**Whither stability?**

**Polycentric democracy and social order**

Pablo Paniagua†[[1]](#footnote-2)\*& Kaveh Pourvand\*[[2]](#footnote-3)\*\*

**Abstract**

One of the perennial questions of political theory is how to *stabilize* a just regime. This “stability question” is pressing, particularly with respect to the contemporary Weberian state that monopolizes the power of legitimate coercion, and anchors society under a single structure of governance. The question of how we could constrain the state to exercise its great power in just ways could not have higher stakes. As a political form, it has given us both liberal democracy and the various totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. Many philosophers think we can solve the stability problem by socializing citizens into strongly affirming liberal democratic values. Vigilant citizens would then maintain a just state. However, the efficacy of this solution has become questionable in recent years, during which liberal democracy has been threatened by polarization and various populisms. In this essay, we provide a novel solution to the stability problem. Trying to stabilize a centralized regime with citizen virtue is not effective political-risk-management; it is putting all the proverbial eggs in one basket. We instead advocate *polycentric democracy*. Such democracy is characterized by plural and overlapping centres of governance. This renders a polycentric system more resilient in the face of diverse views, including “illiberal” ones, than a monocentric one, just as a variegated ecology is more robust than a monoculture. A polycentric regime can then afford to be more tolerant of diversity, which provides various benefits in addition to stability.

**Keywords:** liberal democracy, social order, dynamic stability, polycentricity, antifragility

*“Flexibility is key to stability”*

John Wooden

*“One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them”*

J.RR. Tolkien

1. **Introduction: the twilight of liberal democracy**

Ever since Aristotle (1984) warned that a republic could degenerate into a democracy which, in turn, could degenerate into despotism, political philosophy has been concerned with the issue of institutional and political stability.[[3]](#footnote-4) This perennial question of how to stabilize a just regime has been heightened with the emergence of the Weberian state that monopolizes the power of legitimate coercion, and thus anchors society under a single, bureaucratic structure of governance – which we shall call a form of “monocentric” governance (Buchanan, 2000; Weber, 2019 [1920]; 1994). [[4]](#footnote-5)

The great power of the contemporary state means it may be a vehicle for great good if governed by a just regime but also hugely dangerous if its power is abused (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2019; V. Ostrom, 2007 [1974]; Tocqueville, 2012 [1835]). As a political form *in practice*, the nation-state has given us both liberal democracy, and fascist and communist totalitarianism (Hayek, 2011 [1960]; 2007 [1944]). These political risks and dangers, concerning the concentration of political power for the sake of stability, have been highlighted neatly by J.R.R. Tolkien’s famous quote, cited above, form his celebrated novel *The Lord of the Rings*. The stakes, then, couldn’t be higher in ensuring that the power of the contemporary state is used justly.

Many political philosophers stress that the solution to this ‘stability problem’ is to socialize and coalesce citizens into *strongly affirming liberal democratic values* (Rawls, 1996; Macedo, 1990; Guttmann and Thompson, 1998). Virtuous citizens will then maintain a just democratic state. But this raises the problem of how to achieve and maintain *de facto* consensus in dynamic societies characterized by deep heterogeneity, and changing beliefs (Gaus, 2019; Sen, 2009; Weingast, 1997). The probability of stabilizing democracy today via consensus on a substantive set of liberal democratic values seems low in hyperconnected and globalized modern societies.

The stability question has become pressing particularly in recent years, as liberal democracy has been threatened by the “illiberal populisms” of both left and right (Mudde 2021; c.f. Abts and Rummens, 2007; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019; Paniagua and Vergara, 2022). These “illiberal democratic” tendencies call into question whether a liberal social order governed by a monocentric state will endure over the long-run (De la Torre and Srisa-nga, 2021). Anne Applebaum (2020) has even suggested that we are facing the ‘twilight of democracy,’ under which democratic and self-governing practices are deteriorating, giving rise to authoritarian and despotic regimes around the world.

As we see it, recent events point to the inherent difficulty of relying on citizen virtue to stabilize centralized, liberal nation-states: it is a *high-risk and fragile strategy*. If, for whatever reason, a significant portion of the electorate—which need not be more than a numerical minority of the population—embrace some variant of ‘illiberal democracy,’ then the stability of the whole regime is put into doubt. Consider, for instance, the case of Italy during the rise of fascism (1919-1922), in which a minority—but vociferous and violent—group of the population helped paved the way toward an illiberal and populist dictatorship (Scurati, 2021).

