

# Direct Decentralization: Ballot Measures as a Centralization Foil

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## **Abstract:**

Scholars have long documented a march towards centralization in the politics and policy of federal nations. In spite of constitutional provisions to ensure strong subnational governments, national courts and legislative bodies find rationales for shifting responsibilities upward. But is this inevitable? In this paper, I advance the discussion of how decentralization can prevail with use of direct democracy. I argue that when citizens are the locus of policymaking, they will be more supportive of proposals which grant them control over policy decisions. I test my theory leveraging new data that codes 4,500 ballot measures on centralization's impact. I find that citizen-proposed ballot measures are decentralizing in nature and that centralization is negatively associated with probability of passage. To understand why citizens support decentralization, I analyze polling data and find that support for decentralizing ballot measures is conditioned by state-level trust. These findings pave the way for advancing research on decentralization.

**Keywords:** Federalism, Decentralization, Direct Democracy, Ballot Measures, Trust

**Word Count:** 9,641

For over a half-century, scholars have identified an unrelenting march towards centralization in politics and policy in federal nations. An abundance of research in American politics (Bowman and Krause 2003; Kincaid 1998, 2019; Scott 1909; Riker 1964; Tocqueville 2003 [1835]); comparative politics (Dickovick 2011; Malesky, Nguyen, and Tran 2014; Veliz 2014); and public policy (Grossman and Lewis 2014; Konisky 2011; Marchildon and Bosset 2018) have found consistent evidence of this centralizing tendency. Termed over-centralization, analysis of this question has been of paramount importance for scholars interested in federalism and intergovernmental relations.

Fundamentally, a nation cannot be capable of maintaining federalism when – in the aggregate – decision making continues to be centralized at the national level (Braun 2011). This is problematic as federalism is associated with increased economic gains (Qian and Weingast 1997), improved representation (Brzinski et al. 1999, but see Wiezien and Soroka 2011), innovation (Rabe 2004; Nivola 2017), and enhanced citizen participation in government (Eichenberger 1994; Derthick 2001, 2008). Federalism in the United States is in a period of centralization due in part to increased political polarization – with an increasing reliance on unilateral executive action, congressional inaction, and federal-state arbitration through the federal courts (Goelzhauser and Konisky 2019). Similar centralization is evident at the state-local area where states are increasingly ignoring local home rule by preempting local decisions, taking on more responsibilities of local governments, and limiting local revenue options (DuPuis et al. 2014; Hicks et al. 2018; Phillips 2018; Fowler and Witt 2019).

How can centralization be curtailed? Prior arguments have relied almost exclusively on federalism theory to respond to the over-centralization puzzle. Federalism presupposes a shared relationship between national and subnational governments, not one where one government

dominates the other. Elazar (1987) suggested that a robust federal culture was necessary to preserve a balanced federation. Bednar (2008) provides the most satisfying answer to date, arguing that there are constitutional and judicial safeguards that – under certain conditions – can preserve governmental balance. While previous scholarship no doubt aids in expanding scholars’ understanding of the push and pull of centralization within nations, it remains hamstrung by relying almost exclusively on federalism theory.

In this paper, I address the question of centralization by looking at another institution—direct democracy. I posit a theory of direct decentralization – arguing that when citizens can determine which level of government resolves political and policy issues, they will favor localized government over broader, centralized levels of government. I evaluate this theory by coding the centralizing impact of 4,500 ballot measures across 25 states and 120 years in the United States. I find evidence for direct decentralization: citizen-proposed ballot measures are consistently decentralizing while legislative-proposed ballot measures are mildly centralizing. Additionally, regardless of who proposes a ballot measure, decentralizing ballot measures are more likely to succeed than centralizing ballot measures. Finally – building off Escobar-Lemon (2003) – I find that political trust determines when a citizen is supportive of centralizing ballot measures.

The results presented in this paper provide several implications for scholars. First, they provide an institutional answer to the puzzle of over-centralization. Second, they illustrate the importance of integrating federalism scholarship with other political and policy fields. Third, this paper raises several new questions about how decentralization can influence – and be influenced by – the political and policy process.

## **The March Towards Centralization**

Increasing centralization is recognized as a trend in American and comparative federalism scholarship and in public policy research (Dardanelli et al. 2019a, 2019b; Fenna 2019; Kaiser and Vogel 2019; Kincaid 2019; Lecours 2019; Singh 2019).

### **American Federalism**

One of the most pervasive findings in the federalism literature is that over time political institutions move towards centralization. Kincaid (2019a) provides the most recent iteration of this finding in American politics research, noting that:

The research finds...centralization across twenty-two policy fields in the United States as being continual, although slow, process for most policy fields...However, the timing, pace, and sequencing of centralization varied across fields as political agents exploited opportunities at different times to enhance federal authority in different fields. (pg. 168).

Scholars of American federalism can point to over one hundred years of research documenting centralization. Early scholarship explored the centralizing tendencies of the Supreme Court (Scott 1909) and the outpacing of federal government expenditures relative to state and local government in the first half of the twentieth century (Fabricant 1953).

Riker (1964) provided the first attempt to measure the trends of federalism across American political institutions over time. He evaluated fourteen political and policy functions in the U.S. over four periods (1790, 1850, 1910, and 1964). He finds across most functions a general trend of moving from almost sole state control to predominantly federal control. This first empirical assessment has remained consistent since Riker's analysis. Centralization trends were identified in peer-reviewed research (Krane 1988; Walker 1995; Wright 1978); federal reports (Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations 1984); and academic debate (Elazar 1990). Bowman and Krause (2003, 319) summarize this finding succinctly concluding

that “centralization triumphs in the end.” This centralization trend has held even as elite rhetoric in support of decentralization has increased (Cole, Hisson, and Arvidson 1999).

In addition, to institutional centralization, American political behavior has also become increasingly centralized (Hopkins 2018). Voters increasingly look to federal politics in determining how to vote in subnational elections. This electoral uniformity has engendered further centralization. At the federal level, congressional legislators increasingly rely on ideological purity in lawmaking – resulting in gridlock and legislating via the executive branch (Goelzhauser and Konisky 2019). At the state level, lawmakers engage in preemption – centralizing policies away from municipal government (Hicks et al. 2018). Increasingly, preemption is driven by ideological differences between cities and the states in which they reside (Phillips 2018; Fowler and Witt 2019).

American trends in federalism point almost unilaterally towards centralization. However, this relationship is also observed outside of American federalism research.

## **Comparative Federalism**

Dardanelli et al. (2019b) describe a march towards centralization in five of six nations they examine – Australia, Germany, India, Switzerland, and the United States. These findings are in line with previous examinations of comparative federalism; for example, Veliz (2014) provides a historiography of Latin American nations that characterizes the region promoting a history of a centralization.

Decentralization can occur, but only under specific conditions. For example, in a study of four Latin American countries, Falleti (2005) finds that substantive decentralization – from federal to provincial levels – is likely only to happen when political decentralization occurs in the first round of bargaining between government levels. Likewise, Escobar-Lemmon (2003)

finds that decentralization is more likely to be proposed by legislators of political parties with subnational electoral prospects, as well as regions with low government trust and higher wealth. In subsequent research (Escobar-Lemmon and Ross 2014) she finds evidence that administrative and fiscal – but not political – decentralization leads to perceptions of increased government accountability by citizens.

Decentralization may be short-lived, however, since subsequent re-centralization has been observed in Africa (Dickovick 2011; Grossman and Lewis 2014), Latin America (Dickovick 2011; Eaton 2004) and Southeast Asia (Malesky, Nguye, and Tran 2014).

