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1

Introduction

“I GUARANTEE YOU we can draw four Republican congressional maps,” Republican Kansas State Senate leader Susan Wagle told donors at a closed-door fundraiser in 2020. “That takes out [Democratic U.S. House Representative] Sharice Davids. . . . But we can’t do it unless we have a two-thirds majority in the Kansas Senate and House.”¹

Such an appeal might have sounded strange a generation ago. Here was a legislative leader in Kansas *state* government outlining a *national* strategy for the Republican Party. Wagle’s appeal to contribute money to state-level Republicans was light on the Kansas-specific issues, but it emphasized how state government could play a role in the national tug-of-war over American politics and policy. It outlined a strategy of gerrymandering—a way for this coalition to tilt the rules of democracy in its favor.

The United States has a unique constitutional system. Many of its distinctive institutional features have come under fire in recent years. The Electoral College has been criticized for installing presidents who do not win the popular vote, Senate apportionment for granting equal influence to Wyoming’s 573,000 residents as California’s 40 million, and even the unitary executive for granting too much authority to presidents. But Wagle was describing a way to take advantage of a less often discussed but critically important feature of the U.S. political system: *American federalism*, a system in which authority is dispersed across multiple levels of government.

1. Sherman Smith, “Kansas Senate President Pushes Redistricting Plan That ‘Takes Out Sharice Davids,’” *Shawnee Mission Post*, October 10, 2020, <https://shawneemissionpost.com/2020/10/10/kansas-senate-president-pushes-redistricting-plan-that-takes-out-sharice-davids-103243/>.

While institutional authority is highly decentralized, American political parties no longer are. Over the past half century, the Democratic and Republican parties have transformed from loose networks into more tightly knit partisan teams of activists, organizations, and candidates. Like Wagle at the Kansas fundraiser, these partisan teams coordinate across the many decentralized institutional venues of American federalism to pursue their increasingly national political visions.

Federalism expands the number of institutional venues in which American politics is fought, and it puts the main levers of democracy, such as legislative districting and election administration, at the state level. American federalism has existed in one way or another for well over two centuries—but nationally coordinated and polarized political parties have not. As the Kansas example shows, national political coalitions have developed new strategies to exploit the decentralized institutional features of American federalism.

What happens when today's *national* Democratic and Republican parties collide with the critically important *subnational* institutions of American federalism? That is the subject of this book. Classic theories of federalism often lead us to expect that institutional decentralization is a "safety valve" in times of political crisis, and such an attitude is commonplace in contemporary political discourse. CNN analyst Asha Rangappa and political scientist Michael McFaul each separately tweeted that they were "thankful for federalism"; legal scholar Erin Ryan proclaimed that "I've never been more grateful for federalism than I am right now." For many, the era of national partisan polarization makes the decentralized institutions of federalism all the more appealing, a harkening back to a time when "all politics [was] local."

But today's nationally coordinated parties have fundamentally changed the way that American federalism operates. State governments do not serve as a safety valve for national politics. Instead, they exacerbate national challenges, including unequal political influence and declining accountability—leaving American democracy at risk of backsliding. Indeed, contrary to the hopes of James Madison, a large federal republic may not help contain factions but empower them. And contrary to the hopes of Louis Brandeis, state governments may not be "laboratories of democracy" but laboratories *against* democracy.

I argue, in brief, that the nationalization of the Democratic and Republican parties—the increased national coordination among activists, groups, and candidates in each party coalition—has produced three consequences: a resurgence of state governments as the center of American policymaking, reduced

policy learning between states controlled by opposing parties, and democratic backsliding in states controlled by the Republican Party.

These three consequences lead me to take a fresh look at two prominent theories of American federalism. The first is that state governments are efficient and effective laboratories of democracy, learning from and emulating successful policy experiments from other states and rejecting the failed ones. The second is that the decentralization of power in federalism improves the relationship between the governing and the governed, fostering representation, responsiveness, and democratic inclusion. These theories enjoy wide appeal among scholars and pundits across the ideological spectrum.

