

Book Review

Boundary Control: Subnational Authoritarianism in Federal Democracies, by Edward Gibson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 192 pp., \$76.50 hardcover.

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There have been two important developments in the comparative study of authoritarianism in recent years. First, there is a renewed interest in the role of institutions in establishing and maintaining authoritarianism (Schedler 2009; Pepinsky 2013). Second, a research agenda has emerged that focuses on local authoritarianism and the obstacles to the spread of democracy *within* countries in contrast to previous studies that examined authoritarianism in national politics and the hurdles to the diffusion of democracy *between* countries (Moncada and Snyder 2011). Edward Gibson's book on subnational authoritarianism in federal democracies is one of the first studies that combines and speaks to both research agendas.

Comparing the late-nineteenth century "Solid South" in the United States with contemporary Argentina and Mexico, Gibson shows that the democratization of national politics does not automatically eradicate authoritarianism at the subnational level. In all three countries, local jurisdictions exist (or existed) where incumbents systematically and repeatedly violate citizens' rights "through the legal and illegal manipulation of representative institutions" (p. 13) in order to rig the competitive political process in their favor.

Since subnational *authoritarian* enclaves are embedded in a national political arena that is *democratic*—a constellation Gibson calls "regime juxtaposition"—local incumbents face unique challenges. They not only have to pretend that they are committed to democratic ideals but, more important, incumbents have to constantly fend off local and national opponents to their rule. Hence, the emergence, endurance and end of subnational authoritarianism depend on how successfully local autocrats protect the boundaries to "their" jurisdiction from challenges mounted by opposition forces.

Concretely, stronger political players have an interest in keeping a conflict as isolated as possible, while weaker actors have an interest in bringing allies into a conflict. Therefore, Gibson argues, local incumbents prevail if they manage to close the boundary to their authoritarian jurisdiction, that is, if they succeed in keeping the scope of conflict localized by preventing opposition forces access to outside allies and resources. In contrast, local authoritarianism is threatened if opponents manage to open boundaries and nationalize a conflict by bringing outside forces into the local fray.

Local hegemonic parties “are the most important institutional manifestation of subnational authoritarianism in nationally democratic countries” (p. 27). Political parties are the main vehicle to accumulate and maintain power in most nationally democratic countries. Authoritarian local power holders cannot escape these party politics and therefore try to establish hegemonic local parties to protect the boundaries of their province.

Authoritarian incumbents rely on three strategies to keep the boundaries to their jurisdiction closed. First and foremost, they try to keep a conflict local. Second, incumbents strive to secure national power in order to influence decisions about “their” jurisdiction made by figures higher up in the administrative pecking order. Finally, authoritarian incumbents make an effort to monopolize the linkages between national and local politics.

However, the degree of centralization *between* government layers, the distribution of power *within* government layers and the empowerment of tiers of governments *below* the province circumscribe the strategic opportunities of boundary closers. Concretely, local authoritarian incumbents rely on legal and formal institutional rules to construct hegemonic parties when provincial autonomy is high. In contrast, in countries where incumbents lord over provinces with relatively low autonomy, they choose illegal and informal arrangements to establish hegemonic parties. Furthermore, local authoritarian incumbents have strong incentives to secure national influence in countries with centralized federalism. This is less the case in more decentralized federal democracies where less power is concentrated at the center. Finally, the institutional context also shapes the response to challenges from lower rungs in the administrative hierarchy. In federal democracies with relatively high provincial autonomy, it is easier for local autocrats to neutralize municipalities than in centralized federations where municipalities are relatively autonomous from provinces.

A country’s institutional context also shapes the *demise* of subnational authoritarianism. When subnational political entities have the powers to change local constitutions and election laws it is almost impossible for opposition parties to win. Hence, authoritarian local power holders will most likely be ousted through the intervention of national state authorities. Such center-led transitions usually change the local rules of the game. When provinces have comparatively few powers to shape local institutions and elections laws, however, coalitions between national and local parties are more likely to dismantle local authoritarianism. Such party-led transitions usually occur within the framework of existing rules and regulations.

Based on this theoretical framework, developed and summarized in Chapters 2 and 6, respectively, Gibson compares cases of local authoritarianism in the United States, Argentina, and Mexico and identifies distinct patterns of boundary control in each case.

In Chapter 3, Gibson analyzes the “Solid South” in the United States in the late nineteenth century. He shows how strategies of boundary control have changed in the American South as the country’s territorial regime transitioned from high centralization during the Reconstruction-period to a highly peripheralized system after Reconstruction. Concretely, during the Reconstruction era’s centralized federalism, local autocrats relied on informal and illegal tactics to control the boundary to their jurisdiction. As soon as decentralized federalism had been restored, local incumbents relied on institutional means to rig the system in their favor. Furthermore, the asymmetrical representation of states in national politics helped Southern autocrats, as did the relatively strong powers of states in quelling opposition from urban electorates. The eventual transition to more democratic forms of government was center-led.