## **Public Policy and Centralization**

Literature examining public policy also finds evidence supporting the tendency towards centralization. An increasing reliance on federal grants in many cases has led public policy to be driven by the federal government. Peterson (1995) finds evidence of this relationship since at least the mid-twentieth century in fiscal policy. Weissert and Uttermark (2017) find that centralization has occurred in health policy in the U.S. under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Marchildon and Bosset (2018) in comparative study of eight nations' health systems find a common trend of centralization. Their research concludes that federal governments use legislation and preemption as the primary mechanisms to centralize policy. Furthermore, even when decentralization does occur, a period of re-centralization is likely to follow.

This does not mean that all policies trend towards centralization, only that the majority of policies do. Welfare reform is the most salient exception—with decentralization to states in the 1990s (and many states' further policy hand-off to local governments) (Kincaid 1999; Soss,

Fording and Schram 2011). Kincaid (1998) identifies welfare reform and repeal of the national highway speed limit as the only two instances of recent policy decentralization in the U.S.

Beyond research measuring the flow of centralization in public policy, political scientists have also found that the reliance on federal bureaucrats and their expertise is increasing (Dilulio 2016). Furthermore, even when the number of subnational administrative units increases – thereby decreasing the number of citizens represented in a single subnational unit – the outcome can lead to increased centralization (Watts 2008; Grossman and Lewis 2014).

In sum, there is substantial evidence that political and policy processes have centralized across levels of government. This is concerning as federalism as an institution was implemented to prevent over-centralization. For example, the senate was designed to preserve federalism by including territorial representation within the legislative process. However, the seventeenth amendment and at the state level *Baker v Carr* eliminated this representation in government (Derthick 2001). In addition, the judiciary designed to preserve the balance between levels of government has, more often than not, sided with expanded federal involvement in governmental affairs (Derthick 2008). These trends beg the question, is there is an institution available in government that can reverse centralization—one that has previously been overlooked as a check on centralization? In the next section I evaluate prior scholarship in direct democracy and how that institution may intersect with federalism.

### **Direct Democracy and Federalism**

Direct democracy shapes the decisions of legislators and political actors. Federalism scholars have best evaluated this relationship in Swiss federalism case studies. Swiss citizens frequently participate in direct democracy and the institution exists at both the federal and meso levels.

Switzerland has avoided the trend towards centralization of other nations (Doring and

Schnellenbach 2011). Much of this analysis finds evidence that direct democracy is one of the key institutional features for preventing – or at a minimum stalling – political and policy centralization at federal level (Eschet-Schwars 1989; Obinger 1998; Dardanelli and Meuller 2019). There is also evidence of decreased centralization at the canton level (Schnellenbach, Feld, and Schaltegger 2008, 2010).

Even though the U.S. lacks direct democracy at the federal level, policies are still indirectly impacted by direct democracy in the states. Ferraiolo (2017) finds that citizens respond to federal action by proposing popular initiatives that move policy in line with public opinion within a state. She concludes that citizen initiatives are a process that voters use to circumvent unpopular policy decisions at the federal level. The phenomenon of citizens leveraging direct democracy to pushback on either state or federal policies has been termed “bottom-up”, “pushback”, and “fend-for-yourself” federalism in federalism research (Bowling and Rose 2016). Empirical assessments of policy pushback have largely been limited to evaluations of fiscal constraints within states (Matsusaka 1995, 2004; Dyck 2010). Yet, these findings highlight that citizens are willing and able to use direct democracy as a means to constrain unappealing policies.

Beyond constraining policy, direct democracy in the U.S. also contours the behavior of legislators. The threat of an initiative can entice legislators to change status quo policy to prevent a more unappealing policy change (Gerber 1999; Boehmke 2002; Boehmke and Patty 2007; Le Bihan 2018). Legislators can also attempt to alter the effectiveness of a ballot measure after passage. Gerber, Lupia, and McCubbins (2004) find that the legislature and bureaucracy will not implement initiatives if the cost of compliance is prohibitive or the actor prefers the status quo policy and faces sufficiently small sanctioning costs. Alternatively, when the initiative language is vague, actors will bend implementation towards their preferred position. Even when a ballot

measure is unsuccessful, Kogan (2016) finds evidence that future policy proposals will be moderated towards ballot measures' status quo point.

The scope and behavior of interest groups within a state are also influenced by the presence of direct democracy. The initiative process allows another avenue of policy influence beyond the legislature – lowering mobilization costs for interest groups, which in turn leads to greater interest group density (Boehmke 2002). Direct democracy also increase the entry and exit rates of interest groups (Boehmke 2008).

There are three takeaways from this literature. First in Switzerland, the nation with the most extensive evaluation of direct democracy's effect on centralization, there is suggestive evidence that direct democracy has hindered centralization. Second, turning to the U.S., the literature finds that citizens can leverage state-level direct democracy as a cudgel to respond to unappealing federal and state policy proposals. Third, state level political actors change their behavior and preferences in response to direct democracy. Taken together, these findings suggest that direct democracy in the U.S. is capable of affecting institutional change.

### **Direct Decentralization**

In the previous sections, I have identified two trends. First, federalism research has found a persistent trend towards centralization over time that applies to both federal-state and state-local relationships. Second, direct democracy is an institution capable of constraining the actions of political actors in ways that affect governmental responsibilities. However, scholars of U.S. federalism and direct democracy have yet to consider how the two fields intersect – and to what extent our understanding of federalism and direct democracy could change as a result.

In this section, I propose a theory of direct decentralization and provide a series of hypotheses to test the theory. I argue that political actors will attempt to maximize leverage over

decision making in politics and public policy, thus decisions they make will shift responsibilities to them. Direct democracy provides a citizen-driven process of policy introduction and approval. I should find that, on average, decision-making proposals adjudicated via ballot measure will, in aggregate, increase the amount of decision-making leverage at a more decentralized level of governance. Thus, use of direct democracy might be viewed as direct decentralization—a contrast to the recurring accumulation of power by elected officials leading to centralization of responsibilities and duties.

Direct decentralization assumes that political actors will attempt to maximize their political power when afforded the opportunity (Downs 1957). Direct democracy serves as a counter to this power maximization since it is capable of changing the behavior of other state-level political actors, and it offers the public a means to maximize their own political power. Additionally, as covered in the previous section, direct democracy – when operationalized as a national veto – is associated with constraints on fiscal centralization. Taken together, these arguments suggest that direct democracy in the U.S. states is capable of constraining centralization.

Direct decentralization leads me to anticipate that citizen-proposed ballot measures should be inclined to decentralize decision-making. On the other hand, legislative-proposed ballot measures should centralize power.

Citizen-proposed ballot measures can attempt to devolve power in several ways. They can propose measures that decentralize decision making to a lower level of governance (e.g. county or municipal government). They can also decentralize by requiring voters' approval to put in place or alter public policy (e.g. instituting voter approval of tax increases). Citizen measures can also work to constrain the tools that state government has at its disposal to

implement political or policy changes by either enshrining extant policy in the constitution or increasing the cost of policy choices (e.g. requiring a legislative supermajority to impose a tax increase). Legislative-proposed initiatives will attempt to achieve centralization by removing barriers for unrestrained legislative action and placing more policy decision-making under the direct authority of state government. Since there is no national direct democracy in the U.S., the hypotheses apply to state-level direct democracy, although the theory would apply more generally to countries that do utilize a national initiative or referendum.

