both theoretically and empirically” (p. 158). The analysis addresses a familiarised public with the specific tools of quantitative

analysis, but the authors, also, present, in an explicit manner, the causal link between, what they call, 'centripetalism' and good governance; they elaborate, at length, on the data resulted after having conducted the empirical analysis.

The roots of the centripetal model of governance can be traced back to the theoretical debate on the best way to organize the state structures (between centralism and decentralism), in the 16th and 17th centuries. Both topics of centralism and decentralism (i.e. federalism is part of the decentralist model of governance) are complex issues and difficult to measure. The latter makes the initiative of these authors even more ambitious. In spite of difficulties, there is clear empirical evidence that the centripetal institutional design at national level can have a more positive impact on governance compared to decentralist institutional design.

Overall, *A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance* captivates readers' attention with its topic, structure and style of arguments, and amount of data. The effort to develop a new theory has, apart from inherent limitations and obstacles, the great merit of setting bases for further investigation.