

A Theory of Institutional Congruence

How can we explain subnational variation in local government performance? This chapter develops a theory of institutional congruence to explain why local elites pursue divergent distributional strategies following decentralization reforms. The theory is motivated by a core empirical observation: when the boundaries of elites' political worlds overlap with their social ones, local governments become more representative and redistributive across villages. But when social and political boundaries are further apart, local governance is marked by internal divisions that leave the local state more susceptible to individual opportunism. This divergence informs the animating logic of my explanatory variable of institutional congruence, or the degree of spatial overlap between the boundaries of the local state and cross-village social institutions inherited from the precolonial past.

Social institutions, which I define as norms of appropriate behavior in the public sphere demarcated by group boundaries, are a critical concept for my argument and I offer a detailed discussion of them in this chapter. In the short term, social institutions generate highly regularized expectations of behavior for group members, but these norms themselves emerge and are institutionalized over a much longer time frame. What is critical to the theory is not the mere existence of social institutions, which can be found throughout the Senegalese countryside regardless of precolonial history, but rather their spatial implications in demarcating groups. Institutional congruence relies on dense social institutions that stretch *across* the many villages of the local state, embedding decision-makers in collective norms of comportment and leading them away from short-term opportunism. I specify two mechanisms to explain why the presence of cross-village social institutions is relevant for the decision calculi of local elites: first, social institutions are oriented around shared social identification, here collective descent from a precolonial state, and second, they are maintained and reinforced by social network ties. Together,

these two mechanisms help ease political negotiations over allocative choices by encouraging elites to demonstrate prosocial behavior and abide by local social institutions.

The resulting theoretical prediction is that variation in institutional congruence drives variation in local government performance following decentralization. Local governments that fall within the territory of a precolonial state are expected to have denser cross-village social institutions that constrain elite behavior and broaden local government redistribution and representation. Local governments in historically acephalous, or stateless, areas lack the twin mechanisms to carry social institutions into the realm of local governance, leaving elite interests oriented toward sub-local government populations, be it a village, clan, caste, or ethnic group. It is the variable boundaries of elites' social solidarities, therefore, that lead them to make spatially distinct allocative decisions not easily explained by existing theories of distributional politics.

I lay out the theory in three steps. First, I introduce the cross-village redistributive dilemma that emerges under decentralized governance. I then conceptualize social institutions and detail the two mechanisms through which social institutions impact elite behavior. The chapter concludes with a short discussion on why bygone forms of political order, like precolonial states, generated enduring social institutions.

REDISTRIBUTIVE DILEMMAS OF DECENTRALIZATION

Decentralization presents both opportunities and challenges for local elected officials: public goods investments are valuable local patronage, but delivering them necessitates thorny political decisions. Together, local elected officials must decide how to distribute a finite stock of goods across competing claimants. More concretely, if the average local government in Senegal is home to fifty-one villages, each itself home to elites with personal preferences and ambitions for the distribution of local resources, how do elected officials collectively coordinate or collude over how to distribute scarce goods in the local state?

In recent years, political science has seen a growth of potential answers to this question.¹ The most prominent conclusion follows from the dominant rational choice framework, positing that politicians redistribute goods in order to maximize their individual political payoffs. This may manifest as targeting goods to core or swing voters or, to draw on a common argument from the African context, leaders may construct networks of support by distributing limited resources strategically along ethnic lines.² In line with this approach, recent research on the politics of public goods delivery in rural Africa tends to view contemporary redistributive dilemmas as largely identical from the national to the local level:

¹ Golden and Min (2013).

² For example, Azam (2001); Briggs (2014); and Jablonski (2014).

elites vie to deliver public goods strategically to different political constituencies to maintain support.³ Local politicians are largely assumed to parallel their central state counterparts, governing with a constant eye to their own future political and material payoffs.⁴ In turn, the results of these political calculations explain emerging and consolidating patterns of subnational inequalities.