Moreover, two other considerations suggest that socializing the citizenry into a homogenous set of values would be an undesirable solution to the homogeneity problem even if it were feasible. First, there are epistemic benefits to diversity. Pluralism and contestation about the good life andjustice–including *liberal* conceptions of these values—allow us to *discover* valuable social practices and doctrines. If a diverse social order is analogized to a laboratory, then competing conceptions of the good and right may be seen as falsifiable hypotheses which are subjected to testing (Gaus, 2021; Hayek, 2011 [1960]; Mill 2006 [1859]; Muldoon, 2016). Second, the only feasible ways of engendering such consensus may be oppressive to those experimental groups who fall outside it. Even liberal states have a poor record of trying to integrate minorities and diversity.[[5]](#footnote-6)

We propose a different institutional solution to the stability problem—*Polycentric Democracy*. Such a regime is characterized by plural and overlapping centers of decision-making, each of which have some degree of autonomy from the others and none of which reigns supreme over all the others. We argue that such novel form of democracy might prove more stable amidst deep disagreement, including on liberal and democratic values. Here is our essential claim: polycentric democracy is a better *risk management strategy* than a monocentric state. If the citizens of one particular “decision-making node” adopt “non-liberal” or “undemocratic” values, that governance challenge *does not* threaten the stability of the whole system, whose institutional support comes from multiple governance centers. This renders a polycentric system more resilient to diversity and changing views than a monocentric one, just as a variegated ecology is more robust than a monoculture (Ostrom, 2012a). Such a regime can then afford to be more flexible and tolerant of diversity and heterogeneity than a monocentric one. Greater toleration allows for more “experiments” in forms of life and solutions to social problems, facilitating social learning from which the whole regime can benefit. It also avoids the domination and suppression that may be required in trying to ensure all citizens conform to a particular set of liberal-democratic values. This, we argue, ultimately helps social orders to attain a form of dynamic flexibility and political resilience through time, which might be a better form of political stability than non-dynamic ones.

The rest of this essay will proceed as follows: section 2 draws on Max Weber and Alexis De Tocqueville to highlight two critical features of the monocentric contemporary state: its drive for uniform and hegemonic legislation and its displacement of intermediate associations (i,e., civil society). We argue that these two features of the contemporary state heighten the risk of political instability greatly, particularly in light of the deep and pervasive disagreement that affects contemporary societies. Section 3 outlines our polycentric alternative. It outlines how the “nested resilience” of polycentric democracy not only makes it more robust in the face of disagreement, but also *anti-fragile—*system stability is *strengthened* by exposure to disagreement and low-intensity conflict. Section 4 reflects on the wider benefits of polycentric democracy, particularly with respect to the experimentation of utopian ideas. Section 5 contains concluding remarks.

1. **One solution to rule them all? A Weberian and Tocquevillian characterization of the monocentric state**

It is fair to say that the theoretical focus of contemporary philosophers has been principally, if not exclusively, on the monocentric state. They have been concerned to either legitimate the activities of a centralized state or offer normative prescriptions that such a state is supposed to implement. There has been a general neglect of other forms of political authority, particularly local self-governance (Brennan 2017). Naturally, then, the monocentric state has dominated intellectual reflections on the question of stability (e.g. Rawls 1999 pt. III). We could say that political philosophy has fallen into a conceptual mistake of conflating the idea of *government* with the challenge of *governance*. Government, in the conventional liberal sense of a centralized nation state, is only one of a range of possible institutional solutions to the challenge of governance.[[6]](#footnote-7)

If we are to outline an alternative to an institution, it is helpful to first define that institution properly. Our definition of the institution we seek to improve can then be used to formulate our desired alternative. That is the purpose of this initial section. Drawing on Weber and Tocqueville, we identify two critical features of the monocentric state: legal uniformity and a tendency to displace intermediate associations. We will then outline how these features of the monocentric state combine with the pervasive disagreement of contemporary societies to produce institutional fragility and, ultimately, political instability given irreducible disagreement. Our definition of the monocentric state and diagnosis of its problems will then act as a point of contrast for our description of a polycentric alternative in the following sections.

* 1. ***Weber on the state: Uniformity and Rationalization***

Max Weber (2019 [1922]; 1994) recognized that modernity ignited a process of rationalization under which different fields of human life become dominated by standardization, impersonality, specialization and enhanced social control (Brubaker, 1991, 32–35). The quintessential process of rationalization was the rise of the monocentric nation state and its bureaucratic apparatus (Weber 1994). The contemporary state, according to Weber, has the following characteristics: (i) the claim to a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a given territory; (ii) centralization of the material and ideational means of rule; (iii) planned distribution of the powers of command among various entities; (iv) an administrative and legal order which claims binding authority, and (v) a bureaucratic apparatus—with an administrative staff—oriented to the enforcement and achievement of the political order.[[7]](#footnote-8) This hierarchical structure allows the state to bring uniformity to social life on the basis of a formal-procedural rationality (*Zweckrationalität*).

