

Polycentric democracy and dynamic political stability

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ept**Pablo Paniagua^{1,2}  and Kaveh Pourvand³ **

Abstract

A perennial question of political thought is how to stabilize a just regime in the face of disagreement. The importance of this question has been heightened with the Weberian state that monopolizes the power of coercion and anchors society under a single governance structure. This political form has given us both liberal democracy and totalitarianism. The stakes could not be higher in ensuring stability without dismantling pluralism. This paper provides a novel solution to the stability problem by focusing on dynamic stability reached through polycentric democracy. Plural and overlapping centers of governance characterize such democracy. This renders a polycentric system more resilient to changing views than a monocentric one and superior on political risk-management grounds by diffusing decision-making risks. A polycentric system also fosters antifragility in society by avoiding seeking a single and fixed point equilibrium, thereby eluding the pitfalls currently afflicting liberal democracy.

Keywords

Social order, political stability, polycentric democracy, liberal democracy, dynamic stability

Introduction

A perennial question in political science is addressing and guiding democracy toward stability, avoiding volatility and indeterminacy (Enroth, 2022; Weingast, 1997). Similarly, political theory has been concerned with identifying institutional arrangements that can prevent democratic erosion and avoid political instability (Chung, 2020; Thrasher and Vallier, 2018; Thunder and Paniagua, 2024). Rawls (1999, 2005) led political philosophers to focus on seeking a fixed point equilibrium to attain political and moral stability.

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He inspired a generation of political theorists to fixate on comparing the stability and equilibrating properties of different conceptions of justice (Kogelmann, 2017; Schaefer, 2021). However, despite being a classical theme in political theory, more progress has yet to be made in providing plausible answers to the challenge of political instability (Enroth, 2022).

The question of how to stabilize a just political regime has heightened with the emergence of the Weberian state, which monopolizes the power of legitimate coercion and thus anchors society and politics under a single bureaucratic governance structure (Ostrom et al., 1992). The great power of the contemporary state poses a challenge that can be posed as one of political “risk management” (Chung, 2020): the state might be a vehicle for great good if governed by a just regime, but it is also dangerous if its power is abused. As a political form in practice, the nation-state has given us both liberal democracy and various kinds of totalitarianism (Hayek, 2011 [1960]). The stakes, then, could not be higher in ensuring that the power of the contemporary state is used justly. Moreover, liberal democracies governed by centralized states now display acute fragilities, growing polarization, and political instability following the rise of modern populism and political extremism (Applebaum, 2020; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018).

Rawls’s (1999, 2005) *well-ordered society* offers one solution to this difficulty. According to Rawls, we can achieve a stable political order if all citizens affirm a unitary conception of justice. Their shared sense of justice will motivate the virtuous citizenry to maintain the justness of their institutions over time. However, the probability of achieving and maintaining a stable democracy by promoting a shared sense of virtue, justice, and value seems dim in modern globalized societies, especially once we acknowledge the existence of dynamic preferences, strategic behavior, and conflict (Chung, 2020).

A school of political thought pioneered by Gerald Gaus (2016, 2021) and others (e.g., Kogelmann, 2017; Thrasher and Vallier, 2018; Schaefer, 2021)—hereafter: “dynamic liberals”—have questioned the Rawlsian approach to stability on three grounds. First, it does not accommodate deep disagreement, which extends from divergent conceptions of the good to political justice and even the correct categorization of the external world (Gaus, 2016). Second, it overlooks how an open society can be a *discovery process* (Gaus, 2021), allowing us to discern which, if any, competing understandings of justice and the good may be correct (Hayek, 2011 [1960]; Thrasher, 2020). Third, Schaefer (2021: 10) has recently argued that fixed point equilibrium states—like the one Rawls envisioned—will often not even exist in complex social systems: “conceptions of justice ... [might] surge and recede.” As Miller and Page (2007: 222) suggest: “while the notion of social equilibria is an important one ... we may need to go beyond equilibria to truly understand the social world.”

These recent advances suggest that seeking *static stability* might be a wild-geese chase in political philosophy. Attempting to force a dynamic social-moral system into a static model damages our understanding of social experimentation amidst diversity (Schaefer, 2021). A more dynamic account of stability, one much more amenable to social change and diversity, is required. This essay contributes to the emerging field of dynamic stability by highlighting the antifragile properties of *non-equilibrating* political systems. We delineate a way forward in political thought, away from static

conceptions of stability and towards attaining dynamic stability through polycentric systems. Dynamic stability refers to the system's ability to maintain operational stability at higher levels following disturbances at lower levels with the aid of adaptation, "nestedness," and control devices (see details in section "The building blocks of PD"). The fundamental political institutions, or what Buchanan (2000) calls the meta "rules of the game," are stabilized, even as our ideas and expectations about what is good, just, and right evolve. We advance a form of *polycentric democracy*: a pluralistic form of liberal democracy with different, overlapping centers of governance and local politics (Ostrom, 2005).¹

Our contribution extends the recent literature on political stability in four critical respects. First, dynamic liberals have, thus far, said little about the implications of dynamic stability for our understanding of the *state* as a political institution. We highlight how the Weberian state's centralizing and standardizing tendencies (Scott, 1998) render it *fragile* in the face of pluralism and disagreement (Sen, 2009; Weingast, 1997). Our account of stability questions the centrality of the Weberian state in our understanding of the social and political order. Thus, unlike previous work, our framework invites political scientists and political theorists to think differently about the institutions and mechanisms that underpin a *dynamically stable* democracy in the face of pluralism, polarization, and disagreement.

Second, we stress the importance of two novel institutional features of a polycentric democracy (hereafter PD) that are conducive to dynamic stability. PD exhibits *nested resilience*, whereby macro-level stability emerges as a byproduct of numerous micro-level interactions among actors and decision centers. Furthermore, PD is not merely robust—that is, able to withstand diversity and dissent—but also *antifragile* (Taleb, 2012): it can be *strengthened* by exposure to diversity and disruptions such as those afflicting contemporary liberal democracies.