This literature rests on two assumptions: first, that the political logics of the central state apply constantly as we descend to lower levels of government; and second, that local politicians have substantial levels of social autonomy not only in relation to citizens but from other elites as well. Baldwin's (2013) work on the relationship between politicians and chiefs in Zambia exemplifies this approach. Per her argument, Zambia's Paramount Chiefs act as powerful vote brokers in rural areas because they are sufficiently embedded in their local communities to deliver votes while also standing to benefit personally from the resources that politicians deliver. As unelected officials, chiefs do not risk electoral sanction, but nor in Baldwin's theory do they risk a reputational one from citizens, granting them the space to act with self-interest vis-à-vis society. More recently, de Kadt and Larreguy (2018) have argued similarly that politicians can deploy traditional authorities strategically as vote brokers because traditional leaders stand to gain considerably, again with no apparent cost to the legitimacy or authority of either party.

Though I question the validity of both assumptions in the study of local governance, applying the theoretical insights derived from the behavior of the central state offers one lens into explaining the redistributive dilemmas that emerge following decentralization. Local elites may very well see their political interests as mirrors of those of the center, for example, and seek to maximize party gains. An alternative perspective is found in the rich literature on elite capture, which studies how participatory reforms are prone to capture by local elites, who may use their role as intermediaries to implement their own preferred policies, siphon resources, or, more simply, unilaterally enact policies they believe will help their communities.⁵ By studying the micro-dynamics of bottom-up reforms such as decentralization, this body of work has voiced substantial skepticism about the ability of grassroots initiatives to be truly emancipatory for average citizens because the concentration of power in the hands of a narrow elite induces collusion. Departing from the macro-level literature on the central state, this literature explains the nature of elite capture by looking to the structure of local social relations, with the risks of elite capture most acute under high levels of inequality and in communities with strong social hierarchies.⁶

In this way, the fact that many African countries have seen a "resurgence" of traditional authorities following the dual reforms of decentralization and

³ On national-level distribution, see Burgess et al. (2015). Examples of work, looking at subnational distribution, include Carlitz (2017) and Ejdemyr et al. (2017).

⁴ Cheema and Rondinelli (2007, 7). ⁵ Sheely (2015). ⁶ Mookherjee (2015).

democratization has left rural African communities particularly prone to elite control, as customary elites have seized upon local governance as a means to regain authority they had lost or to enhance what authority they had.⁷ This has led to opposing interpretations: traditional authorities either offer a legitimate source of social capital on which new, democratic regimes could be built or they hinder democratization because the “bonding” social capital they represent encourages consensus politics and marginalizes the voices of minorities.⁸ As a result, the elite capture literature has remained skeptical of decentralization’s ability to foster inclusive development, leading academic attention to shift toward theorizing how we might best check elite power, be it via institutional designs intended to minimize elite influence or, alternatively, by co-opting elites by gaining their buy-in for particular projects.⁹

At its core, however, the assumption that local elites undermine decentralization and development initiatives by pursuing their own individual self-interest mirrors my critique of the macro-perspective to the extent that both approaches ignore the question of when elites are more or less autonomous. The result is that at both macro and micro levels, political science’s dominant lenses for explaining redistributive politics stop short of theorizing local elites as relational actors operating within social and political structures. If local politicians act with an eye to both self-interested and prosocial motives, then studying the former at the expense of the latter leaves us insufficiently equipped to study why elites make the choices they do and with what consequences for society.

I refocus the study of local redistributive politics by theorizing the unique redistributive dilemma faced by local elites when making allocative decisions within the local state. Decentralization in Senegal, as elsewhere, generated a new layer of government between the central state and the village, the lowest political unit in the country. Accordingly, local governments aggregate a number of villages, each home to their own social and political debates, into a newly autonomous administrative unit beneath the central state. By taking the local state as a distinct sphere of governance seriously, I join a small body of scholarship that seeks to theorize the specific political dynamics that arise at a local level.¹⁰ I suggest that local actors’ strategies reveal the dual political realities of decentralized governance: local elected officials must attempt to meet village-based expectations on one level while at the same time navigating the cross-village political environment of the local state.

In this way, the governance structure of decentralization effectively creates a two-level game with unique social and political demands at each level.¹¹

⁷ For example, Englebert (2002a); Lund (2006); and Kyed and Buur (2007).