These ideas are alluring—and deeply embedded in the American ethos. But this book provides new arguments and evidence that they no longer accurately describe the functioning of federalism. Instead of emulating successful policy experiments from other states and rejecting failed ones, laboratories of democracy exist in separate partisan “scientific” communities. And instead of safeguarding democracy, some state governments have become laboratories *against* democracy—innovating new ways to restrict the franchise, gerrymander districts, exploit campaign finance loopholes, and circumvent civil rights in the criminal justice system.

Federalism or State Politics?

The U.S. Constitution occupies a position of admiration in popular culture, “remain[ing] an object of reverence for nearly all Americans,” in the words of former U.S. attorney general Ed Meese.² Scholars go so far as to call it “the Bible” of “American civil religion” (Lerner 1937, 1294; see also Levinson 2011; Franks 2019).³ But the tone of discourse about American institutions has shifted quickly and dramatically since 2016. Scholars, journalists, and observers increasingly worry about the erosion of norms in American politics—and the apparent inability of the rules of the Constitution to contain the erosion. Support for the Electoral College, the Supreme Court, and the U.S. Senate has polarized and declined. Federalism, however, has remained popular across partisanship and among scholars, pundits, and the public alike.

2. <https://www.heritage.org/political-process/report/the-meaning-the-constitution>.

3. As recently as 2015, Matthew Yglesias observed that “the idea that America’s constitutional system might be fundamentally flawed cuts deeply against the grain of our political culture.”

This is not to say that there has not been some prominent scholarly skepticism toward American federalism. Progressive Era thinkers worried that state governments were woefully amateurish and easily captured by the powerful. Historians highlight the triumphs of national state building to take on the challenges of the Depression and World War II (e.g., Smith 2006). Economists have emphasized the gains from scale to be obtained by greater national investment and standardization (e.g., Konczal 2016). And, profoundly, historical scholars of race and democracy would note that state governments were the institutional enemy of abolitionists, anti-lynching activists, and civil rights pioneers.

More recently, historical institutionalist scholars in political science have engaged in critical studies of federalism. In *Fragmented Democracy* (2018), Jamila Michener uses the case of Medicaid administration to investigate how federalism creates inequality in access to political resources and how this affects democratic inclusion. Lisa Miller's *The Perils of Federalism* (2008) points to the potential for a greater decentralization and numerosity of political venues to disincentivize ordinary people's political participation. Rob Mickey's *Paths Out of Dixie* (2015) investigates the "authoritarian enclaves" of the Jim Crow South and their implications for democracy in a federal republic. Although this book uses mostly quantitative empirical methods, I draw on theories from this and other qualitative critical federalism scholarship (e.g., King 2017).

I also draw on a related literature that conceptualizes parties as networks of groups and politics as "organized combat" between them over their policy goals (e.g., Karol 2009; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Bawn et al. 2012). Recent books, such as *State Capture* by Alexander Hertel-Fernandez and *Short Circuiting Policy* by Leah Stokes, speak to the importance of groups, such as green energy firms or conservative organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), in state politics and throughout the American federal system. Understanding the group-based structure of party coalitions is crucial for understanding how their nationalization transformed American federalism.

These critical federalism studies, however, have remained mostly outside of the political science mainstream (at least in the American politics subfield).⁴ By contrast, there has been something of a resurgence of research in the American

4. Weissert (2011, 965–71) notes that when it comes to American and comparative scholarship on federalism, there is little "cross-fertilization of research across the two worlds." Further, the comparative politics scholarship tends to be more focused on the relationship between federalism and democracy—and generally more critical of federalism.