Third, we argue that PD has better *risk management properties* than more centralized political institutions. If citizens of one particular "governance node" adopt "non-liberal" or "undemocratic" values, this does not threaten the stability of the entire system, which is supported by multiple governance centers. Unlike comparatively more centralized systems, we show that PD gains support from redundancy and nestedness. Our analysis strengthens existing accounts of dynamic stability (i.e., Müller, 2019; Thrasher and Vallier, 2018) since they typically predicate stability on the assumption that there is a firm consensus on the common rules of a liberal-democratic order. This consensus is supposed to endure despite all the other changes in the social system. We contend that PD can maintain stability even when we relax this assumption. Its built-in redundancy and fragmentation limit the damage that "illiberal" or "authoritarian" dissenters from the liberal-democratic consensus can cause to the overall system. Crucially, this enables us to show how our proposal can respond better than centralized states to the recent challenges that polarization and populism pose to liberal democracies. Fourth and finally, PD can reconcile active democratic self-governance with deep diversity and social stability, thus highlighting a new avenue of research for political scientists to think about alternative ways to build more resilient democracies.

The twilight of liberal democracy?

The practical efficacy of fixed point stability solutions has become questionable in recent years, during which liberal democracy has been threatened by polarizing politics and populism (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). There are growing concerns that liberal democracies are losing legitimacy, becoming ever more “undemocratic,” and falling prey to *illiberal populisms* from both left and right (Mudde, 2021). Following Mudde (Mudde, 2021), we can argue that the threat is political instability and polarization produced by the rise of “illiberal democratic” populism. The rise of these “illiberal democratic” perspectives, spurred on by social media and technological changes, could seriously threaten liberal democracy.

Applebaum (2020) suggests that we face the “twilight of democracy” whereby democratic and self-governing practices deteriorate, giving rise to authoritarian and despotic regimes worldwide (see also Ostrom, 2000). Recent events point to an inherent difficulty with stabilizing liberal nation-states through citizen virtue: it is a high-risk strategy that may not be robust in the face of illiberal forms of democracy and authoritarian populism (Mudde, 2021). If, for whatever reason, a significant portion of the electorate—which need not be more than a minority of the population—turn away from liberal democratic values to embrace forms of “illiberal democracy,” then the stability of the whole regime could be put into question (Chung, 2020; Olson, 1982). Consider, for instance, the case of Italy during the rise of fascism (1919–1922), in which a vociferous and virulent minority of the population helped pave the way for an illiberal, populist, highly dictatorial, and yet stable political order (Scurati, 2021). Another difficulty with this single-point solution is its irreducible tensions with cultural and ethical diversity (Kukathas, 2003), for it calls upon the liberal state to ensure that citizen values and beliefs do not stray too far from the consensus necessary to maintain political stability. Yet, as the history of genocides shows (Levene, 2008), even liberal nation-states have a poor record when it comes to accommodating diversity on various dimensions.

As Mudde (2021: 576) recognizes, “populism can only be overcome by more [better] rather than less liberal democracy.” Hence, the challenge resides in avoiding the dangers of two extreme ends of the liberal-democratic spectrum: The first is unrestrained populist democracy, which leads to volatility and indeterminate decision-making because it is subject to the familiar aggregation problems of social choice theory (Weingast, 1997). The second is undemocratic liberalism—the rule of technocratic and bureaucratic elites insulated from democratic pressures and, thus, unresponsive to the local needs of citizens (Ostrom, 2000; Mounk, 2018). In other words, we can summarize the challenge of attaining political stability in the face of heterogeneity and individual liberty as follows: “Democracy unchecked by liberalism can slide into excessive majoritarianism or oppressive populism, liberalism unchecked by democracy can easily deteriorate into oligarchy or technocracy” (Berman, 2017: 30). Neither of these solutions will help us to either save liberal democracy or attain a form of political stability that is compatible with human flourishing.

Alas, political philosophy, at least since Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, has often inclined toward the monocentric and centralized solution to the problem of political stability,

disregarding other institutional forms, such as decentralized self-governance (Ostrom et al., 1992).² The feasibility of this solution seems evident: We can attain static forms of stability since “by reducing the diversity and interdependence of contemporary societies, we might foster the existence and stability of static justice equilibria” (Schaefer, 2021: 10). However, as history has taught us, this is a hazardous solution that could undermine our political and civil liberties. One could argue that political philosophy has often made a conceptual mistake by conflating the specific idea of *government* with the broader notion of *governance* (Ostrom et al., 1992).³

Consequently, the monocentric nation-state solution has often dominated our intellectual reflections on attaining a stable political order (V. Ostrom, 2007 [1974]). Comparatively little emphasis has been placed on *polycentric systems*, in which “citizens are able to organize not just one but multiple governing authorities at different scales. [...] Each unit exercises considerable independence to make and enforce rules within a circumscribed domain of authority” (Ostrom, 2005: 283). The distinction between a monocentric and polycentric order is not binary: The polycentricity–monocentricity dyad is a continuum of governance upon which political orders fluctuate (Aligica and Tarko, 2012). Some political orders might have more features of a polycentric system, whereas others have more features of a monocentric one (Müller, 2019). For instance, the United States was founded on polycentric principles (Bednar, 2008), yet it has since transitioned towards acquiring more monocentric features (V. Ostrom, 2007 [1974]). Speaking more generally, liberal democracies have become increasingly monocentric since the 19th century (Olson, 1982; Rajan, 2019). This essay highlights challenges to democracy that are exacerbated as our political orders move towards the monocentric end of the spectrum.

The centralist solution has a critical problem that Alexis de Tocqueville identified: *the crowding out of citizenship*. Echoing Tocqueville, Elinor Ostrom (2000) argued that monocentric governments “crowd out” citizens’ efforts in the co-production of goods and services (c.f. Rajan, 2019). She observes: “Leviathan is alive and well in our policy textbooks. The state is viewed as a substitute for the shortcomings of individual behavior and the presumed failure of community” (Ostrom, 2000: 5). Elinor Ostrom’s (1999, 2012a) work highlights how the monocentric system of governance can reduce the citizen to a mere spectator of politics and public affairs. The atrophied citizen is told what to do by a benevolent expert. Subsequently, citizens become less and less active members of the *Dēmos* and more like a “herd of timid and industrious animals” (Tocqueville, 2002 [1835]).