In Chapter 4, Gibson shows that the territorial regime in Argentina shares many characteristics with American federalism after Reconstruction. A high degree of political decentralization provides governors with considerable discretion over provincial constitutions, electoral laws as well as economic and political life. The power of provinces in national politics is also asymmetrical, with low-population provinces being overrepresented. Finally, provinces enjoy far-reaching powers vis-à-vis municipalities.

These contours of Argentinian federalism shape the strategies of boundary control. The parochialization of power occurs through formal and legal channels. Illegal means of boundary control are hardly necessary as the highly empowered governors can simply craft the local electoral system in a way that neutralizes threats to their rule. Furthermore, the asymmetrical representation of provinces in national politics creates incentives for local autocrats to become involved in national politics as a strategy of boundary control. Finally, due to the wide-ranging powers of provinces, it is comparatively easy for local autocrats to offset recalcitrant municipalities. As in the American South, transitions toward more democratic forms of local government in Argentina are almost always center-led.

In Chapter 5, Gibson examines subnational authoritarianism in Mexico. There, the constitution and electoral regulations limit the powers of provincial governors to craft local electoral systems, while national courts and election monitoring agencies supervise the administration of local elections. By contrast, the national institutions grant considerable political and fiscal autonomy to *cities*. In short, Mexico's territorial regime is non-peripheralized and municipality-empowering, which makes the power base of provincial autocrats in Mexico much more vulnerable and contested than that of local strongmen in the American South and Argentina.

Accordingly, Mexican provincial autocrats resort to informal and illegal means, such as the illicit appropriation of public funds, electoral fraud and the manipulation of national politics to close the boundaries to their jurisdiction. They are also much more constrained in wielding influence in the national legislature. Additionally, provincial autocrats have to spend considerable time and resources to neutralize electoral assaults on the governorship that arise from the relatively autonomous municipalities. Against this backdrop, hegemonic local parties in Mexico were not swept away by national intervention, as was the case in the United States and Argentina. Instead, they crumbled due to the pressures exerted by alliances between local and national opposition parties that managed, slowly but steadily, to wrest patronage networks, fiscal flows and taxable jurisdictions from local autocrats.

To summarize, these comparative chapters show that boundary control occurs across time and context whenever regime juxtaposition exists. The distinct forms of boundary control, however, were shaped by the broader national institutional contexts, namely: whether a system was centralized or decentralized; whether provinces were represented in national politics relatively symmetrically or asymmetrically; and what powers had been given to municipalities.

Overall, Gibson offers a sophisticated and original model to understand the variegated patterns of subnational authoritarianism in *federal democracies*. It would have been interesting to learn more about the applicability of his theory to other contexts. For instance, through which channels does boundary control occur in federations where party institutionalization is weak and where party systems are poorly consolidated? (Hale 2006) Gibson suggests that "private civil society organizations" (p. 12) may vertically integrate different government layers and therefore substitute for the absence of party networks. Gibson also mentions briefly that the parochialization of power in federations where national

party institutionalization is low may occur through “bureaucratic control” (p. 26). Unfortunately, the book does not elaborate on these points.

More important, placing institutions at the center of his explanation for variegated patterns of local despotism in federal democracies, Gibson argues that there is nothing preordained about subnational authoritarianism. It does not simply “emerge” as a consequence of local conditions but is actively built. It is also decisively nonlocal in origins since it is the result of complex processes involving all levels of government.

This is in stark contrast to previous works on subnational authoritarianism that have emphasized the importance of conditions intrinsic to authoritarian enclaves, including historically grown local networks (Migdal 1988) and economic characteristics (Sidel 2014). To strengthen the book’s argument about the causal primacy of institutions in shaping local despotism vis-à-vis such earlier works, Gibson could have more explicitly ruled out aforementioned competing explanations in the substantive chapters of his book. For instance, it would have helped if the local economies in the provinces compared had been briefly examined to show why they cannot explain the emergence of subnational authoritarianism.

Also, why do local strongmen exist in political systems that are not based on the territorial regimes common in federations? While Gibson makes it very clear that he presents a theory for subnational authoritarianism in *federal democracies* where territorial regimes are relatively heterogeneous both between and within countries, it would have been illuminating to learn more about the importance of institutions in shaping subnational authoritarianism in nationally democratic but decentralized *unitary states*. Not only does subnational authoritarianism flourish in such countries, too, but there is also considerable variance within these states with regard to the emergence, longevity, and demise of local despotism despite the fact that territorial regimes are much more homogenous, and national level control over subnational entities is usually considerable. Arguably, the manipulation of institutions by subnational players is more difficult in such countries. Hence, economic conditions such as the concentration of industrialization or landownership patterns may explain better why local authoritarianism emerges, survives, and occasionally collapses.

Nevertheless, Gibson’s landmark study is as timely and important for the debate about subnational authoritarianism in decentralized unitary states as it is for federal democracies because its emphasis on institutions and intergovernmental relations suggests the crucial importance of “the state” and the dynamics within it for our understanding of subnational authoritarianism.

References

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doi:10.1093/publius/pju009