Weber believed this rationalisation was necessary to bring predictability and standardization to our social interaction. In this he sided with Hobbes in recognizing that the nation-state was necessary to impose order on the social world (Weber, 2019 [1922]).[[8]](#footnote-9) Indeed, our contemporary ideal of equality under the law arose against the background of a Weberian state with the capacity to legislate and enforce law uniformly in a territory.

* 1. ***Tocqueville on the state: the crowding out of intermediary associations***

Like Weber, Alexis de Tocqueville (2002 [1835]) stressed uniformity of legislation as a key feature of the contemporary state. For Tocqueville, the demand for uniformity was part of the demand for civic equality under democracy. If all citizens were of the same standing before the state, they should be treated uniformly. In a democratic age, any kind of legal polycentricity would constitute either privilege for some or neglect of others, and would be unacceptable.

Tocqueville stressed that the democratic state’s drive for legal uniformity would either displace or subsume all manner of independent intermediary associations between itself and the citizenry. For to the extent that intermediary associations were self-governing associations that could adopt differing rules of governance, they threatened legal uniformity. Tocqueville famously worried that this displacement would result in “soft despotism”. Stripped of the ability to solve their own problems through intermediary associations and bottom-up collective action, citizens would lose their capacity for personal and associational agency, becoming passively reliant on the state, thus eroding citizens’ democratic and political skills.[[9]](#footnote-10)

What is important for the purpose of this essay is that the displacement of intermediate association by the state heightens the risks of political instability in two senses. First, to the extent that the central state subsumes all other sources of authority, the health of all other local authorities and institutions then depends on the health of the over-arching institution. If the central state is captured by bad actors or a badly motivated electoral coalition, this threatens to sink the whole ship of the political and social order, as they were. This looks to be unwise risk-management, a case of putting all the proverbial eggs into one basket. It is also worth stressing that, in the case of an electoral coalition, it doesn’t require more than a minority of the electorate to take the whole polity into an undesirable direction. Let us assume, at least for the sake of argument, that a vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential election and a vote to “leave” in the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union constituted a defection from any reasonable interpretation of liberal democratic values. Only 25% of US citizens of voting age opted for Donald Trump[[10]](#footnote-11) while only 37% of the registered British voters opted to leave.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Second, the way in which citizens engage with politics changes under a monocentric state. Politics becomes more of a *spectator* sport. As Elinor Ostrom puts it:

“Citizens are effectively told that they should be passive observers in the process of design and implementation of effective public policy. The role of citizenship is *reduced to voting* every few years between competing teams of political leaders. Citizens are then supposed to sit back and leave the driving of the political system to the experts hired by these political leaders”. E. Ostrom (2000, p. 12).

But this has the following important implication. Demands that may have been met at the local or associational level under a more decentralized social order are now placed at the feet of the monolithic central state. This raises the stakes, particularly in a diverse society, since stability now depends on the central state’s capacity to meet heterogenous political demands at *different scales and sizes*, not all of which may be reconcilable with one another. In other words, the monocentric state has the potential risk of severely marginalizing citizens’ efforts and collaboration at better solving their own collective action problems at the local level, thus ‘crowding out’ civil society and other forms of local governance that might fit better the size and scale of the problem at hand (Ostrom, 2000; Paniagua, 2022).

We submit that this marginalization explains at least part of the distrust, polarization, and populism that we see in liberal democracies today (Paniagua and Vergara, 2022; Rajan, 2019). Even a well-meaning centralized state can please only some of its myriad constituencies, leading to resentment and populist pushback from those who feel their demands are unmet or unrepresented. These weaknesses imply that the monocentric state is poorly placed to deal with the main source of political instability today: deep and pervasive disagreement, which we shall discuss in the next sub-section.

***2.3 Deep and pervasive disagreement***

Arguably, John Rawls’ signature contribution to political philosophy in the latter part of his career was to lay stress on the problem of deep disagreement. The burdens of judgement involved in considering the truth of complex matters, such as religion, ethics, the good life, and justice imply that even good faith actors will disagree fundamentally over these core matters.[[12]](#footnote-13) Furthermore, this is not merely an incidental or contingent feature of libera democratic societies. It is rather the “natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions” (Rawls 1996, xxvi). The very freedoms of expression and association protected by liberal societies give rise to this diversity. This, Rawls saw, poses a deep challenge in terms of stability: how could liberal democracies endure given this deep disagreement, especially when some citizens come to reject cardinal liberal values, such as individual autonomy?