Thus, the centralizing state gradually devoids democracy of its real associative and self-governing meaning, reducing it to a mere formal expression of voting for a political leader every few years (V. Ostrom, 1994). Citizens become disassociated from public affairs and are unable to solve their collective challenges (Paniagua and Vergara, 2022). They have the ever-growing impression that liberal democracies and nation-states have failed to provide authentic representation and quality public services (Mounk, 2018; Rajan, 2019). As seen with the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, and with the rise of protests and civic unrest in several places in the world (Applebaum, 2020), liberal democracies—under the current consolidationist and bureaucratic model of the nation-state—are being severely questioned or even under violent assault.

Tocqueville and Ostrom offer the following cautionary message to political theory: “Much of contemporary political thought and the policies adopted in many modern democracies crowd out citizenship. ... [This] is a waste of human and material resources and challenges the sustainability of democratic institutions over time” (Ostrom, 2000: 13). In other words, the “crowding out citizenship” concern suggests that pluralism is incompatible with political stability and active citizen participation under an overly monocentric regime. When a regime is too monocentric or verticalized, citizen participation strains the political order by forcing citizens with conflicting values to agree on a comprehensive agenda. This is a source of frustration and dissatisfaction with liberal democracy and a source of conflict escalation rather than mitigation (Ostrom, 2012a). A different kind of regime, a more polycentric one, may be necessary to make pluralism and citizen participation compatible with stability.

PD and the antifragile society

As E. Ostrom (2005) suggested, there is an alternative to the monocentric view of political stability that is more conducive to democratic participation: “Instead of proposing highly centralized governance systems, the best empirical evidence we can bring to bear on the question of building sustainable democratic systems ... is to design polycentric systems” (Ostrom, 2000: 13). Similarly, the political thought of V. Ostrom sought to connect his vision of democracy—as a responsible system of self-governing individuals and associations—with the idea of a polycentric social order that can withstand diversity (V. Ostrom, 1994; Ostrom, 2012a). An interesting result from the Bloomington school is that political stability and a resilient democracy must be *co-produced* by engaged citizens from the bottom-up (V. Ostrom, 1994).

Today, we face a broad diversity and heterogeneity of views and beliefs (Gaus, 2021). This leads to a fundamental fact of modern social life: Disagreement and contrasting views lead—at times—to friction, and friction might lead to conflict and even violence, or worse, the breakdown of the social order (Chung, 2020). The failure to find a stable and single solution to the facts of pluralism and irreducible diversity has been recognized by Rawls (2005, xvii): “The fact of a plurality of reasonable but incompatible comprehensive doctrines—the fact of reasonable pluralism—shows that, as used in *Theory [of Justice]*, the idea of a well-ordered society is unrealistic.” Political theory has been unsuccessful at overcoming or minimizing disagreement—reasonable or otherwise—interpreting it as a problem to be solved rather than an ineradicable feature of the social order (Gaus, 2021).

PD is a plausible solution to the fact of pluralism. It is “an institutional arrangement involving a multiplicity of polities acting independently, but under the constraints of a democratically supervised framework for institutional competition” (Müller, 2019: 3). Paradigmatical examples of polycentric systems are the market as a coordination process and the “republic of science” (Polanyi, 1951). PD is part of recent attempts to build a dynamic political theory (Gaus, 2021; Schaefer, 2021; Thunder and Paniagua, 2024). This emerging research agenda examines political systems that encourage adaptation, learning, and experimentation with evolving

rules—at different scales of governance—in response to the endogenously changing values of citizens and the irreducibility of disagreement. Hence, “rather than a state without errors, dynamic [political] theorists seek a process of error correction ... in response to evolving values” (Schaefer, 2021: 11).

Recently, advances in social sciences and epistemology have pointed out the fact that diversity has many advantages, such as epistemic discovery (Miller and Page, 2007), effective risk management (see the following sections), and moral innovation and progress (Gaus, 2016). Diversity also supports resilient ecosystems (Ostrom, 2012a), helps sustain economic growth (Hayek, 2011 [1960]), and is conducive to freedom of association–dissociation (Kukathas, 2003). Moreover, putting all one’s hope into stabilizing a single centralized regime based on a single conception of justice or account of the good is ineffective political risk management: it puts all the proverbial eggs into one basket. Suppose our understandings of justice or the good were fallible in the scientific sense of being provisional hypotheses (Popper, 2002). This would suggest that our present conceptions of justice or the good could be revealed as incorrect over time. Now, imagine we follow the static approach in political theory. In that case, we would construct an entire model of a society regulated by fixed principles of justice or the good, convinced that we are correct even though we might ultimately erect our institutions on shaky grounds (Gaus, 2016).

Furthermore, our belief that we have the true conception of the good or the right concentrates all the risk and pressure of the system into one single node without making room for *a robust way of testing* whether we are correct. Such a concentrated strategy is a highly fragile form of risk management (Taleb, 2012). Political theory must instead adopt a more reasonable and risk-sensitive strategy. This, in practice, means elaborating an anti-fragile political theory.

The building blocks of PD

In what follows, we make the case for distributed PD as a solution to the challenge of political instability. Such a form of democracy is characterized by plural and overlapping—competing and cooperative—governance centers. Following the insights of Polanyi (1951) and Ostrom (2005), we conceive PD as a political system or arrangement that possesses the following four features:

- (i) An overarching and abstract system of meta-rules (i.e., a constitution) that works as a political limiting principle (Thrasher and Vallier, 2018).⁴
- (ii) Multiple—both heterogeneous and overlapping—governing authorities at different scales.
- (iii) Processes that allow for competition, cooperation, exit and entry procedures, and conflict resolution among the decision centers.
- (iv) Considerable independence for each decision-making center to make and enforce rules within a circumscribed domain of authority (Aligica and Tarko, 2012).

Our polycentric account of dynamic stability must answer three questions: (i) What remains stable? (ii) What changes dynamically? and (iii) Why think that some things can remain stable in the face of change when social forces modify others?

First, what remains stable is the set of rules that Buchanan (2000) calls the meta “rules of the game” or what Thrasher and Vallier (2018) call a “limiting principle.” These meta-rules are distinct from the first-order rules that directly govern the conduct of citizens. They specify jurisdictional boundaries and “how we settle upon first-order legal and institutional rules” (Thrasher and Vallier, 2018: 398). Second, the meta-rules of PD allow the first-order (institutional) rules to change dynamically, following our evolving ideas and expectations of the good life, justice, and morality more generally. The former rules are relatively *less malleable* than the first-order rules subject to experimentation at the lower levels. These meta-rules enable the social system to accommodate diversity and achieve antifragility (Taleb, 2012) since they delimit only the range of possible institutional outcomes rather than prescribe particular solutions to each decision center.