Hypothesis 1 defines the expectations of direct decentralization across ballot measure proposals. I expect citizen-proposed measures to decentralize and legislative measures to centralize. By definition, this suggests that legislative-proposed ballot measures should be more centralizing than citizen-proposed measures.

**Hypothesis 1: Centralization**

- a) Citizen-proposed ballot measures will attempt to devolve power away from the state government.
- b) Legislative-proposed ballot measures will attempt to centralize power towards the state government.

Furthermore, since voters determine the adoption of ballot measures, I anticipate that citizens will uniformly favor proposals which increase their decision-making power in state government. Thus, I anticipate that – regardless of proposer – citizens will be more likely to support decentralizing ballot measures over centralizing ballot measures.

**Hypothesis 2: Supporting Decentralization:**

Voters are more likely to approve measures which decentralize government compared to measures which centralize government.

The final hypothesis examines if citizens' opinions of government influence support for decentralization. Direct decentralization would suggest that when voters are unhappy with the quality of government, they should respond with greater fervor in decentralizing power away from state government. This hypothesis builds on prior research in comparative federalism (Escobar-Lemmon and Ross 2014).

**Hypothesis 3: Trust and Decentralization:**

- a) Citizens will be less likely to support centralizing ballot measures when they distrust government.
- b) Citizens will be more likely to support centralizing ballot measures when they trust government.

Direct decentralization helps to identify where and how decentralization can occur via an institution in government. Furthermore, this research helps to answer an outstanding puzzle in federalism research – providing an understanding and substantive example of how decentralization can push back against the march of centralization. In the next section, I discuss how the data were collected and coded to empirically assess the hypotheses.

### **Data and Measures**

The population of proposed ballot measures was collected from the National Conference of State Legislatures Correlates of Policy Project (Jordan and Grossman 2016). The dataset contains historical archives of proposed ballot measures for all states going back to the start of

direct democracy in the Progressive Era. The data also contain variables coding ballot measures on substantive areas of policy and measures of electoral support.<sup>1</sup>

To score the potential impact of federalism on proposed ballot measures, I perform a content analysis using the coding scheme implemented by Bowman and Krause (2003 [see also Krause 2005]). Content analysis and expert coding is a popular technique within federalism research to identify centralization trends (Riker 1964; Hooghe et al. 2017; Kincaid 2019a). The measure was originally developed to examine policy behavior and actions between the states and federal government and reflects both substance and scope of these actions. To ameliorate potential validity concerns in the coding structure, I adopt the guidelines for content analysis in Neuendorf (2016). A codebook and intercoder reliability statistics can be found in Supplemental Appendix A.

Two elements made up the centralization score: one reflecting substance and one reflecting scope.<sup>2</sup> The substance measure reflects the extent to which the proposal centralizes or decentralizes power; the scope measure reflects how widely the proposal extends that power.

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<sup>1</sup> I focus on ballot measures in this paper as they represent the best data with which to test the hypotheses. While not the only form of citizen participation in government, state ballot measures are archived, and measures of centralization can be ascertained. I discuss extensions to alternative forms of voter participation in the Discussion section

<sup>2</sup> A third variable used in coding, but not used here is a variable indicating whether measures reflect vertical or horizontal decentralization. Ballot measures which affect the division of power between levels of government (e.g. state and municipal) are coded as vertical. Ballot measure which affect the division of power between branches of state government (e.g. legislative, executive, and judicial) are coded as horizontal (Krause 2005). I examine vertical ballot measures in this analysis.

Negative values in the substance score indicate a proposal that decentralizes power away from the state – by either devolving power towards local government, or enshrining policy in the state constitution. Positive values indicate a proposal that centralized power towards state government, while a score of zero indicates a proposal that does not change the balance of decision-making authority. The range is -2 through +2. A score of -2 was assigned if a proposal fully decentralized a policy away from state government. A score of -1 was assigned if a proposal only partially decentralized power away from state government. A +2 represents a policy fully centralized toward state government; a +1 a policy partially centralized toward state government. The difference between partial versus full decentralization (centralization) depends upon how much power is reserved for state-level actors. If a ballot measure places decision making wholly in the hands of either voters or local-level governance, then the ballot measure is considered fully decentralized. Conversely, if the ballot measure places decision making only in the hands of state-level actors then a ballot measure is coded as fully centralizing. If decision making is split between state-level and/or local-level citizen-level actors, the ballot measure is deemed partially decentralizing (centralizing). Kincaid (1998) uses the term delegation to describe partial decentralization phenomenon.

The scope measure captures how widely the proposed ballot measure will be felt. The score is trichotomous – a one is assigned if the measure only addresses a single county, city, or entity within the state. A score of two is assigned if a law affects more than one locality but not the entire state. A score of three is assigned if the ballot measure applies statewide.

The total centralization score is calculated as the product of substance score and the scope score. The variable ranges from negative six – a broad measure which fully devolves power statewide -- to positive six – a measure which fully centralizes power to the state level statewide.

Table 1 provides summary statistics and descriptive examples of each component of decentralization and ballot measures. The modal category in the data is mixed or neutral measures accounting for 31 percent of ballot measures within the data. Some 36 percent of ballot measures are coded as decentralizing; of which half of the number (18 percent) are completely decentralizing statewide ballot measures and the remaining are partially decentralizing. One-third of the ballot measures are coded as centralizing; of which a roughly a quarter (9 percent) are completely centralizing statewide ballot measures. The remaining are partially centralizing. Overall, there is a slight skew towards decentralizing ballot measures – 36 percent of all ballot measures – relative to centralizing measures – 32 percent of all proposed measures. This is suggestive that the scope of ballot measures could be decentralizing in aggregate.

**Table 1: Distribution of U.S. Ballot Measure Centralization Scores**

<b>Classification of Ballot Measure</b>	<b>Freq.</b>	<b>Pct.</b>
Unconstrained decentralizing - broad scope (-6)	845	18.49
Unconstrained decentralizing - moderate scope (-4)	32	0.7
Constrained decentralizing - broad scope (-3)	622	13.61
Unconstrained decentralizing - narrow scope (-2)	62	1.36
Constrained decentralizing - moderate scope (-2)	40	0.88
Constrained decentralizing - narrow scope (-1)	51	1.12
Neutral - any scope (0)	1429	31.26
Constrained centralizing - narrow scope (1)	188	4.11
Constrained centralizing - moderate scope (2)	51	1.12
Unconstrained centralizing - narrow scope (2)	318	6.96
Constrained centralizing - broad scope (3)	472	10.33
Unconstrained centralizing - moderate scope (4)	53	1.16
Unconstrained centralizing - broad scope (6)	406	8.88
<b>Total</b>	<b>4571</b>	<b>100</b>

In the next section I present an empirical analysis which further explores when ballot measures are likely to constrain centralization.