Rawls’ initial response was to refashion his theory of justice as a political principle that citizens could affirm for diverse reasons as part of an overlapping consensus (Rawls 1985). However, by the end of his career, Rawls stressed that disagreement extended to justice itself, and the consensus of citizens should be limited to a commitment to *public reason*, the notion that coercive laws should be justified with reasons all citizens could accept (Rawls 1997). However, as the recent decade has showed us, it is hard to see why we will agree on how to conduct politics if we disagree on practically everything else. Indeed, many philosophers have objected to Rawls’ public reason proposal.[[13]](#footnote-14) Also, many contemporary political philosophers now stress that disagreement is *pervasive* and extends to all domains, including even the basic conceptual categories we use to understand the world (Thrasher and Vallier 2018; Muldoon 2021). The search for underlying consensus amidst this diversity looks quixotic at best, thus, “looking for a hidden consensus behind the curtain of reasonable disagreement might be a dead end” (Müller, 2019, 85).

Moreover, the challenge is even deeper if the problem of stability is viewed in diachronic or dynamic rather than static terms. From a static perspective, the challenge is to find some underlying consensus between diverse citizenry at t0. Even if that challenge was met, the consensus would need to maintain itself over time given changing beliefs and circumstances, including unforeseeable and unpredictable new forms of disagreements.[[14]](#footnote-15) Such a ‘static’ fixed-point stability would look mightily fragile in the face of change (Thrasher, 2020).[[15]](#footnote-16) Hence, these important considerations suggest that it is hard to see how we could form and maintain a consensus on moral values, even liberal-democratic ones, without the “the oppressive use of state power” (Rawls 1996 p. 37).[[16]](#footnote-17) In other words, the social order seems to face a critical tradeoff: either we attain static stability at the expense of coercively reducing disagreement and diversity, or we renounce to large consensus and fix stability, by allowing deep disagreement and diversity to persist.

As the recent political events during 2016-2021 around the world have showed us, deep disagreement combined with the two risks inherent to monocentric regimes do not bode well for the liberal-democratic state. If the health of a liberal democratic polity remains on the central state remaining liberal democratic because it subsumes other associations, but deep disagreement extends to liberal-democratic values, then there is always the possibility that a minority of “illiberal” voters capture the state and take it into an illiberal direction. If deep disagreement leads to a radical diversity of often mutually exclusive political demands, and these are pressed against a central state, then it is almost certainly the case that many constituencies in society will be deeply disappointed by how the outcomes of the political process. Either quarrels, disputes and deep disagreements will constantly arise amongst voters—thus, leading to polarization, fragmentation and even violence, or deep dissatisfaction against politics and the monocentric state will emerge—thus, leading to political disaffection, problems with representation, and, finally, populism.

In other words, deep disagreement plus a political system requiring uniform “one-size-fits-all” solution is a recipe for *political fragility*. This fragility has arguably exhibited itself in practice in the recent decade, as liberal democracies struggle to respond to polarization among their populace (Paniagua and Vergara, 2022), which might explain why some scholars are concerned that we might be reaching the twilight of democracy (Applebaum, 2020). Having defined the constitutive features (and major risks) of the monocentric state and its fragility in the face of deep disagreement, we now turn to outline our polycentric democratic alternative.

1. **The ideal of Polycentric democracy**

Following the insights of Elinor and Vincent Ostrom (E. Ostrom 1972; V. Ostrom 2010), M. Polanyi (1951), and Aligica and Tarko (2012), we can conceive of polycentric democracy (hereafter: PD) as a political system or arrangement that possesses the following properties: (i) an overarching and abstract system of rules (i.e., a constitution), (ii) multiple governing authorities *at different scales*, (iii) processes that allow for competition, cooperation, exit and entry procedures, and conflict resolution among the decision centres, and (iv) considerable autonomy for each decision-making center to make and enforce rules within a circumscribed domain of authority (see also Ostrom, 2005).[[17]](#footnote-18) Thus, polycentric democracy is one instance of a wider genus of polycentric systems. The market economy and the scientific process are other examples.

In the previous section, drawing on Weber and Tocqueville, we identified legal uniformity and the displacement of intermediate associations as the hallmarks of the contemporary monocentric state. PD represents not so much a repudiation of the modern state as a reconceptualization of it *away* from monocentricity (Thiel et al., 2021). The equality-driven demand for legal uniformity now finds expression at the “meta” level in the abstract rules that govern the interaction between decision-making centers and resolve their disputes. Within the constraint of these meta-rules, however, legal polycentricity is given significant latitude over uniformity. In what follows, we argue that such a decentralized state regime is not only robust in the face of deep disagreement but *antifragile*. That is to say, it can not only withstand deep political contestation and disagreement, but potentially it can be strengthened by it (Ostrom, 2012a; Taleb, 2012; Taleb and Douady, 2013).[[18]](#footnote-19)

***3.1 Wither Stability? Political stability as nested resilience***

One reason to think that polycentric democracy can be anti-fragile in the face of deep disagreement and diversity is that this is true of polycentric systems more generally. Even though diversity and disagreement have been treated as problems by political theorists, contemporary social science and epistemology has shown that diversity and polycentricity can fruitfully combine to produce various benefits. These include effective problem solving (Hayek, 2011 [1960]; Page, 2007), moral innovation and progress (Gaus, 2016), resilient ecosystems (Ostrom, 2012a), and radical freedom of association (Kukathas, 2003), to mention a few. The key feature of polycentric democracy which makes it amenable to stability amidst diversity is its *nested resilience*, to which we now turn.