We may interpret the meta-rules as rules of political justice, so long as this is understood in a “thin,” second-order sense. Their task—*inter alia*—is to adjudicate and manage our first-order disagreements about what political justice requires.⁵ These disagreements include issues such as the scope and protection of property rights, how to balance freedom of association with equality of opportunity, the extent and form of redistribution, whether justice should be neutral regarding conceptions of the good life, and how criminal law should balance retribution, rehabilitation, and deterrence.

Third, how can the meta-rules stay stable amidst the dynamism of the first-order rules? Our answer partly builds on Buchanan and Tullock’s (1962) and Ostrom’s (2005) insights that diverse citizens are more likely to consent to “thin” and “nested” meta-rules because they lower the stakes of political contestation. The more monocentric a political system, the more political contestation becomes a zero-sum game, raising the costs of toleration. A workable compromise may not be possible under deep diversity and strong monocentricity (Chung, 2020). A polycentric system is comparatively more likely to gain consensus and remain stable at the meta-level because it is less of a zero-sum game: political battles are less fractious (i.e., interpreted as discovery processes rather than all-or-nothing struggles), and thus, risks are lowered for all political factions. Such a regime can afford to be more tolerant of diversity than the (monocentric) nation-state.

Our account is related to pre-existing accounts of dynamic stability in grounding the stability of the meta-rules in consensus (Thrasher, 2020). For example, Thrasher and Vallier (2018: 404) write that, while all first-order rules are subject to change, this “must occur in the context of stable constitutional rules and widespread agreement on the limiting principle.”⁶ However, pre-existing accounts tend to see consensus as the *sole* ground of the meta-rules’ stability. This raises the worry that a polycentric liberal order might not endure if a substantial portion of the citizenry defects from the agreement, seeking to overturn the meta-rules and impose their contested views of justice or the good upon other citizens. While we have just concurred that the permissive or “thin” nature of the meta-rules makes them more amenable to consensus than a comparatively more monocentric social order (see also Ostrom, 2005), we additionally contend that they

have bases of stability *beyond* consensus—namely, the built-in redundancy and risk dispersal of a polycentric system. In other words, it is difficult for authoritarian or “unreasonable” factions to overturn a polycentric system simply because power is dispersed across many decision-making nodes in a nested manner. Redundancy and contestation thus provide extra insurance in case the consensus falters.

Put differently, PD seeks to answer the question: How can we use disagreement and diversity to our advantage? We argue that such decentralized and overlapping forms of governance are more robust and dynamic in the face of political instability and more resilient to political risks that arise from the capture of central power (Olson, 1982). A polycentric regime can afford to be more tolerant of—and gain from—diversity and heterogeneity (including even authoritarian or illiberal doctrines on our account) than the nation-state while also dealing better with the Tocquevillian concern analyzed in section “The twilight of liberal democracy?” Greater toleration allows for more factual “experiments in forms of living” and solutions to social problems, facilitating social learning from failures that benefit the whole system.

Our framework not only adds to the literature on the epistemic advantages of diversity (see Gaus, 2021; Müller, 2018) but also focuses on some overlooked advantages of PD: (i) *Nested resilience* (see section “Nested resilience and de-escalating conflict”), which enables a better adaptation to diversity through an ability to deescalate conflict and achieve macro-level stability in an emergent fashion, and (ii) *systemic antifragility* (see “Antifragility and risk management” below), which allows PD not only to manage the risk of diversity and polarization better than monocentric regimes but also to be strengthened by exposure to such risks. Since they are interrelated, the relationship between the epistemic advantages of diversity vis-à-vis antifragility and resilience requires some clarification.

Let us begin with epistemic advantages. Making decisions in a distributed rather than centralized way has epistemic advantages that, on a macro level, could also lead to more stability and efficiency (Polanyi, 1951). Epistemic advantages could improve a system’s performance (measured in terms of justice), as Gaus (2016), Müller (2019), and Thrasher (2020) have suggested. Epistemic learning is enabled because innovations in some jurisdictions could spread, be amended, or otherwise be discarded as other agents and groups assess the results. Such experimentation improves the problem-solving capacity of the political order by increasing its ability to use available knowledge while encouraging the growth and adaptation of its knowledge stock (Müller, 2018).

Moreover, multiple jurisdictions under a PD would allow for *resilience* through two mechanisms: First, decentralized and overlapping governance structures diffuse rather than escalate political conflict and accommodate pluralism. This lowers the political intensity of contestation because citizens are not forced to agree upon a comprehensive social and moral program (Ostrom, 2012a). Second, as we have suggested, even if one “political node” embraces some illiberal or questionable doctrines, the rest of the system remains partly unharmed by that exploration. Thus, the political risk is contained, improving the political risk management of the social order. In such a system, the cost of disagreement and learning from mistakes is lower because many socioeconomic and political ideas can be tested simultaneously. Accordingly, the

system turns local errors into system-wide assets—that is, exhibits *antifragility*—because it can circumscribe risk while adapting and learning from local experiments and failures (Taleb, 2012).

Nested resilience and de-escalating conflict

A crucial but unexplored feature of polycentric systems is their capacity to generate nested arrangements and emergent properties rather than forming just fragmented orders that solve only minor, self-contained, and separate problems (Ostrom, 2012b). “Nestedness” or “nested structures” can be interpreted figuratively as Russian dolls: small social or political orders within larger ones governing particular challenges so that each local set of rules and incentives avoid contradicting and conflicting with the rules and objectives of other larger scales. Marshall (2008: 77) conceptualizes “nested arrangements” as cooperative systems that encourage the autonomous functioning of smaller, more exclusive units operating within broadly agreed principles.

“Nestedness” is a property in which governance functions—like monitoring, sanctioning, and enforcing rules—are organized into multiple and overlapping jurisdictions, enabling the system to generate either emergent properties or a multi-layered solution to complex issues. Consider, for example, how the coordinative capacity of the market and its ability to generate prosperity are emergent properties of the system (Gaus, 2021; Hayek, 2011 [1960]) and how the possibility of local self-governance is an emergent property of polycentric systems that follow certain principles (Ostrom et al., 1992). Some complex externalities—such as climate change—can only be managed through a bottom-up and concerted effort at multiple scales of governance and, thus, in a “nested” manner (Ostrom, 2012b).