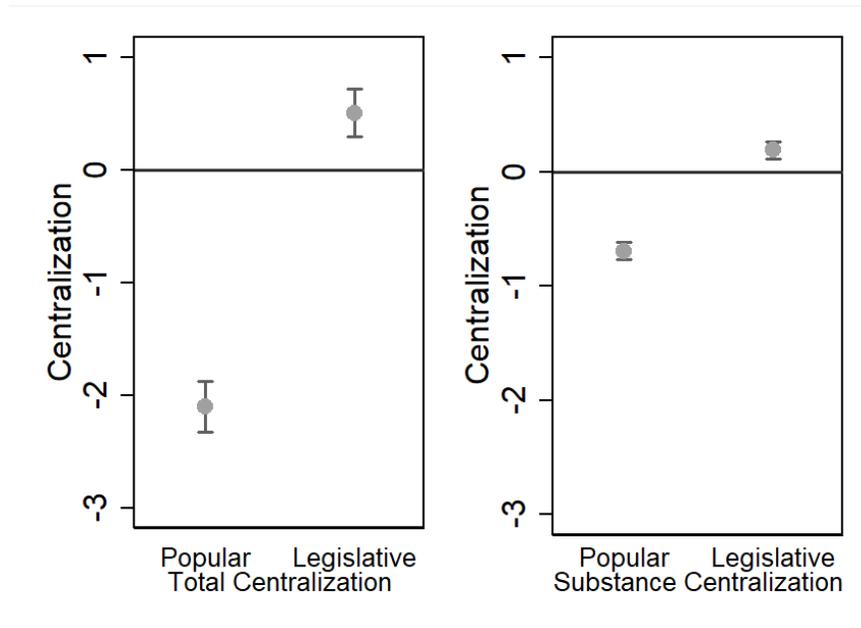
## Results

I begin by examining when ballot measures produce decentralizing policy. In the analysis presented below, I find consistent support for Hypothesis 1 – that popular proposed measures are decentralizing. In Figure 1, I present a difference of means test comparing centralization across ballot measure proposers. The y-axis plots centralization, with positive values indicating increased centralization and negative values indicating decentralization. Additionally, I compare proposers using both total centralization and substance centralization scores. The plot allows me to test three components of Hypothesis 1: if popular proposed ballot measures are on average decentralizing; if legislative-proposed ballot measures are on average centralizing; and if the proposers are significantly different from one another. The plot is presented with 99 percent confidence intervals.

The results in Figure 1 provide strong support for Hypothesis 1. Examining both total centralization and substance centralization, I find that popular proposed initiatives are in aggregate decentralizing while legislative-proposed ballot measures are in aggregate centralizing. On average a popular proposed ballot measure receives a total centralization score of -2.03 (-0.67 for substance centralization) while legislative-proposed ballot measures receive an average total centralization score of 0.50 (0.19 for substance centralization). The figure thus finds support for the components of Hypothesis 1. Additionally, the results also suggest, on average, citizen-proposed measures are likely to have a greater decentralizing impact than proposed legislative ballot measures. Substantively, the results indicate that citizen-proposed measures will attempt to devolve decision making towards the local or citizen-level of governance or limit state authority

by enshrining powers within the state constitution. Legislative-proposed measures alternatively will attempt to increase the amount of decision-making authority at the state level.

**Figure 1: Ballot Measure Centralization**

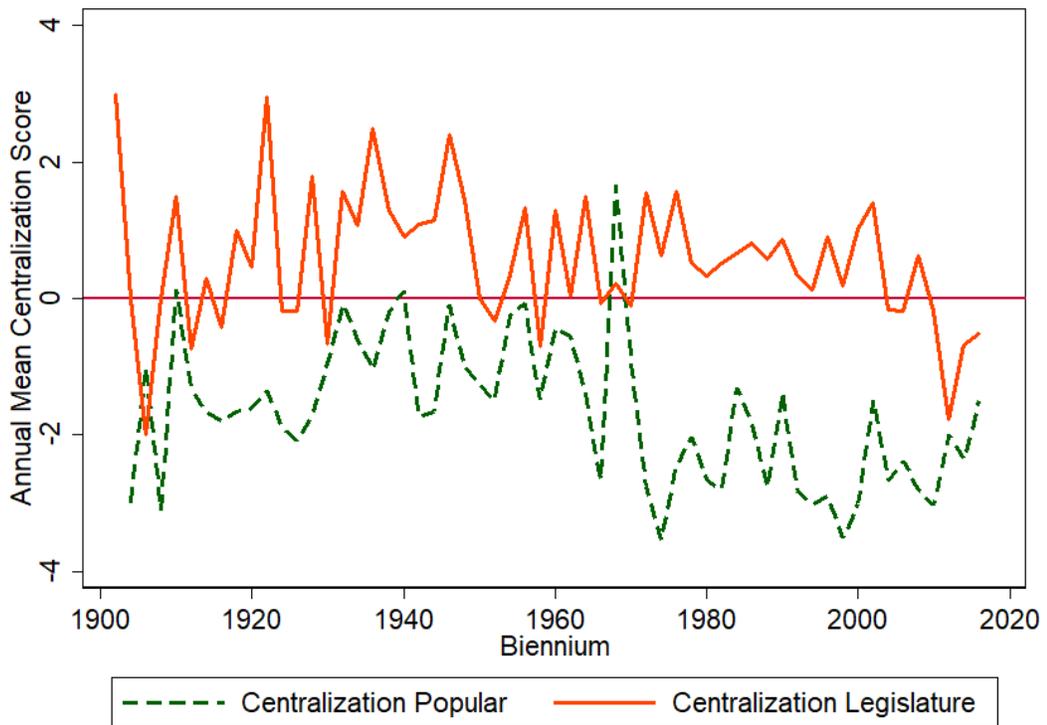


Notes: 99 percent two-tailed confidence intervals.

In Figures 2 and 3, I present additional visualizations to assess the validity of the findings. It could be that the average centralization effects of ballot measures are driven by a specific period of direct democracy. While ballot measure elections are independent of one another, it could be that the political culture of a specific generation heavily influenced centralization trends. Figure 2 indicates that this is not the case. These plots report the mean total centralization over legislative biennium across the era of direct democracy in the U.S. Citizen-proposed measures are represented by the dashed line, while legislative proposals are represented by the solid line. Values above zero indicate a period with centralized proposals while values below zero represent a period of decentralization.

Figure 2 finds that citizen-proposed ballot measures have favored decentralization since the Progressive Era. Except for a single biennium in the late 1960s, citizen-proposed measures have consistently been on average decentralizing. Legislative-proposed measures on the other hand have been more centralizing. While not as consistent as citizen-proposed initiatives, legislative-proposed measures are on average centralizing in scope. Finally, apart from two biennia in the data, popular proposed ballot measures report a lower mean centralization value than legislative-proposed measures.

**Figure 2: Total Centralization Over Time**



As a robustness check on the results, I examine the substantive content of the ballot measures. I score ballot measures across the administrative-political-fiscal typology in

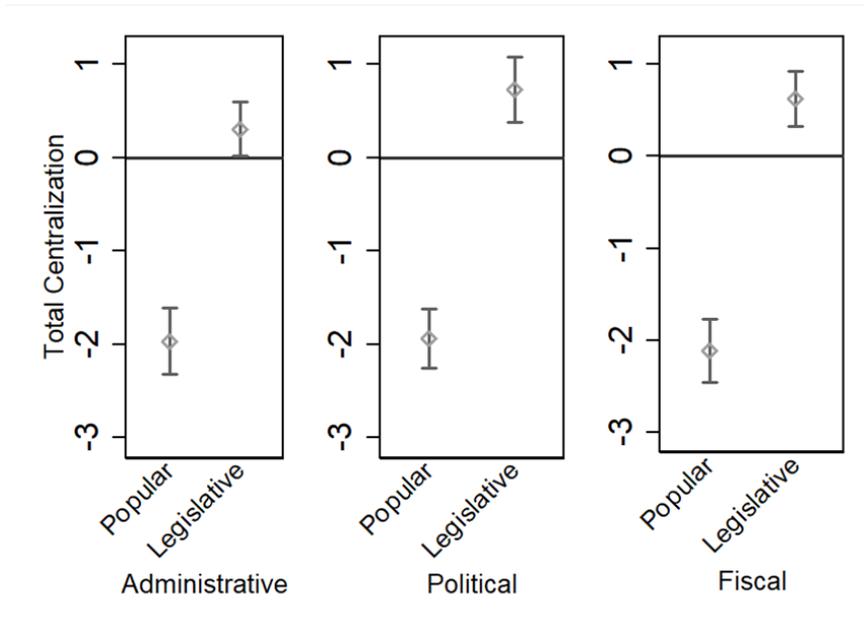
federalism scholarship (e.g. Fullei 2004).<sup>3</sup> Administrative federalism encompasses the division of social services such as education, healthcare, housing, and welfare. Fiscal federalism refers to policies associated with revenues and fiscal autonomy. Political federalism represents policies which encompass electoral institutions. Of particular concern are ballot measures relating to fiscal federalism. Prior scholarship demonstrates that direct democracy has decreased levels of spending and taxation within states (Matsusaka 2004; Dyck 2009).