politics subfield of *state and local politics*. Scholars of American politics have long used variation across states as a way to test theories of legislative rules, public opinion, and other political forces.⁵ To understand whether term limits decrease polarization, for instance, a scholar might compare trends in states that have term limits to those that do not, drawing conclusions about how term limits are likely to work in legislative institutions in general. These studies matured from investigating cross-sectional variation—a very difficult way to produce causal evidence given the vast differences between states on so many observed and unobserved characteristics—to highly sophisticated investigations into the measurement of and causal relationships between state public opinion, policy, and socioeconomic outcomes. Many of these studies have uncovered troubling issues in state and local politics, including unequal political influence (Rigby and Wright 2013), racial conflict (Duxbury 2021), unresponsive policy outcomes (Lax and Phillips 2012), and minimal electoral accountability for “out-of-step” legislators (Rogers 2017). Others, such as the classic *Statehouse Democracy* (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993) and Devin Caughey and Christopher Warshaw’s *Dynamic Democracy* (forthcoming), find evidence that state policy is responsive to public opinion and paint a more optimistic picture of democracy in the states. This book builds on this state and local politics research.

For the most part, however, state and local politics research has treated the states as fifty separate polities, in which theories of “American politics” writ large are transplanted onto the states. As a political science professor of mine, Paul Pierson, would joke, quantitative Americanists tend to study the states primarily as a way to increase one’s N to 50—to increase the “sample size” of governments as one might increase the number of rat cages for a lab experiment.⁶ While this kind of research strategy might help scholars “address a domain of questions with greater statistical rigor because of the large number of states” (Brace and Jewett 1995, 655), it misses how political groups use state-level authority in ways that are inextricably tied to the politics of other states

5. This is closely related to the “subnational comparative method” in comparative politics scholarship.

6. Researchers have used the state level as a way to increase their N to 50 in cross-sectional studies of the roles of public opinion (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Lascher, Hagen, and Rochlin 1996), interest groups (Gray and Lowery 1988), descriptive representation (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Sanbonmatsu 2002), or institutional rules and legislative organization (Chubb 1988; Poterba 1995; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 1998; Barrilleaux and Berkman 2003; Overby, Kazee, and Prince 2004).

and, more importantly, to national politics. Although I am a quantitative Americanist, I take a slightly untraditional path in investigating how the use of state authority under federalism has changed as the political parties have become more nationally coordinated.

The Nationalization of the Parties

Decentralized federal institutions have existed throughout American political history, but nationalized parties have not. By nationalized parties, I mean political parties in which aligned groups, activists, candidates, and incumbents—in all offices at all levels of government—share similar policy agendas and see themselves engaged in broader political conflict with the other national party. Nationalized parties are polarized, with a growing distance between the policy goals of the average Democrat and average Republican, but this is not the whole story. Nationalized parties are polarized *and* nationally coordinated.

Although intraparty conflict continues, such as in contentious primary elections between “establishment” and “outsider” candidates, no longer do the parties mobilize predominantly around parochial issues or have distinct regional subcultures. Instead, they battle in the national arena, as the Republican government of Texas did in attempting to sue states who gave their Electoral College votes to Joe Biden,⁷ or the Arizona state GOP did in calling on citizens to give their lives to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.⁸ “There is one national Republican Party, just as there is one national Democratic Party,” in the words of Lee Drutman (2018a).

Today’s national Democratic and Republican parties are consolidated in new and important ways. Major organizations in each “extended party network,” such as the National Rifle Association for Republicans or MoveOn.org for Democrats, are national in scope and yet highly mobile, able to shift political resources across geography and levels of government in search of advantageous terrain or to respond to political threats. Elites, activists, and

7. *State of Texas v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, State of Georgia, State of Michigan, and State of Wisconsin* (2020), <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/images/admin/2020/Press/SCOTUSFiling.pdf>.