Hence, under PD, the problem of overarching political stability at the macro level is bypassed or *indirectly solved*. Macro-level stability is a side effect of the discrete actions and governance attempts of many different (and decentralized) political units seeking to maintain coordination and political stability at the lesser levels while they adjust to changing circumstances. In other words, overarching stability is attained in dynamic terms by a process of adjustment and by the many different components trying to deal with micro-level political instability and volatility in a multi-layered manner. This conception of a nested social order “diffuses” the macro-problem of stability not by trying to solve it as a single, unitary problem—as does the Rawlsian well-ordered society—but rather as a multi-layered problem approached from the bottom-up, in which the solution emerges unintentionally as a by-product of the efforts of the different units. Thus, diversity is managed in a decentralized rather than top-down manner. In other words, under PD, systemic stability is attained indirectly through cooperation, competition, experimentation, and adjustment processes among the lower level parts at multiple scales (Ostrom, 2012a).

As seen in section “The twilight of liberal democracy?,” the contemporary political polarization of liberal democracy relates partly to the fact that we are not effectively managing deep disagreement and divergent moral views among citizens (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Müller, 2019). Our present, excessively monocentric (or insufficiently polycentric) systems are transforming moral disagreement into high-stakes, winner-takes-all conflicts because they cannot diffuse political tensions nor disarticulate

disagreements among citizens at lower levels. When social orders become increasingly monocentric, the demand for self-governance and pluralism puts pressure on the stability of the political order by obliging citizens with diverging conceptions of the good to agree upon a shared conception of justice (Gaus, 2016). In contrast, PD seeks to accommodate pluralism at its source through its decentralized and overlapping forms of governance. Nested and multi-level structures enable polycentric regimes to deal with diverging values and pluralism at lower levels, thereby preventing unnecessary conflict escalation.⁷

The polycentric alternative can be contrasted with contractarian and rationalist solutions that seek to solve the problem of stability *ab ovo* by identifying an *ex-ante* rational consensus (Gaus, 2016). PD instead decomposes or “unbundles” the stability problem into different fragments at different scales. Consequently, it is easier for the different governing units to cooperate and match the size and scale of the various parts of the problem: “Collective action problems faced by large groups are often decomposable into smaller problems among which some are typically surmountable given pre-existing trust between some members” (Marshall, 2008: 77). The critical point here is that the properties of PD explored in section “The building blocks of PD” will more likely help *defuse* fundamental disagreements about the right and the good by allowing citizens to enter diverse and “nested” social orders that better represent their values and shifting moral preferences.

Consider the restaurant industry for illustrative purposes. It looks to be stable and thriving at the systemic level, but this “system” attains its overall stability at the expense of several restaurants going bankrupt at the regional, local, or street levels (Taleb, 2012). Similarly, the aviation industry has become ever more stable thanks (paradoxically) to airplane crashes. These are catastrophic and undesirable events. Yet when they occur, they are leveraged as information at the systemic level, becoming the “epistemic fuel” that ignites the industry’s adaptation and improvement process. The aviation industry has used data about failures to improve flight safety 139 times over the last 60 years (Johnson and Gheorghe, 2013). Industry-level stability is attained thanks to all the units’ dynamic adaptation, cooperation, and competition.

The principle also applies to buildings that can attain dynamic stability in the face of earthquakes and other shocks because minor micro-movements and oscillations at different scales help diffuse the shock throughout different areas (Reitherman, 2012). Forest fires serve similar purposes in biology and ecosystems. By destroying some trees (local damage), they can enable healthier trees and other desirable vegetation to flourish better, thereby increasing systemic stability (Certini, 2005). In all these cases, we see the application of the “nestedness” or “nested governance” principle that enhances risk management (Ostrom, 2012b). Additionally, “nestedness” allows governance systems to be scaled up (or down) appropriately to “match” the scale of the problems (or fragments of the problem) they are aiming to solve (V. Ostrom, 1994) while providing institutional diversity (Ostrom, 2012a), and reasonable redundancy for risk management purposes (Taleb, 2012). Our proposed alternative is a form of multi-layered or compound stability that seems more robust and flexible than other static alternatives that political theorists have proposed. Nested jurisdictions deliver risk-management benefits when shocks arise because “when small systems fail, there are larger systems to call upon—and vice versa” (Ostrom, 1999: 528).

Antifragility and risk management

Our proposal not only diffuses political instability and disagreement throughout the different nodes of governance: A second crucial advantage is that it helps the entire system become antifragile (i.e., learn from local mistakes) and better manage risks by limiting experimentation to the lower levels. PD is a better risk-management strategy since the instability and errors at the smaller levels will be contained rather than spilling over into the rest of society. Therefore, there is little risk that social and moral mistakes could endanger the entire order. At the same time, these mistakes can be a source of learning for all agents in a polycentric society. In this way, PD promotes an *antifragile society* by circumscribing and economizing on errors and mistakes.

This form of social order allows people who disagree about the right and the good to enter groups, polities, and other competitive arrangements, giving them a chance to experiment with their moral conjectures instead of imposing them on others as usually occurs in a single unitary system (Gaus, 2021; Ostrom, 2005). Different normative visions and conceptions of the good can be tried on a small scale and, after that, be copied, contested, improved, or scaled up as other citizens desire after seeing them in action. By “giving (deeply) diverse views room for testing their ideas,” a PD “should considerably relax the tensions of society and thus lead to more harmony within society” (Müller, 2019: 147).

Such decentralized experimentation is valuable for exploring radical or untested visions of the “ideal society” that many political philosophers espouse. Given their uncertain outcomes, implementing these grand visions imposes large-scale societal risks. In a PD, advocates of each radical proposal can invest their own—and no others’—human capital, resources, efforts, and intellect to demonstrate its virtues on a smaller scale. PD thus enables a “skin in the game” (Taleb, 2018) approach to political and normative experimentation by allowing political theorists and social entrepreneurs to show, in real-world settings, how such systems would function. This not only helps us to have better and richer risk profiles and minimize the systemic risk of our political and normative options, but it will also protect us from thinkers who would hastily like to use other people’s lives and resources to establish their preferred utopias. In such a manner, we could gradually exit the status quo and alter our socioeconomic systems according to the experiments whose results are most attractive to citizens. Decentralized experimentation will avoid the dangers of large-scale “utopian social engineering” (Popper, 2002).