In Figure 3 the y-axis plots total centralization – positive values indicate increased centralization while negative values indicate decentralization. Again, estimations are presented with 99 percent confidence intervals. The results suggest that decentralization in popular proposals is consistent across typologies. Citizen-proposed administrative, political, and fiscal federalism ballot measures are similar in the scope of decentralization. Conversely, legislative-proposed ballot measures are similar in centralization scope across the federalism typology. The findings in Figures 2 and 3 find evidence that decentralization is proposed predominantly by citizens and not the legislature. Furthermore, the persistence of decentralization is not a function of a specific time period of typology. These findings support Hypothesis 1.

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<sup>3</sup> Note this coding is not mutually exclusive (e.g. a ballot measure can be placed into more than one category).

**Figure 3: Centralization Across Federalism Typologies**



Notes: 99 percent two-tailed confidence intervals

### **Examining Electoral Support for Decentralized Measures**

Having found evidence of decentralization across certain ballot measures I now empirically assess Hypothesis 2 – that regardless of who proposes ballot measures, centralization will be negatively associated with electoral support. The results presented in Figure 4 find strong support for this hypothesis.

I run a series of empirical models to estimate the association between federalism and ballot measure support – model results can be found in Supplemental Appendix B. I leverage two dependent variables to estimate ballot measures support: first, a dichotomous variable coded 1 if a ballot measure was passed; and second a continuous measure of the percentage of voters who

voted for a ballot measure's passage in an election.<sup>4</sup> The main independent variable is the total centralization score of a proposed ballot measure.<sup>5</sup> I include state and time fixed effects in models to help account for variation between states and potential cofounders overtime.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 4a reports the logistic regression results for proposed ballot measures across total centralization scores. The y axis represents the predicted probability of a ballot measure's passage. Popular measures are represented by the dashed line while legislative measures are represented by the solid line. I find that regardless of proposer, as ballot measures become increasingly centralized, the probability of passage decreases. Across all levels of centralization, citizen-proposed ballot measures have a lower probability of passage relative to legislative ballot measures. The probability of a citizen-proposed measure passing decreases, on average, by 14

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<sup>4</sup> There are a number of reasons I leverage both of these measures. The most critical is that the threshold needed to pass a ballot measure varies by state (e.g. a simple majority in California but 60 percent in Florida) and thus the percent of voter support is not analogous across states. Additionally, in the data for many older ballot measures only the outcome – not percentage support is known. The differences between model results are trivial.

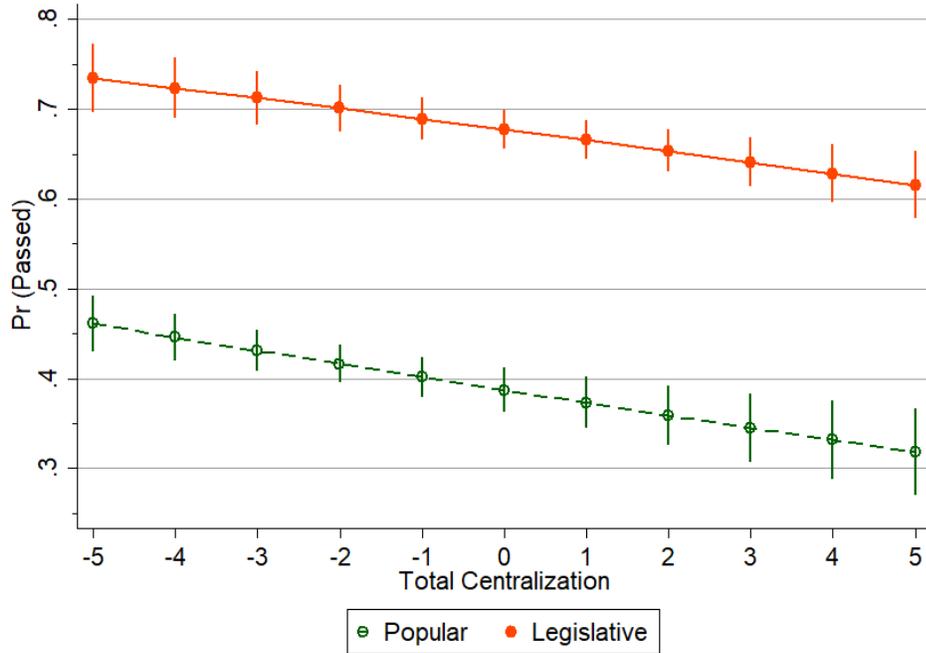
<sup>5</sup> I recode the Bowman Krause total centralization score such that the highest and lowest centralization scores (i.e. 6 and -6) are re scored so that they are only one unit removed from the next highest and lowest scores (i.e. a score of 6 is now 5 and a score of -6 is now -5). I do this so that I can estimate an ordered logistic regression.

<sup>6</sup> In Supplemental Appendix B, I also estimate a series of alternative models that account for frequency of ballot measure usage within states. Alternative specifications comport with results presented in the main body of the paper.

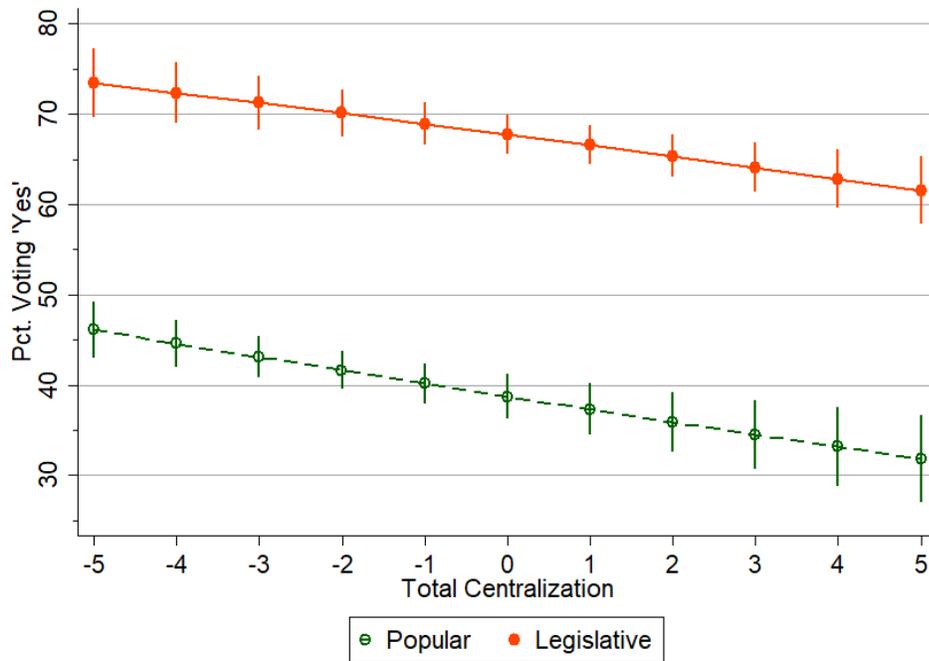
percent when moving from the minimum to the maximum observed value of total centralization. A legislative-proposed measure's probability of passage will decrease, on average, by 11 percent when moving from the minimum to the maximum observed value of total centralization.