⁸ For example, Economic Commission for Africa (2007) versus Mamdani (1996) and Ribot and Oyono (2005).

⁹ Respective examples would be Cruz and Schneider (2017) and Labonte (2012).

¹⁰ For example, Paller (2019). ¹¹ Akin to Putnam (1988).

Local elected officials are pressured by village- or client-based expectations in the first level of the village. A local government councilor, for instance, may feel obliged to meet the demands of voters or neighbors in their village, perhaps to fulfill campaign promises, because they view them as clients, or, more simply, to be well-regarded by their families and neighbors. The councilor and their family members are also likely to benefit directly from any investments. But at the level of the local government, politicians must navigate a second political arena. Here, the competing demands of the many villages that comprise the local state mean that councilors must engage in negotiations over which villages receive scarce investments. What is rational for a councilor vis-à-vis their village, co-ethnics, or extended family is not therefore always their best choice in the arena of the local state, where a politician may face incentives to target swing voters for their party, or to show respect to a prominent village or extended kin. This raises the real risk that the individual incentives of any given councilor run counter to those of the collective or, alternatively, that in the pursuit of their first objective they risk upsetting important relations at the second level of the local state. This, I argue, is the unique distributive dilemma faced by local politicians under decentralization.

How elites resolve this dilemma generates the empirical variation under study in the following chapters. I focus on how local governments allocate social service investments and, as a secondary area of interest, who gains representation in the local state. Critically, if these two levels are at times more compatible while at others they are farther apart, we can generate predictions about when local elites are likely to arrive at broader or narrower redistributive equilibria. The theory of institutional congruence outlined in the next section does just this.

A THEORY OF INSTITUTIONAL CONGRUENCE

My central theoretical proposition stipulates that the nature of local political life, and hence local distributive politics, is a function of the degree of spatial overlap between the formal institutional boundaries of the local state and informal, social institutions inherited from the past. Where institutional congruence is high, the presence of social institutions that stretch across villages enables cooperation within the local state because social institutions imbue elites with more prosocial preferences toward group members. In brief, institutional congruence brings the two levels of demands faced by politicians – those emanating from their village or family and those that emerge from the political dynamics of the local state – more closely into alignment.

This is for two reasons. First, the presence of dense cross-village social institutions reorients elites toward group goals, say to help the neediest or to preserve community cohesion. This elongates elite time horizons, enabling cooperation in the short term on the promise of longer-term payoffs for individual actors. Because these norms and networks are legible to villagers,

the majority of whom are embedded in the same local social institutions, the risk of village-based sanction is mitigated. This alone does not lead local elites to abandon their personal political ambitions or their desire to bring goods and resources to their own villages and families, but it does broaden the range of distributional decisions they view as desirable. Effectively, social institutions extend elites' perceptions of their social obligations beyond their immediate village or individual interest, expanding their prosocial preferences toward the boundaries of the local state itself.

At the same time that institutional congruence raises elite interests to the level of the local state, it also increases the costs of individual opportunism. Elites embedded in cross-village social institutions risk broad social sanction, which may range from public scorn or ridicule to losing one's spot on electoral lists, precisely because their social worlds more directly map onto their political ones. Under these conditions, social institutions set boundaries on village-based opportunism because local elites know that pursuing individual goals alone will be sanctioned both politically within the local government and socially within their wider social networks.

The theory thus predicts that local government redistribution should be broader across space in areas that were home to precolonial states because these areas face structurally distinct redistributive dilemmas following decentralization. In these communities, institutional congruence encourages elites to demonstrate a preference for long-term interactions with the group over short-term individual- or village-based gains and to collectively abstain from predation by stipulating that such behavior is inappropriate.¹² Even if actors retain a desire to deliver to their "core" constituents, overlap between cross-village social institutions and the jurisdictional boundaries of the local state endows them with concurrent preferences informed by their social relations at the second level of play, the local government. In contrast, where institutional congruence is low, elites find their social and political worlds less intertwined, facilitating their pursuit of narrow opportunism.