Polycentric systems have the capacity to generate *nested arrangements* and *emergent properties* rather than forming just decentralized or fragmented arrangements that solve only small, but separate, problems (Ostrom, 2012b; Paniagua, 2022). In simple terms, the notion of ‘nestedness’ or ‘nested structures’ could be interpreted figuratively as Russian dolls: there are small social or political orders within other larger ones, such that that each local set of rules and incentives *aligns with* the rules and objectives of other larger scales. Marshall (2008, p. 77) for example, conceptualizes “nested arrangements” as cooperative systems that encourage the autonomous functioning of smaller, more exclusive units, operating *within* broadly agreed principles.

“Nestedness” then is an institutional property in which key governance functions—like monitoring, sanctioning, and the enforcement of rules—are organized into multiple and overlapping layers of governance, enabling the system to generate either emergent properties or a nested solution to complex (multi-layered) problems (Paniagua, 2022; Paniagua and Rayamajhee, 2023). Consider, for example, how the coordinative capacity of the market and its ability to generate social prosperity are actually emergent and unintended properties of the system (Hayek, 2011 [1960]; Lewis, 2012), and how the possibility of local self-governance is actually an emergent property of polycentric systems that follow certain design principles (Lewis, 2021; Ostrom, 1990). In fact, E. Ostrom recognized that some complex externalities—such as climate change—could only be managed through a bottom-up and concerted effort at *multiple-scales of governance*, and, thus, in a ‘nested’ manner (Ostrom, 2012; Paniagua and Rayamajhee, 2023).

Under a PD, we do not try to deliberately stabilize the whole system by way of an *ex-nihilo* conscious, rational consensus on our preferred conception of liberal-democratic values. Macro-level political stability is achieved indirectly as *a side effect* of the efforts of many different (and decentralized) political units, each seeking to maintain their own political stability at lesser levels. In other words, overarching stability is the changing and emergent product of myriad micro-level adjustments by the many different decision-making centers to the stability challenges they face. This ‘diffuses’ the macro-level challenge of stability, by solving it not as a single unitary problem, but rather as a ‘nested’ problem from the bottom-up. Hence multi-level flexibility, adaptation and competition is crucial on this account of systemic-level stability (Ostrom, 2012).

For example, consider the ‘restaurant industry.’ Such an industry looks stable and thriving at the systemic level. However, this higher-level stability is attained through instability at smaller scales (such as regional, local, or street levels), where millions of restaurants go bankrupt every month (Taleb, 2012). Similarly, the ‘aviation industry’ becomes ever more stable at the systemic level thanks to the risk of airplane crashes. Airplane crashes are obviously catastrophic and undesirable events that can bring entire companies to bankruptcy. Yet when they occur, they are leveraged as ‘vital information’ at the systemic level, becoming the ‘epistemic fuel’ that ignites the process of adaptation and improvement in the industry. In fact, the aviation industry has successfully used data about actual failures to improve flight safety by 139 times over the last sixty years (Johnson and Gheorghe, 2013). Again, industry-level stability is attained thanks to the dynamic adaptation of different units at multiple scales, and by fragmenting and tackling different aspects of the problem at different levels.

The principle applies as well with buildings that can attain dynamic stability in the face of earthquakes and other shocks (e.g., wind) by the fact that there are minor micro-movements and oscillations at different scales that help diffuse the shock throughout different and decentralized areas (Reitherman, 2012). Dampers are strategically placed in the building structure to control floor vibrations and building displacement, mitigating the risk of systemic failure. To further enhance the building's systemic stability, engineers use clusters of various seismic vibration control technologies at different scales (ibid., chapter 9). In biology and ecosystems, forest fires serve similar purposes. By destroying some trees (local level damage), they enable trees and other desirable vegetation to flourish better, thus increasing systemic stability (Certini, 2005).

In fact, it has been recently argued that complex externalities, such as modern pandemics, banking instability, and climate change are complex and multi-layered challenges that could be better managed through nested and polycentric arrangements (Paniagua, 2022; Paniagua, 2020; Paniagua and Rayamajhee, 2023). Thus, in all these examples, we can see different forms of applying the principle of ‘nestedness’ or ‘nested governance’ (Ostrom, 2012b; Paniagua, 2022; Walloth, 2016).[[19]](#footnote-20) Moreover, ‘nestedness’ allows management or governance systems to be constantly scaled-up (or scale-down) appropriately in order to deal better and ‘match’ the scale of the problems they are aiming to solve, enhancing efficiency (Tarko, 2017).