In addition, a PD’s nested and fragmented features defuse conflict and disagreement by breaking grand moral problems into more localized and fragmented issues, allowing groups to air their grievances, communicate their expectations, and inform the world about their actions. This will not only lower the intensity of disagreement and the possibility of it escalating. It might also encourage groups to seek compromises at the margin and alter their values through adaptation in the face of failed experiences (or successes) in dealing with pressing moral issues. Thus, PD promotes reconciliation and learning when liberal democracy needs it most (Schaefer, 2021).

In short, putting all one’s hope into stabilizing a single centralized regime is ineffective political risk management. In a highly centralized or excessively monocentric democracy,

large-scale experiments—such as fascism and planned socialism—have proven to be hazardous since their effects are felt throughout the entire population, leaving little room and resources to mitigate the damage (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Levene, 2008). In contrast, the system delineated here is antifragile in the face of errors arising from political and socioeconomic experimentation. The potential mistakes *are contained and fragmented* under PD, generating evidence for learning while leaving ample room and resources in the system to mitigate damages. Since they allow for redundancy, multiple jurisdictions strengthen the robustness of the governance process when shocks arise.

To conclude, our proposal minimizes the risk of moral, populist, and political catastrophe, a vital risk that nation-states have struggled to contain (Mudde, 2021; Scurati, 2021). Such a process of institutional persuasion and experimentation will allow the social order to adapt to diversity quickly, unlike the status quo, which ossifies the political order and exacerbates social tensions (Applebaum, 2020). As James Scott (1998) and Elinor Ostrom (2005) suggest, a highly centralized state often attempts to undercut social dynamism and experimentation by imposing stasis on otherwise complex and pluralistic social orders. Similarly, our static social theories in political philosophy fail to reflect our *de facto* dynamic and pluralistic societies (Schaefer, 2021). A polycentric theory of the political order could help amend these blind spots.

Objections to PD

We now turn to explore six objections to our proposal. A first objection to PD is that giving too much leeway to subunits in a polycentric scheme could encourage strong collective identities, which might lead to secessionist movements and thereby undermine stability. However, while sub-national groups with strong identities can form easily enough under either monocentric or polycentric states (Levene, 2008; Mudde, 2021), they may be *less likely* to secede from a polycentric political order that affords them substantial autonomy to live according to their views. By contrast, monocentric states often impose uniform solutions to contested questions of morality and culture (Kukathas, 2003). This is a relevant source of frustration and conflict escalation rather than mitigation.

Not even liberal-democratic states have been immune to these difficulties. Consider, for instance, sub-national secessionist movements such as the Québécois in Canada, Scots in Britain, Catalonians in Spain, or Flemish in Belgium. These movements arose under an excessively monocentric or vertical form of nation-state, which tends to escalate rather than diffuse conflict (Kukathas, 2003). One might argue that such political orders are “institutionally road-blocking” every attempt to escape the current (ossified) political settlement (Müller, 2019: 161), exacerbating political tensions. In contrast, a regime that gives polycentric autonomy to subnational groups could avoid ossification, reduce dissatisfaction, and reconcile democratic self-governance with pluralism. In this way, polycentricity might maintain an (albeit loose) overarching political order in the face of strong collective identities that might already exist (Bednar, 2021).

A second objection is that PD makes it too easy for “anti-liberal,” or otherwise “unreasonable,” movements to take root in a subunit. They might oppress the local population

and use those subunits to establish themselves and grow. Thus, strong, centralized institutions are needed to prevent these movements from arising. We can offer a partly *concessionary* response: our conception of PD allows for state enforcement of certain uniform fundamental rights, which would place some constraints on all subunits (see the sixth objection for further details). We can also respond on a *comparative and risk-management* basis. This objection overlooks the importance of political risk management insofar as it presumes that the central state will reliably combat illiberal forces without being captured by them. However, a core claim of our essay is that there is no guarantee of this, as evidenced by recent struggles of centralized liberal-democratic states—from the United States to continental Europe—to contain illiberal populist movements from within (Mounk, 2018; Mudde, 2021).

Moreover, the “downside” risk of the central state being captured by illiberal or oppressive forces is significantly high, as they would then have the power to impose their “unreasonable” views on all of society, escalating political conflict. It is worth recalling that, until quite recently, centralized nation-states in the West often promoted oppressive (homophobic, racist, patriarchal, etc.) norms rather than combating them. The history of the twentieth century suggests that a liberal hegemony under a strong nation-state is no indication of robustness in the face of illiberalism and populism (Ortega y Gasset, 2021 [1961]).

A PD might perform better on this front (paradoxically) because it affords illiberal groups more tolerance at lower scales and space for contestation. To wit, we prevent illiberalism at the systemic level by allowing it to be contained, fragmented, and partially take root in parts of the system and *then* be contested and repelled by the different subunits. PD reduces systemic risk analogous to managing a forest fire with small, controlled fires. Redundancy and a competitive system of governance units make it less costly to reconfigure the political landscape in anticipation of, or response to, internal shocks (Marshall, 2008). This might not prevent illiberal movements from taking root in some subunits, but it diminishes the probability that they could spread and take over the system as quickly as they have throughout the history of strong nation-states (Levene, 2008; Scurati, 2021).

Thirdly, there may be concerns that our proposal for PD is speculative and needs more evidence to support the claimed benefits. Several examples of polycentric orders in the real world have successfully dealt with the challenge of achieving social coordination amidst diversity and disagreement (Aligica and Tarko, 2012). For instance, the market and the organization of scientific inquiry are examples of how polycentrism operates (Müller, 2019). Also, the multi-level governance literature (Hooghe and Marks, 2003) has documented how some liberal democratic states have—at the margin—become more polycentric in recent decades on issues such as climate governance (see Ostrom, 2012b). This recent trend has moderately reversed the longer term secular tendency towards monocentricity in liberal democracies, with national governments ceding certain features of decision-making power to subnational and international government bodies (Hooghe and Marks, 2003). Our polycentric vision, then, intensifies some incipient trends already occurring within liberal democracies.