8. John Bowden, “Arizona GOP Asks If Followers Willing to Give Their Lives to ‘Stop the Steal,’” *The Hill*, December 8, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/529195-arizona-gop-asks-if-followers-willing-to-give-their-life-to-stop-the-steal>.

voters are coordinated by the internet and powerful national media apparatuses. State and local parties, on the other hand, once central forces in American politics, are increasingly “pawns” in national politics (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2019, 166).⁹

The old phrase “all politics is local” no longer applies to the political parties—but it does apply to American political institutions. What happens when you mix nationalized party coalitions with America’s highly decentralized federal institutions? As the parties polarize, gridlock in Congress becomes more likely, and policy action moves down to the state level, with profound consequences. The shift to the state level does not simply change the location of political battles. It fundamentally changes the terrain of American politics, providing new advantages to groups who have the informational capacity to monitor politicians at lower levels of government and groups that can move political and economic resources across borders. And it opens up new opportunities for groups to tilt election administration and institutional rules in their favor, posing new challenges for American democracy.

National Parties in Subnational Politics

The collision of national parties and American federalism has had a series of profound consequences across the states. Table 1.1 outlines these consequences: a resurgence of state policy, the polarization of state policy learning, and, in some states, democratic backsliding.

9. The causes of party nationalization are multifaceted. They include shifts in technology and the media environment, in the strategies of activist organizations, in the decline of labor unions and the rise of economic inequality, and in elite electoral strategies around race and cultural conflict. This large-scale investigation of the transformation of the Democratic and Republican parties since the “textbook Congress” of the 1970s has yielded some of the most important political science research of the past two decades. The political consequences of party nationalization are also broad. National parties have fundamentally different incentives in federal systems than do decentralized parties with distinct regional group networks and cultures. Much of this ground has been covered by scholars of polarization. In an environment of polarized national parties, individual electoral candidates understand that, no matter where they are running, or for what level of government, their fates are tied to the national party brand. Ordinary Americans feel increased antipathy toward the opposing party, and their sociocultural identities grow more interwoven with their partisan identities. Parties in government engage in more procedural brinksmanship in legislatures, courts, and agencies in order to thwart their opponents.

TABLE 1.1. Consequences of the Collision of National Parties and American Federalism

State Policy Resurgence

Increased policy variation across states

Policy polarization between blue states and red states

Advantages for concentrated and well-resourced groups

Examples: Health policy outcomes increasingly tied to state of residence

Polarized Laboratories of Democracy

Separate partisan networks of legislative subsidizers

Decreased policy emulation between red and blue states

Little relationship between policy success and diffusion

Examples: Coordination of interest group activists; ALEC model bills

Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding

Increased use of state authority to shape democratic performance

Declining democratic performance in Republican-controlled states

Examples: Voter suppression; gerrymandering; repression of protest

State Policy Resurgence

The collision of national parties and federalism has transformed the American political economy. The first consequence of the collision is *state policy resurgence*. As the federal government became increasingly polarized and divided government more likely, policy-demanding groups had greater incentive to follow the adage “think globally, act locally” by shifting political resources to the state and local levels. As in earlier periods when subnational coalitions were unable to achieve their goals at the national level, this massive influx of political resources and efforts in the states has generated a simple result: important state policy changes. These major policy changes, such as vehicle fuel efficiency standards, tax cuts for high earners, or refusing expanded Medicaid, have put state governments at the center of American public policy. State policies have become increasingly varied, and this variation is increasingly driven by the party that controls the state government. Americans’ tax rates, gun laws, health insurance subsidies, and ability to obtain a legal abortion are now determined by one’s state of residence to an extent not seen since before the civil rights revolution of the mid-twentieth century.

But not all political actors have the ability to efficiently *venue shift*—to shop for the most advantageous political terrain among the multitude of governments contained in the American federal system. Groups with coordinated and mobile political resources—who do not face the same information, time, and mobility constraints as ordinary voters—are better able to strategically locate and shift resources toward the most favorable political venues, both vertically from the national to the state level and horizontally across states. Activist groups on issues like abortion and the environment funneled money into state legislative campaigns. Organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) spread model bills across the states, providing an easy way for conservative state politicians to introduce legislation. Ordinary voters, on the other hand, are geographically constrained and, as Daniel Hopkins (2018) shows in *The Increasingly United States*, increasingly inattentive to state and local politics.