Nestedness, then, unpacks apparently unitary and complex problems into multi-level smaller problems, to later tackle the differing aspects of the problem at the most appropriate scale of collective action (V. Ostrom, 1994). This helps to solve ‘complex problems’ from the bottom up in an ascending matter, tackling different aspects and fragments of problems according to their scale and size (Paniagua, 2020). Nested governance then in PD system can be explained as “the eventual result of larger, more inclusive organizational [political] units emerging from, and then ‘nesting’ .... smaller, more exclusive units that manage to self-organize sooner. Smaller organizations thus become part of a more inclusive system without giving up their essential autonomy” (Marshall, 2005, p. 47).

Let us now consider how nested resilience provides a response to the challenge of deep disagreement. The most obvious way it does this is by lowering the political stakes. No longer is it the case that one central authority subsumes all others. An “illiberal” turn by a portion of the population does not threaten to “sink the whole ship,” as it were. Furthermore, political demands now find expression at multiple jurisdictions rather than solely, or mostly, in the central state. Politics thus become less of a zero-sum, “winner-takes-all” game. My faction attaining a political victory does not imply your faction having to lose, since you can still win in another political jurisdiction. One of the key causes of polarization and enmity in politics is at least abated. As Muller puts it:

“[PD] has the advantage that, in letting different polities follow their own evaluative standards, it also succeeds in defusing disagreement on a macro-level. Defusing ‘deep disagreement’ is again a side effect of letting polities discover new ‘ways of living’ [in a nested manner] … Giving (deeply) diverse room for testing their ideas should considerably relax the tensions of society and thus lead to more harmony within society” (Müller, 2019, 141, 147).

An additional benefit of PD, particularly for liberal democratic political elites, is that it is more likely to provide *promptly signals* of disaffection and discontent with, or otherwise rejection of, liberal-democratic values from the citizenry, since these sentiments can be expressed forthrightly at myriad local levels. Simply put, there are many more potential canaries in the political and social coal mine under a PD. This is beneficial because elites will be able to respond sooner to discontent if they become aware of it sooner. Consider what a shock both the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 was for the Anglo-American political class. Arguably, these landslide results occurred not so much because elites ignored discontent but that they were not aware of it at the local level. Additionally, under a PD there are multiple jurisdictional flora to experiment with potential policy solutions that could alleviate the grievances of the discontented segments of the population. A successful resolution of the issue in one jurisdiction can be adopted by others. Just as local fires serve to strengthen a forest’s systemic resilience to fire and plane crashes make the air transportation system safer, so would allowing disagreement to destabilize micro-level jurisdictions *improve*,through time, the system-level stability of a PD. It is in this sense that a PD is antifragile through a process of nested governance (Paniagua, 2020, 2022).

1. **The systemic benefits of Polycentric Democracy**

The leveraging of diversity and nestedness under a PD to achieve stability has wider benefits. First, it avoids assimilation. A PD can allow considerable heterogeneity on several important dimensions, including education, religion, forms of social organization (consider how, say, the Amish society differs socio-economically to the wider US population), and language. It thus avoids the repression and social tension that accompany attempts to assimilate the whole population into a moral and cultural consensus. Additionally, under a PD, political units can enable experiment with different normative visions and conceptions of the good life. These can be tried *on a small scale* or at local levels and thereafter be copied, contested, improved, or scaled-up if other people desire them after they see them in action. This system of ‘small scale bets’ and ‘small scale prototypes’ not only help us to explore what institutions really work in practice, but also reduce the great risk that accompanies system-wide social engineering.

Consider, for example, three famous normative institutional proposals: Rawls’ (1999a) notion of “property-owning democracy,” Nozick’s (2013) ‘libertarian utopia’, and Habermas’ (1996) proposal for ‘deliberative democracy’. These three proposed systems would require substantial changes to the institutional regime already prevalent in liberal democracies –welfare state capitalism. They thus involve very high risks and irreducible uncertainties by tweaking a significant portion of existent socioeconomic regimes. The problem is not simply that these proposals may turn out to be less just than anticipated, they might be significantly worse than the status quo, as attested to by the many failures in radical social engineering in the twentieth century.[[20]](#footnote-21)

The advantage of PD resides precisely in *minimizing* these ‘normative risks.’ Radical normative visions can be subject to experimentation first at smaller scales, in which we can later see their real consequences at lower political and social costs. Political entrepreneurs and philosophers will deploy their *own* (and no one else’s) human capital, money, effort, and intellect to make their socioeconomic plans work and demonstrate their desirability to the rest of the citizenry. Failure under these circumstances neither imperil the whole system, nor it undermines or threaten the lives and wellbeing of a large portion of the population. Mistakes are comparatively small and contained, thus, they generate vital information and evidence to learn from, and so their damage is mitigated, while social learning is maximized. Only in such manner, radical political and economic ideas can be tried and tested in practice, whilst protecting the entire system from downside risk and systemic failure.