The closest example to the proposal we have in mind is a federation such as the Swiss and Canadian models (Bednar, 2008; V. Ostrom, 1994). However, the main difference is that under existing federalism, there are scant possibilities of creating new decision centers. Our proposal *takes federalism to a more polycentric level* by enabling the creation of new experimental polities, thereby allowing fluctuations in the number of decision centers through entry and exit. Existing liberal democracies very occasionally allow this. Consider, for instance, the cases of Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, two largely autonomous regions created within Italy. Analogous to such cases, the decision centers in a PD will be akin to new “states within a federal order, free cities—cities with a high degree of municipal autonomy—or special experimental zones” (Müller, 2019: 138).

A fourth concern is that in a society already polarized across an entire front of issues, the causes of instability may be so deep-rooted as to dwarf institutional solutions such as our proposal. However, a case can be made that PD is at least a *more feasible* response to polarization than monocentric institutions (Bednar, 2021). If polarization is entrenched, polarized factions are more likely to prefer sorting into separate jurisdictions than seeking a uniform, centralized settlement, which, by definition, they find difficult to agree upon. A PD’s meta-rules are better positioned than monocentric regimes to secure agreement in a polarized society precisely because they give different groups significant autonomy to manage their own affairs (Thrasher, 2020). If polarization is entrenched, polarized factions are more likely to prefer sorting into separate jurisdictions than seeking a uniform, centralized settlement, which, by definition, they find difficult to agree upon. As we have argued, the meta-rules, or “limiting principle,” are “thin” enough to secure consensus since they do “not need to have a detailed and substantive content” (Thrasher and Vallier, 2018: 407). Moreover, if the consensus falters, the built-in redundancy of PD provides additional capacity to withstand and contest “unreasonable” political forces that may seek to overturn it.

Furthermore, a polycentric system is better placed to prevent polarization from arising in the first instance by encouraging what Lipset (1960) defined as “cross-cutting cleavages,” whereby citizens are not polarized into opposing camps on all issues, such that it is easier for them to find common ground on at least some general concerns. The notion of “cross-cutting cleavages” echoes James Madison’s concerns in the *Federalist Papers*. Madison, in Federalist No.10, considered factions’ dispersed and variegated nature as a mechanism to promote political stability and prevent the tyranny of the majority (Goodin, 1975). Given that no single group can align all members of society along a single cleavage, groups will have the incentive to build a broader base by seeking the approval of different factions under a more general and “thinner” (or abstract) set of causes, thus diminishing polarization and social conflict (Goodin, 1975).

Cross-cutting cleavages in federal or multi-layered political orders imply that no single cleavage is felt too strongly or allowed to structure too much of social life (Bednar, 2021). Thus, “multiple and politically inconsistent affiliations, loyalties, and stimuli reduce the emotion and aggressiveness involved in political choice” (Lipset, 1960: 88). Bednar (2021) argues that “fragmented and overlapping institutions of authority are supposed to manage democracy’s innate rivalry ... This system of safeguards makes democracy

more robust.” A multi-layered political order “builds in a repository for diversity; its structure enables differences between national- and state-expressed interests, even within the same party. This diversity can ... serve as a reservoir of interest and information dispersion that could protect democracy by restoring the possibility that cross-cutting cleavages emerge” (Bednar, 2021: 1). This is precisely what PD seeks to promote, hence reinforcing our arguments concerning the role of polycentricity in de-escalating political conflict.

A related concern here is that polarization will prevent social learning under PD. We may be cognitively biased against learning from groups we dislike or perceive as different from ourselves. However, whether diversity leads to hostility between groups and, by extension, to cognitive biases against mutual learning depends on political institutions. We have contended that the “winner-takes-all” logic of monocentric institutions turns “mere differences” into polarization and hostility, intensifying our cognitive biases against learning from the “other” (Müller, 2018, 2023). More polycentric institutions would reduce inter-group hostility and polarization and, consequently, lower cognitive biases against social learning by alleviating zero-sum dynamics. Having the freedom to choose which, if any, of other groups’ practices to adopt—rather than having them potentially imposed upon us against our will—may make us more open to learning from them, especially when doing so helps us better achieve our own goals.

All this said, one might even question whether hostility prevents social learning under PD, as competitive pressure can be a sufficient mechanism. Consider, by analogy, how countries engaged in conflict can nonetheless imitate one another’s innovative political strategies and adopt technologies or practices despite hostility. In the context of a PD, competitive pressure is present because decision centers potentially compete for residents. This suggests that social hostility may not prevent social learning under PD since the decision centers have strong incentives to learn from and accurately evaluate experiments conducted elsewhere, replicating successes and correcting mistakes even if those innovations originate from disliked groups.

A fifth objection stems from the dynamic nature of PD, which allows for jurisdictions to be created and dissolved—albeit gradually. One might worry that these lower level institutional changes disadvantage PD compared to a centralized state’s more institutionally stable arrangements. Sarah Song (2012) makes arguments to this effect. She argues that political trust is “more likely among citizens who come together within a stable infrastructure of state institutions and who share a sense of solidarity, rooted in a shared political culture than among individuals who are constantly banding and disbanding in episodic demois” (Song, 2012: 59). Additionally, elected representatives “need to know in advance to whom they are accountable.” Otherwise: “[if] demois are constantly forming and disbanding ... it would be very difficult if not impossible for representatives to know on whose behalf they are acting” (Song, 2012).

However, as the previous sections suggest, there are reasons to believe that shifting towards greater polycentricity would increase bottom-up trust and cooperation between citizens of diverse societies (Bednar, 2021; Ostrom et al., 1992; Ostrom, 2000). Building trust among heterogeneous citizens in a centralized regime is difficult as the

imposition of uniform solutions raises the political stakes too high (Scott, 1998). The losers of zero-sum, “winner-takes-all” political disagreements often resent the winners (Rajan, 2019), while the winners frequently fear retaliation from the losers. This is part of the diagnosis concerning the recent illiberal and populist turn in liberal democracies (Mounk, 2018; Mudde, 2021; Paniagua and Vergara, 2022).