Whereas many theorized that federalism would incentivize state governments to customize policy to local preferences, the state level is increasingly dominated by national groups who exploit the low-information environments of amateurish and resource-constrained legislatures, declining local news media, and identity-focused voters. Local constituents can still influence state politics, but only with a blunt tool: choosing whether the national Democratic Party or national Republican Party should control their state.

Partisan Laboratories of Democracy

The second consequence is the transformation of states to *polarized laboratories of democracy*. Louis Brandeis posited that states can learn from each other's policy experiments, emulating successful policies and rejecting the ones that fail. But I argue that two features of modern polarization act as wrenches in the gears of Brandeis's theory. First, facing heavy constraints on policymaking resources, state governments have long counted on outside experts and interest groups to help them produce laws. Today, however, interest groups and expert organizations are much more likely to be aligned with one party or the other. In the language of Brandeis's laboratories metaphor, the "scientific" communities behind state-level policymaking are increasingly separated by party. Second, partisanship incentivizes politicians to avoid emulating successful policies from the opposite party, because it would provide evidence that the other party has good policy ideas.

I draw on advances in the policy diffusion literature to test whether state governments emulate efficient and successful policies from other states—or

only do so from copartisan governments. The hopeful idea of laboratories of democracy predicts that states will copy policies that produce economic success, such as reduced unemployment, or political success, such as electoral victories for the governors who implemented the policies. But I show that, while this may have been true in the past, it has not been true in recent decades. After the 2008 financial crisis, Democratically controlled Minnesota improved its economy by increasing public investments in education and infrastructure, but Republican-controlled Wisconsin to the east ignored its neighbor's success, instead opting for steep tax cuts for high earners. There is little evidence that the kind of policy success experienced in Minnesota led to greater emulation from other states—and to the extent that success matters, it only does for states controlled by the same political party.

Democratic Backsliding in the States

The third consequence is the return of states as *laboratories of democratic backsliding*, where the national Republican Party coalition in particular has innovated new ways to make American democracy narrower and more restrictive. I say “return,” because much of American history involves civil rights activists calling on the federal government to take action against racially authoritarian state governments. Yet while the politics of race and democracy in America are still topics of intense discussion, there has been less systematic inquiry recently on how federalism's prominent role for state government relates to it.

Indeed, federalism and democracy are still deeply interwoven today. By endowing states with authority over election administration and other key levers of democracy, national parties can use the states that they control to rig the game in their favor by limiting the ability of their political enemies to participate.

I investigate whether state governments have been democratic champions or democratic villains over the past two decades. I develop a new set of publicly available measures of state democratic performance, which I call the *State Democracy Index*, based on dozens of measures of state performance in elections, legislative districting, civil liberties, and other components of democracy. The measure allows me to test long-standing theories of how democracy expands and contracts, such as changes in party competition, polarization, racial demographics, and the coalitions in control of state government.

When it comes to democratic backsliding in the states, the results couldn't be clearer: over the past two decades, the Republican Party has eroded

democracy in states under its control. Republican governments have gerrymandered districts, made it more difficult to vote, and restricted civil liberties to a degree unprecedented since the civil rights era. It is not local changes in state-level polarization, competition, or demographics driving these major changes to the rules of American democracy. Instead, it is the groups that make up the *national* coalition of the modern GOP—the very wealthy on the one hand, and those motivated by white identity politics and cultural resentment on the other.

Methodological Approach

I classify the methodology in this book in different ways. The quantitative methods and data analysis of variables that change over time will be familiar to those interested in the budding area of quantitative American political development (APD), as well as American political economy (APE). Perhaps the greatest common thread between these scholarly communities is a focus on *big questions* that are not always amenable to traditional research designs that aim to uncover unbiased estimates of *causal* relationships. Many interlocking processes, in which causes and consequences feed back into each other, have caused the changes in American democracy that I chronicle in this book.