Consequently, under a PD, we could gradually and slowly alter our existing institutions and socioeconomic systems according to how experiments have worked out in practice, and the various revealed preferences of citizens and their changes in the face of new proposals. To put the point in Popperian terms, PD constrains the utopians to engage in *piecemeal social engineering* (Popper, 2002). This ultimately minimizes the risk of moral, populist, and political catastrophe, a vital risk that nation states have often failed to contain in the last centuries (Mudde, 2021; Rummel, 1997; Scurati, 2021).[[21]](#footnote-22)

1. **Concluding remarks**

We began by noting that the monocentric liberal-democratic state’s drive for legal uniformity and its displacing of intermediate associations mean that its long-run stability is a static and high-risk affair. The health of the whole society depends on the health of one over-arching institution, which would be the site of many political demands, often incompatible ones, because these demands could not find expression at lower institutional levels. Once we additionally consider the problem of deep disagreement, then the monocentric liberal-democratic state looks much more fragile than many have assumed. This is how we have diagnosed the problem of populism and polarization affecting contemporary liberal democracies.

We then outlined our alternative of polycentric democracy. The great advantage of this approach is that in decentralizing political power, it is a better risk management strategy. We are no longer betting the health of the whole society on one highly important institution in the central state. Dynamic stability is the function of the operation of plural and overlapping institutions. This is not only more robust to an “illiberal” turn amongst segments of the population. Additionally, by allowing greater expression of political discontent at multiple levels, this system gives many more advance warnings of discontent and political dissatisfaction, and by allowing multiple jurisdictions, allows more variegated attempts to reformulate policies to try and resolve this discontent at their proper size and scale.

We propose, then, PD as a normative and reasonable solution to the challenges posed by polarization and populism. It would prove helpful to conclude by making some remarks as to how this solution may be implemented. We do not conceive of PD as an institutional blueprint to be realized wholesale. The question, then, becomes one of which changes would count as a marginal move *towards* such a polycentric regime. The institutions that come closest to a PD today are federal systems such as Swiss institutions. However, actually existing federal institutions fall short of a PD for two key reasons. One, jurisdictional boundaries are usually fixed. Two, and relatedly, there are restrictions on creating new jurisdictions. Therefore, desirable policy changes would make it easier for citizens to create new jurisdictions, outline conditions under which those jurisdictions can deviate away from the rules of the central state,[[22]](#footnote-23) and provide guidelines on conflict resolution.

Finally, the hope would be that one set of policy changes in this direction would beget other ones in an iterative fashion. After some new jurisdictions form, an unanticipated conflict between them and the state might arise, creating the opportunity to further clarify the procedures of conflict resolution. The greater clarity might incentivize the creation of yet more jurisdictions, which would then create further challenges down the line that need resolving, but the successful resolution of those challenges would make the creation of new jurisdictions even easier, and a positive cycle would ensue. We believe that this gradual transition towards polycentric democracy might be the most reasonable and resilient way forward to save liberal democracies from polarization, political disaffection, deep disagreement, and, ultimately, their catastrophic demise.