A similar result is found in Figure 4b. Moving from the minimum to the maximum observed level of total centralization is associated on average with a 13-percentage point reduction in electoral support for a citizen-proposed ballot measure. Moving from the minimum to the maximum observed value of observed level of total centralization is associated with an 11-percentage point reduction in electoral support for legislative-proposed ballot measures. The results of the empirical models find consistent evidence that voters are more likely to support ballot measures which devolve decision making regardless of who proposes the ballot measure.

**Figure 4a: Probability of Ballot Measure Passage**



**Figure 4b: Percent Supporting Ballot Measure Passage**



Notes: 95% two-tailed confidence intervals.

## **When do Citizens Support Decentralization?**

Finding an association between ballot measure support and decentralization, I now examine when citizens' evaluations of state government are associated with support for decentralization in ballot measures. Prior scholarship has found that citizens' trust in government is associated with both encouraging (Escobar-Lemon 2003) and rewarding (Escobar-Lemon and Ross 2014) decentralization in legislatures.

Building on their research, I expect that citizen support for a ballot measure is conditional both on the substance of a ballot measure and an individual's trust in the appropriate level of government. Put simply, I expect that when an individual does not trust government, she will be more likely to support decentralizing ballot measures and be less likely to support centralizing ballot measures. However, when an individual trusts government, I expect her to be unlikely to support decentralizing ballot measures and supportive of centralizing measures. As my hypothesis requires an interaction between variables, I follow the recommendations in Berry, Golder, and Milton (2012) and specify predicted marginal effects. I expect that the marginal effect of trust on ballot measure support is negative when ballot measures are decentralizing. The marginal effect of trust on support should be positive when ballot measures are centralizing in scope. Additionally, I expect the marginal effect of a decentralizing measure to be positive when an individual is untrusting of government, and become negative when an individual is trusting of government. Conversely, individuals should be less supportive of centralizing ballot measure when they do not trust government, but when a respondent does trust government, she should be supportive of centralizing measures.

I evaluate my theory using a collection of surveys collected by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). PPIC fielded frequent surveys, which contains the required questions to

evaluate my theory. As hypothesis 3 deals with evaluation across types and levels of ballot measure substance, I require a survey that provides a consistent evaluation across multiple ballot measures. PPIC surveys accomplish this. Across the decade of surveys in my sample (2002-2012), surveys fielded an identical question over 17 unique ballot measures. The surveys provided title summaries for the ballot measures and then asked if respondents were likely or not likely to support the proposed ballot measure in the upcoming election. Additionally, the PPIC also fielded a question that evaluated citizens' trust of state government. Because ballot measures are a state-level electoral institution, it is critical that any measure of institutional trust be evaluated at the same level of government.

In order to evaluate the determinants of support for ballot measures, I pool 17 ballot measure surveys into a pooled logistic regression. I estimate a random effects logistic regression model to ascertain when citizens are likely to support decentralization in ballot measures. Random effects are associated with each ballot measure in the data. Functionally, the random effect specification aids in accounting for the fact that the impact of trust and decentralization may be unique to each measure. This technique estimates a unique logistic regression for each measure and produces a weighted average that is used to estimate coefficients in the model. The dependent variable is a dichotomous measure coded 1 if the respondent indicated that she supports a proposed ballot measure (*Respondent supports measure*).

My first independent variable of interest is a measure of political trust (*Respondent trust*). The variable is trichotomous indicating whether the respondent "Generally trusts the government in Sacramento to do what is right", "Sometimes trusts the government in Sacramento to do what is right", or "Does not trust the government in Sacramento to do what is right". The sometimes trusts state government category is the reference category in the analysis.

My second independent variable of interest is a measure of ballot measure substance. Due to the limited number of ballot measures fielded in PPIC, I recode ballot measure centralization into a trichotomous score reflecting if a ballot measure is decentralizing, neutral, or centralizing (*Ballot measure centralization*). Neutral ballot measures are the reference category in the model.

I also include a vector of individual control variables including respondent gender, race, age, age-squared, educational attainment, homeownership, family income, party identification, and ideology. Summary statistics and variable descriptions are located in Supplemental Appendix C. I also include county fixed effects and year fixed effects.<sup>7</sup>

The results of the logistic regression are reported in Table 2, with interpretable effects provided in the right-hand column. The results find strong support for hypothesis 3. A respondent's level of trust on ballot measure support is associated in the expected direction. A respondent who trusts state government is significantly more likely to support a ballot measure than a respondent who is neutral, the reference category. Conversely, a respondent who does not trust state government is significantly less likely to support a proposed ballot measure. Ballot measure substance is also significantly associated with support. When respondents sometimes trust government, the reference category, decentralizing measures are predicted to receive lower levels of support, although the effect is not statistically significant. Centralizing ballot measures are significantly associated with higher levels of support.

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<sup>7</sup> I also estimate the model using a matching technique to help ascertain the causal validity of the findings. Results are reported in Supplemental Appendix D and are substantively similar to the models reported in the main body of the paper.

Looking at the interaction term, I find support for the hypothesis across three of the four reported coefficients. Respondents who trust state government are significantly less likely to support decentralizing ballot measures. Respondents who are untrusting of state government report a negative – yet statistically insignificant coefficient – of supporting a measure. When a respondent is trusting of government, she is significantly more likely to support a measure which centralizing government. Untrusting respondents report significantly lower support for ballot measures that centralize government.

