

Jacob M. Grumbach. *Laboratories Against Democracy: How National Parties Transformed State Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2022. vii + 261 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

In *Laboratories Against Democracy: How National Parties Transformed State Politics*, political scientist Jacob Grumbach deconstructs the longstanding mythos of American federalism as a champion of democratic engagement and safeguard against authoritarianism. Federalism, the sharing of power between the levels of government, is traditionally viewed as a hallmark of American democracy and lauded by prominent thinkers, such as the Decentralists, Brandeisians, and New Federalists, who argued that it holds together a diverse country and protects against tyranny, promotes policy learning and experimentation, and incentivizes government efficiency via resident sorting behavior, respectively. However, Grumbach upends these notions by arguing that the collision of nationally coordinated and polarized political parties with federalism generated the consequences of “a resurgence of state policy, the polarization of state policy learning, and, in some states, democratic backsliding” (p. 9).

The gridlock caused by polarization and divided government at the national level led policy demanders to turn to the states, which positioned states at the forefront of policymaking and led to increased variation and polarization in policy among them. Grumbach graphically illustrates the shift in fiscal activity to the state level since the 1970s as a result of the national government’s slowdown in domestic policymaking. He also tests the state level relationship between party control and policy change in two timespans and finds that among the sixteen issue areas examined, only education and criminal justice policies are non-polarized. This analysis shows party control increasingly explaining policy change and highlights a seemingly authoritarian state and local policing system, where “Democratic and Republican states alike have enabled police to take excessive and violent action against journalists, protestors, and ordinary (especially Black) Americans” (p. 60). This is contrary to the notion of authoritarian

national authorities, as the policing power is concentrated at lower levels of government.

Grumbach then considers who is responsible for the resurgence of state policy, which he concludes to be interest group activists, not ordinary voters. He employs useful illustrations to show that “some major changes in average state opinion are associated not with correspondent policy change but with policy stasis” (p. 90). Conversely, interest group activists partake more in politics and impart a disproportionate effect on state policy. Their association with activist groups provides them with greater resources and mobilization to pursue their more extreme policy agendas at the state level.

Unlike the Brandeisian vision of states emulating successful policies implemented by other states, Grumbach asserts that policy learning is increasingly polarized, where states controlled by the Democratic and Republican Parties pursue distinct policy agendas. A main reason for this suppression of policy diffusion is the theory of the quality of party brands being premised on policy issue ownership. This theory claims that “helping to implement a successful policy may bring legislators and governors individual electoral benefits, but if the policy is owned by the outparty, it comes at the cost of improving the outparty brand” (p. 129). Grumbach quantitatively tests three hypotheses across economic and social policies to better understand policy learning. They include partisan similarity, where policies are emulated by copartisan governments independent of policy success; unbiased learning, where policies are adopted based on evidence of success; and partisan learning, which factors partisanship into the emulation of policies with evidence of success. He finds a positive relationship for partisan similarity, mixed results for unbiased learning, and a strong relationship between electoral success outcomes, though not economic success outcomes, among copartisan governments for partisan learning. These results support his claim of polarized policy learning.

While a key function of American federalism is to defend against tyranny, Grumbach highlights the troubling pattern of state governments experiencing democratic backsliding. To measure democratic performance in the states, he introduces a State Democracy Index, which considers several indicators in election administration and civil liberties and allows for cross-sectional and temporal assessments by providing a score that measures the health of democracy in states over the observed time period. He includes a helpful choropleth map of the United States in the years 2000 and 2018 to depict democratic performance across the states in both years and the intrastate change in that time period. He particularly notes North Carolina and Wisconsin, which were “among the most democratic states in the year 2000, but by 2018 they are close to the bottom” (pp. 170, 171). He follows this analysis by testing the theories of partisan competition and polarization to explain why this democratic shift across states is occurring. He finds that those two factors have little to no effect, respectively, on a state’s democracy score; however, he notes a significant, negative relationship between Republican control and democracy. Grumbach claims that the Republican Party benefits from democratic contraction, which incentivizes them to gerrymander districts and increase voting barriers. He also notes the electoral advantage the Republican Party holds based on geographic dispersion and the elites who partner with this coalition via racial appeals. While he falls short of detailing the historical culpability of the Democratic Party in these areas, Grumbach effectively assesses the Republican Party as the main cause of democratic backsliding.

After analyzing the shortcomings of American federalism in a nationally coordinated and polarized political climate, Grumbach advocates a greater role of the federal government in policymaking. While acknowledging the progress of some states in advancing policies that bolster democracy, Grumbach argues that such policies are constrained versions of their potential

at the national level. Furthermore, he cautions against maintaining the idealistic notion of decentralization as a champion of democracy, as it makes the country prone to democratic backsliding at the state level. In short, this book adequately delineates the consequences of federalism and is recommended to people involved in political science, public policy, or democratic change.

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