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1. † Dr. Pablo Paniagua, Academic Director of the PPE Master’s Program, Universidad del Desarrollo and Research Fellow, Centre for the Study of Governance and Society, King’s College London. Corresponding author: [pablo.paniagua\_prieto@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:pablo.paniagua_prieto@kcl.ac.uk). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. \* Dr. Kaveh Pourvand, Postdoctoral Research Associate in Philosophy, University of Arizona. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. “[T]he problem of social order arises from a recognition of societal complexity and diversity, whence the question of what makes complex and diverse societies hold together” (Enroth, 2022, 1-2). This problem, “is tied to an awareness of a seemingly new kind of society characterized by irreducible heterogeneity” (ibid., 2) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. “Monocentrism” or “monocentricity” is understood here in a Hobbesian manner as the form of governance in which there is a single consolidated decision-making center that has the ultimate authority over all important decisions related to a community or group (V. Ostrom 1994). Thus, polycentric governance is distinguished from monocentric governance by the fact that *it lacks a uniquely designated final authority* over all important decisions related to the governance of a group or community. In such an arrangement, the overarching and shared rules can be agreed upon and enforced by the different decision-making centers themselves, “without an ultimate center for decision-making” (Thiel et al., 2021, 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Consider, for example, the Australian state’s policy of forcibly taking aboriginal children away from their natural born parents into adoption by white couples. For a brief discussion, see Kukathas (2003,193) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Governance *is not* government, but rather *a process* that needs to be maintained by sets of rules and institutional arrangements as to achieve certain political and social goals such as order. Thus, governance is here defined as a “process by which the repertoire of rules, norms, and strategies that guide behavior within a given realm of policy interactions are formed, applied, interpreted, and reformed. A useful shorthand expression … is that ‘governance determines who can do what to whom, and on whose authority’” (McGinnis, 2011, 171). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. We here follow Dusza’s account (1989, 75-76). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Though it is worth noting that Weber was famously ambivalent on this issue, expressing fear that the “iron cage” of bureaucracy would also be a threat to certain expressive forms of individuality. Under this “authoritative power of the State … the performance of each individual is mathematically measured, each man becomes a little cog in the machine and, aware of this, his one preoccupation is whether he can become a bigger cog … This passion for bureaucracy, as we have heard it expressed here, is enough to drive one to despair. … the great question is therefore not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parceling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life” (Weber, 1924 [1909], pp. 412-413). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Hence his famous lament at the end of *Democracy in America*: “an immense tutelary power is elevated, which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate … It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood ... It willingly works for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent and sole arbiter of that; it provides for their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances; can it not take away from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living?” (Tocqueville, 2002 [1835], Volume 2, Part IV, Chapter 6, 663). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Only 62 million voters opted for Donald Trump, out of 245 million Americans of voting age. Total voter turnout was 138 million. Trump famously lost the popular vote to Hilary Clinton but won overall because of institutional quirks of the US’ electoral system. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. The Brexit vote was 17 million. This was 52% of those who voted in the referendum but only 37% of registered voters. (Turnout among registered voters was 70%.) Note that the 37% figure overstates the support for Brexit insofar as not all British citizens who are of voting age and eligible to vote are registered to do so. The percentage would be even lower if the denominator was the number of citizens eligible to vote rather than registered to do so. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Indeed, they will even disagree also on what constitutes truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. The literature is now vast. But for one critique, see Enoch (2015) and the literature cited therein. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Consider who, say, fifty years ago could have predicted the disagreements in the West today over issues such as: the status of gender and sexuality, abortion, nationality, migration, vaccinations, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Tellingly, the original Rawlsian theory conceived of the problem of how to stabilise a *closed society* cut off from the rest of the world. But this stipulation simply defines away—or assumes a way by mere definition—much of the real-world sources of instability: immigration, new ideas, international politics, trade, new technology, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. The policies of the Communist Party of China may exemplify this kind of strategy. They try to maintain political consensus and stability of the social order by comprehensive state regulation and suppression of news content, internet use, and cultural content such as films. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. These decision centers can either be “states within a federal order, free cities—cities with high degree of municipal autonomy—or special experimental zones. For lack of a better name, let us call these decision centers ‘polities’” (Müller, 2019, 138). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. A complex adaptive system is antifragile when it can not only withstand *known and predictable* shocks and stressors, but also, learn and improve from *unknown and unpredictable* disorders and mistakes, in order to become more malleable, thus increasing the long-term probability of its survival (Taleb, 2012). On the mathematical definition of antifragile consult, Taleb and Douady (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Walloth (2016), for instance, argues that complex systems are nested systems: systems that enclose other systems and that are simultaneously enclosed by even other systems at lower scales. According to his theory, each enclosing system emerges through time from the generative activities of the systems they enclose. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. The obvious examples of famines in Soviet Russia and Maoist China come to mind here. But here are many other examples of damaging, though not quite so catastrophic attempts, at large-scale social engineering, from authoritarian city planning to forced villagization. For a series of case studies, see Scott (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Some readers might object that a monocentric regime with enhanced deliberation is a better way of promoting learning than a polycentric one. Citizens can test one another’s ideas through deliberation, thereby spotting weaknesses and improving them. These argumentatively refined normative principles could then be quickly implemented throughout the whole of society by a monocentric state, without the messy fragmentation of a polycentric system. While polycentric democracy is open to deliberation, this is as a *complement* to jurisdictional variety than a replacement of it. There are stern epistemic limits to how much we can establish in *a priori* discourse. To establish what works, we need to *see* what works. This requires scope for *empirical experimentation* that a polycentric regime can, in fact, provide bountifully but a monocentric deliberative regime could do only to a limited degree. To explore the severe limits of deliberative regimes at promoting factual learning and discovery consult Müller (2019, chapters 3 and 7) and Brennan and Landemore (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. This might involve the new jurisdiction giving up the right to some of the services or public goods offered by the central state. On the analytical relationship between federalism and polycentric democracy consult Müller (2019, chapter 10), and Bednar (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)