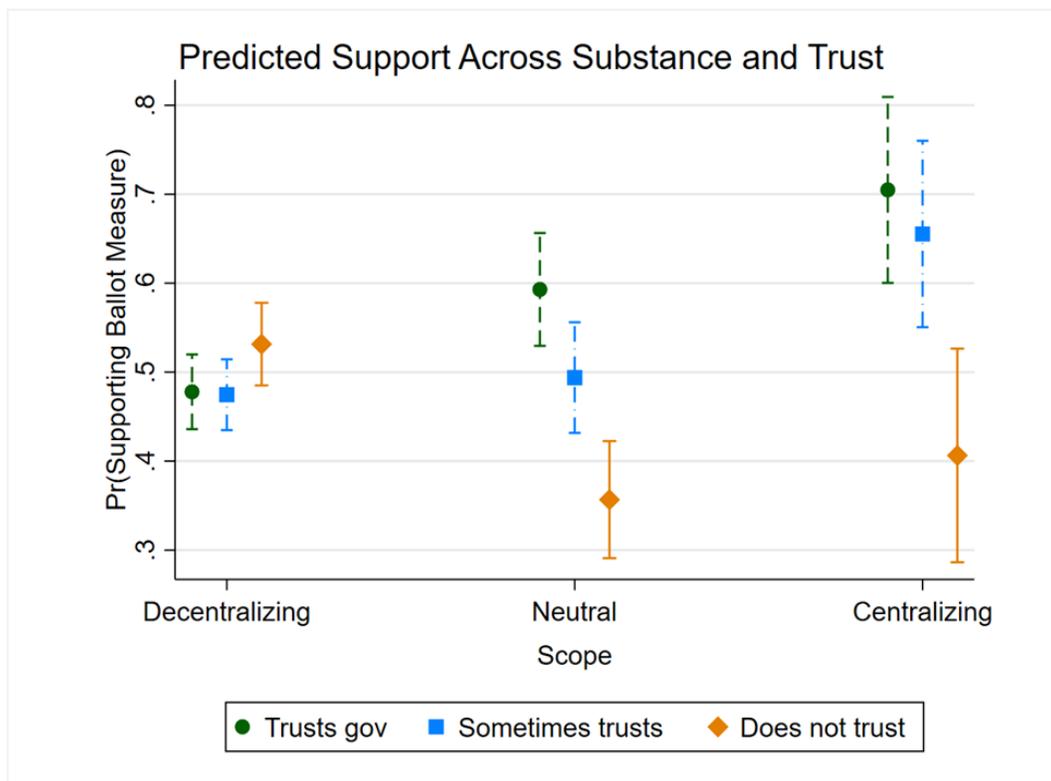
The results are also substantially significant. Figure 5 reports the predicted support for the three types of ballot measures across varying levels of political trust. Looking first at respondents who trust state government, I find that they are somewhat unlikely to support the sample of decentralizing ballot measures with only a 47 percent probability of indicating support. Respondents who trust state government become significantly more likely to support ballot measures as they become neutral and then centralizing topping out at a 71 percent chance of supporting centralizing ballot measures. I observe a similar pattern for individuals who somewhat trust state government. Respondents who sometimes trust state government only have a 47 percent probability of supporting a decentralizing ballot measure. Support remains at substantively similar levels for neutral ballot measures (49 percent probability), yet increases significantly to a 65 percent probability of support for centralizing measures. I observe a dissimilar pattern for individuals who do not trust state government. These individuals have higher – yet, not significant – support for decentralizing ballot measures relative to other categories. A distrusting respondent has a 53 percent probability of supporting a decentralizing ballot measure. Her support for ballot measures significantly decreases when compared to neutral (37 percent probability) and centralizing (40 percent probability) ballot measures.

**Table 2: The Effect of Centralization and Trust on Ballot Measure Support**

	DV: Respondent supports measure	Interpretable effects predicted probability
	b/se	
<u>Respondent trust:</u>		
Trusts government	0.415** (0.063)	0.592
Does not trust government	-0.586** (0.085)	0.356
<u>Ballot measure substance:</u>		
Decentralizing	-0.080 (0.167)	0.482
Centralizing	0.689* (0.286)	0.646
<u>Interaction:</u>		
Trusts government x Decentralizing	-0.401** (0.074)	0.478
Does not trust government x Decentralizing	-0.180 (0.137)	0.533
Trusts government x Centralizing	0.821** (0.101)	0.709
Does not trust government x Centralizing	-0.471** (0.145)	0.405
Respondent controls	✓	
County fixed effects	✓	
Year fixed effects	✓	
Intercept	1.464** (0.323)	
$\sigma^2$	-3.002** (0.369)	
Number of cases	25,129	
Number of groups	17	
AIC	33,991.542	
BIC	34,780.325	

Notes: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01. 95% two-tailed confidence intervals. Random effects clustered on ballot measure.

**Figure 5: Predicted Ballot Measure Support**



Notes: 95% two-tailed confidence intervals.

The hypothesis can be further evaluated by examining marginal effects plots. I expect that the marginal effect of trust will be negative at its lowest observed (does not trust government) value and become positive across its highest observed value (trusts government) across levels of centralization. Likewise, I expect the marginal effect of centralization to be negative at its lowest value (decentralization) and become positive at its highest observed value (centralization) across observed levels of trust. This is observed in the marginal effects plots reported in Figure 6. Figure 6a plots that marginal effect of trust and 6b reports the marginal effect of centralization.

Looking first at the marginal effect of trust, I observe strong evidence in support of the hypothesis. There is a strong increasingly negative marginal effect of trust on ballot measure

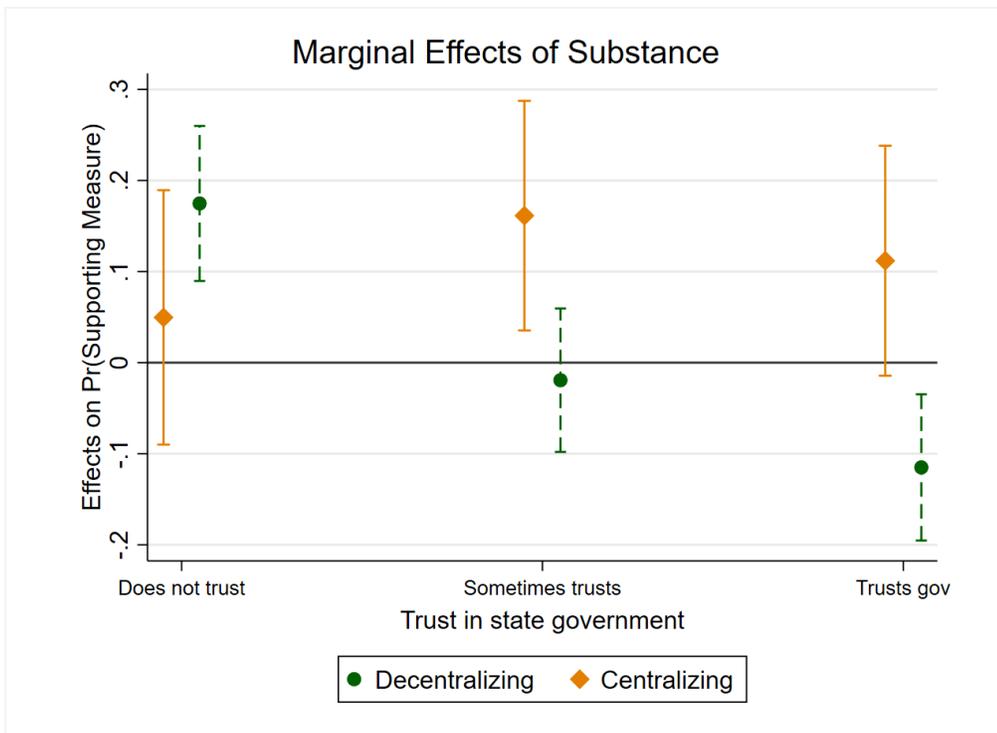
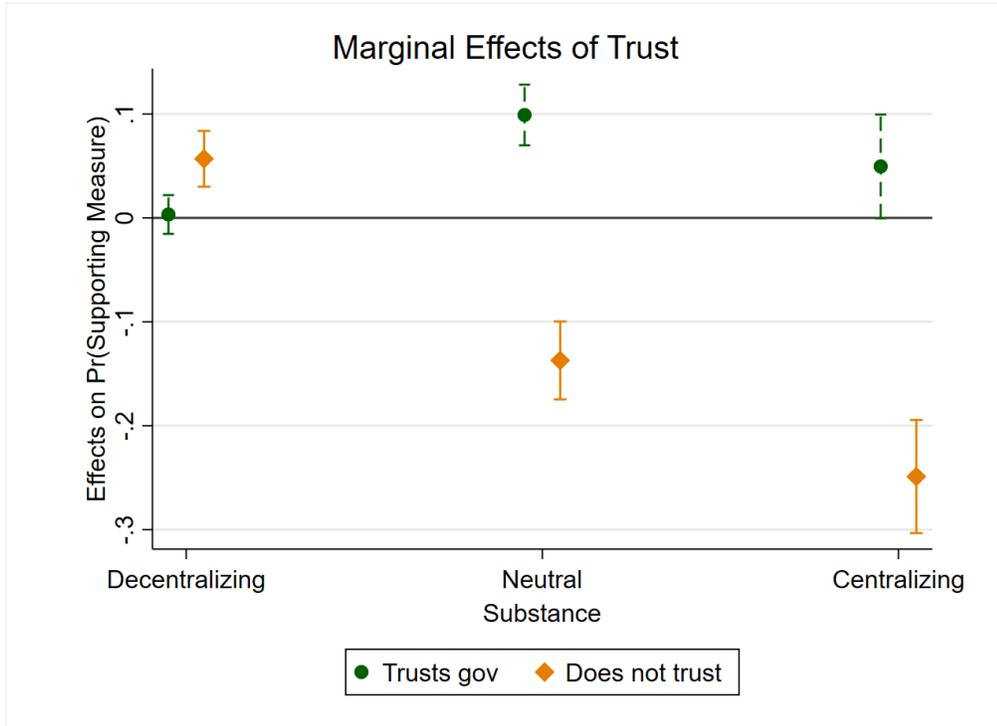
support when respondents do not trust state government. When a ballot measure is decentralizing, respondents who are untrusting of government are more likely to support a ballot measure than respondents who sometimes trust state government (the reference category) and individuals who trust government. On average, an untrusting respondent is 6 percent more likely to support a decentralizing ballot measure than respondents at higher levels of trust. For untrusting respondents, moving from a decentralizing to a neutral ballot measure is predicted to significantly decrease ballot measure support by 19 percent. Moving from a neutral to a centralizing ballot measure is expected to again significantly decrease ballot measure support for untrusting individuals by a further 11 percent. When a ballot measure is centralizing, untrusting respondents are 25 percent less likely to support the measure compared to individuals who sometimes trust government.