In contrast, polycentric arrangements might allow deeply polarized groups to rebuild trust because they amount to a “political disarmament treaty”: Citizens lay the foundation for civil concord by renouncing the zero-sum political war and granting each other reciprocal rights to live and let live in different—albeit often overlapping—jurisdictions (Bednar, 2008; Kukathas, 2003). Moreover, to the extent that *proximate* interaction engenders trust from the bottom-up, local jurisdictions will surely be able to achieve more trust *internally* than national ones the center imposes (Ostrom et al., 1992). Regarding accountability, political science suggests that representatives find it exceptionally difficult to know the interests and values of their citizens in large, impersonal, and centralized nation-states (Olson, 1982; Scott, 1998). By contrast, it is easier for leaders of local jurisdictions to gauge their members’ interests and preferences precisely because such jurisdictions are smaller and more homogenous (Bednar, 2008). This is so even if we allow such jurisdictions to be relatively transient or marked by some degree of turnover among their members (V. Ostrom, 1994).

Sixth and finally, another objection might be that we need to clarify how PD would work in practice. It is important to recall that the distinction between monocentricity and polycentricity refers to two ends of a continuum (see section “The twilight of liberal democracy?”). Embracing greater polycentricity need not mean moving *entirely* to the purely polycentric or extremely decentralized end. Instead, we could move gradually closer to it by decentralizing a great deal—though not all—of first-order policymaking rules to the lower level jurisdictions. Examples of relevant policy areas could include welfare policy (education, health, pensions, unemployment insurance, etc.), most taxation, the provision of small-to-medium-scale public goods, and so on. Still, given that we would fall short of the fully polycentric end of the spectrum, the constitution could also include a select list of first-order rules along with the meta-rules outlined in section “The building blocks of PD.” These might include a basic framework of uniform rights, the provision of large-scale public goods, and mechanisms to maintain economic integration and monetary coordination among the decision centers.

However, the *specific* allocation of first-order authority between national and subnational jurisdictions under more polycentric arrangements cannot be established from the academic armchair (Bednar, 2008). A practical bargaining process between the diverse factions of the political order would decide these concrete questions (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962). This might invite the question of why the parties would agree to a significantly more polycentric settlement than the status quo. We think they have sufficient reason to do so, given the discontent with the comparatively more monocentric status quo (see section “The twilight of liberal democracy?”) and the various virtues of polycentric arrangements that our paper outlines.

Concluding remarks

Our existing, excessively monocentric system of liberal democracy has proven unable to deal with growing social diversity and incapable of accommodating different forms and preferences of living. Thus, it is road-blocking creative ways to escape the current status quo, escalating rather than diffusing conflict. This has generated political discontent, polarization, democratic frustration, and even attacks on liberal democracy. Political theorists have also attempted to force a dynamic social-moral system into a static theoretical model of the political order, damaging our understanding of adaptation and experimentation along the way (Schaefer, 2021).

PD can provide a reasonable way out of this impasse. Our approach is consistent with recent attempts to move political thought towards alternative dynamic theories of the social order. We have focused on the aspects of *non-equilibrating* political orders that reflect some features of “compounded resilience”: risk diversification, nested orders, error correction, and the “unbundling” and diffusion of disagreement in response to evolving citizens’ values. Political thought has partially neglected all these features, yet they are crucial for strengthening liberal democracies going forward. The antifragile society envisioned here is a more pragmatic approach that can improve upon the static notion of the well-ordered society most familiar in political theory. Such a society will allow for more justice pluralism, more social learning, and broader forms of experimentation. It will also diffuse conflict and manage disagreement. This alternative vision might appeal to political theorists, helping us revitalize our analytical toolkit to build better and more resilient democratic systems in light of the extraordinary challenges that democracy faces.

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Notes

1. The intellectual history of the term “polycentric” or “polycentricity” is quite broad (see Aligica and Tarko, 2012): it starts with the work of scientist and polymath Michael Polanyi (1951) and it reaches fame much later in the social sciences through the work of Elinor Ostrom and her Nobel Prize in 2009. However, neither Polanyi nor Ostrom ever considered extending the idea of “polycentricity” to political philosophy or democratic theory. As far as we are aware, the term “polycentric democracy” was first suggested by philosopher Julian Müller (2019) only

- recently. This paper borrows the term from his work by extending it to the problem of redefining political stability and the challenge of attaining a stable social order in the face of disagreement.
2. An alternative tradition has explored self-governance, decentralized orders, and dynamic theory. For example, these ideas were part of the socialist literature until Marx became dominant (e.g., Owen and Fourier). They are also found in a certain strand of the liberal tradition, represented by Tocqueville, Montesquieu, and Hayek, among others. This essay seeks to revive that tradition.
 3. Christopher Morris' (1998) work, *An Essay on the Modern State*, is one notable exception that does not make this conflation. Morris explicitly recognizes that decentralized alternatives to the contemporary state have existed, such as the "complex, crosscutting jurisdictions of towns, lords, kings, emperors, popes, and bishops" found in Medieval Europe (1998, 33). But he does not offer a theory of a polycentric alternative to the contemporary state (on this see also Thunder, 2025).
 4. Such set of abstract rules should help define: (i) the broad ethical and moral boundaries of the search space for the politics, thus circumscribing (to some reasonable degree) the possible set of experiments; (ii) the rules for exit and entry of new politics, and the procedures for competition and cooperation among them; (iii) the meta-institutions or procedures for resolving conflict.
 5. Dynamic stability retains some similarity to Rawls' account of stability. For Rawls, the *subject of stability* is the conformity of the basic structure (BS) with a conception of justice over time. On our account, the subject of stability is the conformity of the meta-rules with *functional criteria* over time (Van Schoelandt, 2020). These are the meta-rules' ability to (i) allow different understandings of the good and justice to co-exist and (ii) leverage the benefits of diversity.
 6. Similarly, Müller (2019, 185–7) also grounds the stability of PD's overarching rules in widespread consensus among *reasonable* citizens.
 7. PD has an additional benefit in this regard. According to Müller (2023) and Landemore (2017), many existent disagreements are 'shallow' because they can potentially be resolved by new empirical data, unlike 'deep' disagreements, which involve fundamentally different moral evaluations. Polycentric democracy can significantly reduce shallow disagreement in society by providing evidence about the effectiveness of different policies and ways of living. Consequently, disharmony and friction arising from shallow disagreements will be less prevalent under PD.

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