The challenge of answering these big questions has led me to embrace methodological pluralism. This book is mostly quantitative. A lot of the quantitative work I do is in building new quantitative *measures* of concepts that we typically speak about qualitatively, such as how conservative a state's abortion policy is, or whether the quality of a state's electoral democracy has risen or fallen. Importantly, the measures I create in this book will be helpful for other researchers who want to dig into state politics and policy. I am especially eager for other scholars, think tanks, and political observers to use my State Democracy Index to further delve into the causes and consequences of democratic backsliding in the states. When it comes to understanding the threats to American democracy and how to fight them, it takes a village.

In addition to creating new measures, I use more traditional quantitative analysis to test hypotheses about causes and effects. My workhorse here is the *difference-in-differences* design, which, rather than “controlling” for state characteristics and comparing otherwise similar states, looks at whether a change *within* a state produces a change within that same state.

Still, I draw heavily on qualitative knowledge. The theories I propose and test are informed by historical and qualitative scholarship. It is also critical to qualitatively interrogate quantitative measures that attempt to capture broad

concepts like democracy and policy liberalism. Moreover, I use qualitative cases not only to illustrate the statistical results but also to provide additional evidence about the causes and consequences of the collision of national parties and federalism when using quantitative measures and methods is not feasible.

Another important methodological choice is this book's focus on the U.S. case rather than comparisons across countries. It may seem at first that it is impossible to learn about the role of federalism this way. Federalism has been a constant throughout American history; there is no variation in this "treatment" variable. But I argue that we can actually learn a great deal from a U.S.-specific focus. First, we can test whether the patterns in real-world data match the long-standing theories of American federalism. This is what I do, for instance, in the "Partisan Laboratories of Democracy" chapter. I take on the traditional idea that states are laboratories of democracy that emulate effective policies in ways that produce better governance and show that this doesn't appear to have happened much in recent years. Second, we gain tremendous insight by looking at change over time. In the "Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding" chapter, I test whether a rise in polarization, political competition, or Republican control of state government leads to changes in democratic performance.

The major crises in modern American politics are not just the result of institutional racism, plutocratic influence, or partisan polarization. They are a product of these forces flowing in a *federal institutional system* of government. Federalism provides numerous political *venues for national*, not just parochial, political actors to battle. The structure and multiplicity of these venues make it more difficult for ordinary Americans to hold politicians accountable in elections. This structure is advantageous to well-resourced interests, who can move their political money and influence across venues in highly strategic ways. Federalism makes it easier for political actors to tilt the rules of American democracy, itself, to their advantage. Antidemocratic interests need only to take control of a *state* government for a short period of time to implement changes that make it harder for their opponents to participate in politics *at all levels*—local, state, and national.

This book combines institutional analysis with a historical focus on political parties and organizations. The institutional analysis, whether based in game theory or qualitative argumentation, teaches us about how the rules of American politics shape the incentives of politicians, organizations, and voters. The historical and behavioral analysis teaches us about what these political actors

want out of politics. Understanding the nationalization of American politics, where the Democratic and Republican parties compete as coordinated teams at every level, requires knowledge of institutional incentives, the connections between politics and the economy, the politics of geography, the behavior and attitudes of the broader public, and the historical development of American politics. Gone are the days when a single research framework could explain major political transformations.

I develop new tests of classic theories of American federalism, such as whether states act as effective laboratories of democracy, or about how states expand or contract democracy. But before presenting the results of these tests, I delve into the traditional, hopeful understanding of American federalism. In the conventional view, federalism is not only functional and efficient but deeply embedded in American national identity. This mythos stretches back to the Founding but has seen a resurgence over the past generation. This mythos, however, has conspicuously neglected a major research tradition that has long called into question the utility of federalism: scholarship on race and civil rights.

I am frequently asked the question, “Weren’t you relieved to have federalism once Donald Trump became president?” This line of thought is alluring. Certainly, at a given moment in time when one opposes the national government, it is helpful to have state governments that can govern differently. State governments have pushed back against Trump administration initiatives in areas like immigration, environmental policy, and reproductive rights, with some success. But this is not the right question because, absent federalism, there is a good chance Trump would not have become president in the first place. The collision of federalism and nationally polarized parties helped create fertile ground for Trumpian politics.