Two points merit clarification. First, all societies possess identities, social networks, and informal social norms that regulate members' behavior.¹³ What is critical for my theory is that these dynamics map onto the formal institutional bounds of local decision-making in cases of high congruence. Social institutions exist everywhere, therefore, but on the eve of decentralization only some communities had inherited social institutions stretching across the numerous villages of the local state. At stake is the relative congruence between formal institutions and informal, social ones, not the presence or absence of such institutions in the first place.

Second, the theoretical framework that I develop in this book contributes to our understanding of when informal institutions can improve development

¹² Raub and Weesie (1990). ¹³ Ellickson (1991) and Munshi and Rosenzweig (2008).

outcomes, while at other times they impede or pervert them.¹⁴ In locating the argument in the degree of relative overlap between formal and informal institutions, however, the argument does not necessitate an exact spatial overlap between the boundaries of precolonial states and contemporary local governments. In contrast, West African precolonial kingdoms were far larger than the boundaries of today's subnational units. Even when the boundaries of a decentralized jurisdictional unit overlap with only a small part of what was once a precolonial kingdom, this should be sufficient to embed local political life within longer-term social dynamics.¹⁵ Institutional congruence can therefore emerge under the less demanding condition that social institutions inherited from the precolonial past embed the majority of villages within any given local government. The critical component is not the nature or size of the precolonial political unit but rather the legacy of shared social institutions these defunct political structures left behind, a point I return to at the end of the chapter.

Conceptualizing Social Institutions

I have briefly defined social institutions as norms of appropriate behavior in the public sphere that are demarcated by group boundaries. Like all institutions, social institutions structure action for group members by rewarding behavior deemed socially desirable while imposing costly sanctions on poorly viewed behavior. They are institutionalized to the extent that individuals have highly regularized expectations for the behavior of both fellow community members as well as themselves.¹⁶

Social institutions rely intimately on understandings of group boundaries, which we can break down into two components: categories and networks. These dual aspects invoke the concept of *catnet* pioneered by White (2008 [1965]) and Tilly (1978).¹⁷ Here the presence of local identities that “classif[y] people in a way that plausibly corresponds to their concrete experience of social ties to others” generates categories that are embedded within interpersonal

¹⁴ For example, Hyden (1980); Collins (2004); and Mattingly (2016).

¹⁵ Naturally, individuals' social ties extend beyond the boundaries of the local state. This is illustrated in the answer that one village chief in Louga Region, home to the precolonial state of Cayor, gave when asked whether he would change his local government boundaries. He would add a few villages that had close ties with his neighbors, the chief stated, but “I could not remove any” (Interview, February 20, 2016). It is not necessary that a local government encompasses the entirety of a social network therefore, but rather that local elites see the villages in the local government as part of a shared network, however much more broadly that might spread.

¹⁶ My use of the term is distinct from an older use of the term as organizations formed by individuals coming together for a shared purpose. For example, Lipset (1959) argued that social institutions – as churches or social clubs – could help sustain democratic systems.

¹⁷ Weber (1978 [1922], 390) similarly observed that shared memory of community origin can generate powerful identities that are shaped by persistent social relationships.

network ties.¹⁸ This serves to render these identities, what Gould (1995) refers to as a sense of “groupness,” particularly salient. Of course, individuals have and always will identify with many categories. “Groupness,” however, depends on primacy and stability in social relations that cannot be assumed from merely possessing an identity. Rather, collectively held identities only motivate behavior when they establish both who group members are and who has “lived” social connections with whom. A key implication of this is that group identities are particularly mobilizing at the local level, while also opening up the possibility that highly localized understandings of sociopolitical cleavages drive political behavior.