The marginal effect for respondents who trust state government is quite different – observing an increasingly positive association between trust across centralization. When a ballot measure is decentralizing, trusting respondents are not expected to support a measure at substantively different rates than respondents who sometimes trust government. However, trusting respondents are significantly less likely to support ballot measures compared to untrusting respondents. Moving from decentralizing to a neutral ballot measure, trusting respondents' probability of supporting a measure increases significantly. On average, trusting respondents are 10 percent more likely to support a neutral ballot measure compared to the reference category. Trusting respondents remain more likely to support moving from a neutral to a centralizing measure. On average, a trusting respondent is 5 percent more likely to support a centralizing measure compared to the reference category.

Turning to marginal effect of ballot measure substance in panel 6b, I continue to observe support for the hypothesis. I find an increasingly negative association for decentralizing measures on ballot measure support across levels of trust. When respondents are untrusting of state government, they are 18 percent more likely to support a decentralizing ballot measure. This is significantly greater support than neutral ballot measures, the reference category. Moving to respondents who sometimes trust state government, there is a significant decrease in support for decentralizing ballot measures. Respondents in this category are 2 percent less likely to support decentralizing ballot measures compared to the reference category – although this is not a significant difference. When respondents trust state government, I find another substantive decrease in support for decentralizing ballot measures. Trusting respondents are 11 percent less likely to support decentralizing measures than the reference category. This support is also significantly lower than the centralizing ballot measures as well.

The marginal effect for a centralizing ballot measure on measure support is increasingly positive across levels of trust. When respondents are untrusting of state government, the marginal effect of a centralizing ballot measure is a statistically insignificant 5 percent increase in support relative to a neutral ballot measure. Moving to respondents who sometimes trust state government centralizing ballot measures become substantively positive. Centralizing ballot measures are 16 percent more likely to be supported by respondents in this category. This support is significantly higher than the reference category. For respondents who trust state government, centralizing ballot measures maintain their positive marginal effect – using a one-tailed test. Respondents in this category are 11 percent more likely to support a centralizing measure compared to the reference category. This is significantly higher support than either neutral or decentralizing ballot measures.

**Figure 6: Marginal Effect of Respondent Trust and Substance on Support**



Notes: 95% two-tailed confidence intervals.

In sum, the survey data find support for Hypothesis 3. In three of the four interactive coefficients, I find the expected association between state trust and ballot measure substance on ballot measure support. These effects are substantively meaningful as well. Marginal effect plots find further support for the hypothesis. I find evidence of a negative marginal effect for untrusting respondents on ballot measure support across ballot measure centralization. Yet, the marginal effect becomes positive when examining respondents who trust state government. Likewise, I observe a negative marginal effect for decentralizing ballot measures across increasing levels of respondent trust. Again, the marginal effect becomes positive when observing centralizing measures across increasing levels of trust.

## **Discussion**

In this paper, I provide evidence of how institutions work to preserve federalism. I find that direct democracy can help counter the march towards centralization through strategic decentralization. Political actors within a state are likely to propose ballot measures that move the decision making towards their level of government – at least on political and policy issues that determine the vertical structure of government. Regardless of who proposes it, voters are more likely to support a ballot measure that decentralizes government. Furthermore, there is a conditional association between individual-level trust in government and support for decentralization where untrusting individuals favor decentralization, while trusting individuals support centralization. These results raise a number of important considerations that future scholarship ought to address.

Weissert (2011) has urged American federalism scholars to “move beyond marble cakes and picket fences to answer some of the truly pressing and challenging questions of the day” (pg. 974). This paper illustrates the importance of following this advice. The results presented in this

paper are critical as they provide a remedy to the longstanding trend of centralization. Previously scholars have only been able to point to informal intuitions – such as culture (Elazar 1987; Doring and Schnellenbach 2010) or safeguards (Bednar 2008) – as a means to constrain over-centralization. Federalism scholars need to continue working on integrating their work with other subfields in order to fully understand how federalism colors politics and policy.

Comparative scholars should also take note of the results presented within this paper. Presently, 30 nations allow citizens to place constitutional amendments on the ballot, while 86 nations require citizen approval for proposed constitutional amendments (Comparative Constitutions Project). Future scholarship must assess the generalizability of these findings when examined in a cross-national context. Does citizen voting on constitutional amendments impede centralization at the federal level in a similar manner to the US states? If not, what institutional arrangements can encourage or discourage decentralization?

The results of this paper should also be examined at the local level, as the results raise many important questions for public administration and policy scholars. Namely, does the decentralization trend replicate at the local level of governance? While city, county, and municipal governments can all have policies which require the approval of voters. Local governance scholars should investigate if a similar relationship between citizens and government exists at this particular level. Furthermore, how does variation in the strength of home rule influence this relationship?

Finally, policy diffusion scholars should consider the results of this paper. It is well documented that states adopt particular policies, at least in part, because other states have adopted them (Berry and Berry 1990; Boehmke and Witmer 2004; Pacheco 2012; Desmarias, Harden, and Boehmke 2015). This paper raises a series of interesting questions that need to be

addressed. First, there is evidence that the substance of ballot measures diffuse in a similar manner to state policies – with leader states introducing policy changes via ballot measures and laggard states following suit in subsequent elections. If ballot measures do diffuse across states, this begs the questions if decentralization can also diffuse vis-à-vis this network.

Over a half-century of research has documented the trend of centralization from the U.S. states to the federal government and more recently from local level to states without much institutional opposition. In fact, direct democracy can curb this march of centralization and citizens clearly prefer decentralized policies. This paper works to move the discussion of over-centralization out of the subfield of federalism and into a broader theoretical arena where it belongs.

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