Preview of the Book

In the next chapter, I outline existing theories of federalism—and contrast them with my argument about the role of national parties. Three groups of scholars proposed important theories of how politics works within the decentralized institutions of American federalism. Whether they argued that it reduces national polarization, incentivizes policy experimentation and learning, increases efficiency, or protects against tyranny, dominant theories were optimistic about the role of American federalism in mitigating political challenges. This chapter describes in detail how today’s national parties render the

mechanisms of these theories inoperable. In particular, I draw on political economy and historical institutionalist literatures to argue that the increased coordination of groups and organizations in national party coalitions has increased inequality of influence in state politics, reduced policy learning, and made the United States more vulnerable to democratic backsliding.

Chapter 3 argues that the nationalization and polarization of the parties in a federal system have had the paradoxical effect of increasing the importance of the state level in policymaking. As Congress polarized and divided government became more common in Washington, D.C., activists and organizations in the national Democratic and Republican coalitions set their sights on the states, passing significant policies in the states controlled by their party. After a half century in which national civil rights and economic policy had made governance more *similar* across states, state policy once again diverged, with policies in the areas of taxation, health care, the environment, gun control, abortion rights, and labor polarizing between red and blue states. In the areas of education and especially criminal justice, however, state policies did not diverge.

In part 2, I turn to the question of *who governs* the resurgence of state policy and argue that activists and organizations, not ordinary voters, have been in the driver's seat. Chapter 4 shows that while policy has shifted dramatically, public opinion in the states has been mostly static over the past generation. In the process, I also review literature and present new evidence that even compared to national politics in the United States, state and local politics are especially unequal by income, race, and age.

Groups with time, information, and mobile political resources—especially money—are particularly advantaged in state politics. Chapter 5 shows how activist groups have set policy agendas and polarized legislatures in the states. Over the previous two decades, activist networks, such as gun rights activists affiliated with the NRA, used campaign contributions, primary election endorsements, online organizing, and similar tactics to get candidates for state-level offices aligned with the goals of the national coalition.

Chapter 6 investigates whether Louis Brandeis's theory of states as policy laboratories operates in the era of national parties. Do states learn from each other, emulating successful policy experiments and rejecting failed ones? Or does the nationalization of the Democratic and Republican parties mean that state governments live in separate partisan "scientific" communities? I find that states are more likely to emulate electorally successful policies from other states—but only when those states are controlled by the same political party.

Part 3 investigates what might become the most important consequence of party nationalization: democratic backsliding. American federalism gives state governments authority over critical democratic institutions, especially election administration and legislative districting. Chapters 7 and 8 provide new evidence that the quality of democracy is diverging between states—with states like North Carolina and Wisconsin experiencing dramatic democratic backsliding over the past decade. Specifically, chapter 7 develops a systematic quantitative measure of democratic performance in the fifty states, the State Democracy Index.

Chapter 8 uses the State Democracy Index to investigate the cause of democratic changes in the states. States' levels of polarization, partisan competition, and demographic change have little relationship to their democratic performance. In the era of national parties, it is party control of government that drives democratic backsliding. Specifically, control by the Republican Party—a national coalition that combines the very wealthy with an electoral base motivated by racial and cultural conflict—dramatically reduces democratic performance.

In the conclusion I discuss the implications of this research for our understanding of federalism, the Democratic and Republican parties, and American politics more broadly. I discuss how different kinds of political groups and organizations might engage with policy feedbacks—how policy can affect future politics—in the context of national parties and decentralized institutions. Considering the transformation of American federalism over the past generation, I point to areas of further research into the roles of institutions, organizations, public opinion, elections, and democracy. Most importantly, I consider how policy and institutional reform can protect American democracy from threats that arise from Washington, D.C., as well as the states.

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