Consequently, social institutions inhere in social relationships and are intimately tied to actors’ identities as a member of a given public, via their social network ties and their identification with a group. This means that social institutions shape and constrain behavior by stipulating how things should work for members of a given group explicitly because the act of belonging prescribes certain behavioral strategies.¹⁹ I conceptualize social institutions as more than “individuals’ obligations and incentives for maintaining them,” as recently defined by Lust and Rakner (2018), therefore, because they cannot be understood as a property of individuals.²⁰ Rather, as norms demarcated by group boundaries, they are animated through social relations, meaningful only to the extent that they shape actor preferences and expectations for their social interactions.²¹ In so doing, social institutions “truncate players’ strategy space” by conditionally shaping actors’ beliefs and strategies.²² Individuals believe that others expect them to behave a certain way and, in turn, that others will behave similarly.²³

Social institutions are particularly potent in shaping local political life both because they are enforced through social interactions and because they are internalized by actors. Social scientists have disproportionately focused their attention on the former; we know that norms inform actor behavior because they lead individuals to anticipate the reactions of others, for example, what will earn esteem and what will earn scorn.²⁴ Though these dynamics certainly matter, the materialist approach of much of our scholarship on informal institutions risks overemphasizing the fear of punishment in explaining individual compliance. In contrast, I seek to broaden the incentives that motivate actors by taking into account altruistic or other-regarding behavior for those within their social networks. Social institutions induce compliance because they build on

¹⁸ Gould (1995, 18–19). ¹⁹ See discussion in Kowert and Legro (1996).

²⁰ In contrast, my definition is closer to Hechter’s (1990), who defines social institutions as “some regularity in collective behavior,” though he includes conventions in his account.

²¹ Akin to Katzenstein’s (1996) conceptualization of norms as “collective social facts.”

²² Platteau (2000, 291). ²³ Goldstein and Keohane (1993, 18) and Bicchieri (2006, 15).

²⁴ As Elster (1989, 99) writes, “for norms to be social, they must be both shared and partly sustained by approval and disapproval.”

“reservoirs of authority,” long histories of social cooperation that add weight to the meaning individuals place on their own behavior.²⁵ To the extent that social institutions are internalized by actors, they persist because individuals seek to behave honorably in accordance with what they deem appropriate or good. This means that social institutions can influence behavior even absent a palpable threat of sanction; individuals may behave in accordance with such social norms because they are internally motivated to do so.²⁶

Two social institutions feature prominently in the empirical chapters.²⁷ First, norms of conflict avoidance among group members check the escalation of intra-elite splits. Across historically centralized areas, rural Senegalese elites consistently speak of the dangers of letting political “squabbles” escalate, detailing how they circumscribe conflicts before they can impact local social relations.²⁸ This comes out clearly in an idiomatic Wolof expression invoked in the region of the precolonial kingdom of Cayor, which – to paraphrase – states that problems should be discussed “first in the room, then in the household, then in the compound and then under *l’arbre à palabre*,” a reference to the location where elders meet in the afternoons to converse, often found in the center of a village. The saying signals an aversion to the escalation of conflict or behavior that could reveal social disharmony by stipulating a series of social mechanisms to limit a conflict’s spread. This is a social institution: it proscribes a specific action (the resolution of conflict as discretely as possible), it is social to the extent that it is rooted in a clear group (here locally understood as descendants of “Cayor”), and it is institutionalized because its behavioral consequences are regularized and expected.²⁹

Second, communities that were home to precolonial states share strong social institutions around principles of balance and equity. This is illustrated well with the politics of local electoral list construction. Local party leaders in historically centralized areas are quick to clarify that they are obliged to put individuals from a large number of lineages and villages on their party’s list or risk being seen as biased or unfair, undermining not only their electoral prospects but their broader reputations. Similarly, one village chief explained his local government’s allocative strategy: we “let others take something at their turn” because by so “doing a favour,” we ensure that projects will flow to all villages and, over time, everyone will get their share.³⁰ As an investment in social relations that may generate returns in the long term, local elites are

²⁵ Hall and Lamont (2013, 51). ²⁶ Dasgupta (1988).

²⁷ In rural Senegal, social institutions are rarely justified explicitly. Rather they are assumed to be self-evident, often articulated through adages or offhand comments. On the ground, individuals often describe various local social institutions in cultural terms, or as community *values*. I retain the language of institutions because social institutions remain firmly rooted in shared expectations about behavior or local “logics of appropriateness” for group members.

²⁸ Interview, mayor, Fatick Region, May 10, 2013. ²⁹ See Coleman (1990a).

³⁰ Interview, Kaffrine Region, February 8, 2016.

willing to balance resources and benefits across villages whom they see as falling within shared group boundaries both because they believe it as the fundamentally appropriate course of action and because they view it as an assurance of returns for their own villages in the future.

It is important to clarify that even when they are broadly based, social institutions should not be read as implying an absence of conflict. Conflict in West African societies is often masked as villagers adopt a “front” of solidarity.³¹ The political disagreements – from the mundane to the scandalous – which were widely reported in historically acephalous areas may indicate that similar controversy exists unseen in historically centralized zones. Indeed, I found disagreement to be as prevalent in areas of rural Senegal that were home to precolonial states as in areas that were not. Rural Senegalese everywhere remember and note their displeasure and conflicts with others. Yet strong group norms can lead individuals with otherwise disparate interests to adjust behavior and opt for civil negotiations that protect social relations.³² Social institutions, I suggest, help explain why communities actively *constrain* political conflicts from upsetting community social relations, but that does not mean there is an absence of conflict in the first place.

Why Social Institutions Influence Elite Behavior

Social institutions shape elite behavior via two mechanisms. First, social institutions are rooted in a category of shared social identification, which imbues social institutions with meaning and orients them in the minds of actors. Second, they are tied to actors’ social networks, which allocate sanctions and rewards for abiding by stipulated behavior and, in so doing, reproduce the value of social institutions for the group. These mechanisms interact in powerful ways and both are integral in generating institutional congruence. Together, a shared sense of group identification and dense social networks among elites carry social institutions into the realm of local politics, reorienting elite behavior toward group-level goals at the second level of the local state.

The Social Identity Mechanism

Social identities can provide a vehicle for cooperation because shared identification with a group creates “commonsense notions” about political and social life that structure individuals’ political preferences and strategies. As an illustration, take a comment given to me by one local government councilor in Senegal. When asked to describe his relations with other villages in his local government, he dismissively responded, “we are all *ceddos* here,” a reference to

³¹ An absence of conflict should not be accepted at face value, as Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2003, 161) argue, because preserving reputation in dense social networks is a necessary act since “one’s adversary in a moment may be needed in another situation.”

³² Ellickson (1991).

the warrior slave caste influential in the region's precolonial kingdom.³³ In reality, it is highly unlikely that all citizens in his community descend from the *ceddo*, but by taking the category as self-evident, the councilor reveals how durable and localized understandings of identity persist in the region and are granted new prominence under decentralization. Local interpretations of political life of this nature shed light on how actors understand their sociopolitical obligations because such narratives reveal and reinforce the demarcation of social boundaries, but also the value and relevance of group membership itself.

Of course, there is no shortage of social identities and cleavages within any given community. What allows an identity rooted in a shared descent from a precolonial past to emerge as such a powerful driver of elite behavior? Across rural West Africa, social identities are often mobilized around local histories of settlement and descent.³⁴ These can verge on the mythical, but they are recounted with great pride, such as one village chief in Fatick Region tale of his maternal ancestor, a revered hunter who had ruled over more than ten lineages as a provincial titleholder under the King of Ndoffene in the precolonial state of Sine.³⁵ Much like Laitin's (1986) study of the role of Yoruba ancestral cities in Nigeria, I suggest that shared identification with a precolonial kingdom generates "commonsense frameworks" that limit the ability of politicians to mobilize other identities for political gain. If the dominant framework for social identification is rooted in descent from a precolonial state, one's social and political rights, as well as one's obligations, are intimately tied to these shared claims to group membership.³⁶

In this way, shared social identification reinforces the logic of local social relations and provides a focal point for community cohesion. The power of such localized identities can hold even in the presence of other sources of diversity. By way of illustration, we can return to Laitin, who emphasizes that ancestral cities remain as the hegemonic identity for the Yoruba despite the presence of other politicized identities, such as religion.³⁷ Identifying as *ceddo* is likewise not a new identity nor does it exclude the local councilor from embracing his other identities, such as being a Wolof or a Muslim. It gains potent political viability, however, once it is redefined within the territorial space of the local state as the most "natural" identification for the community as a whole. Social identities are not absent in historically acephalous zones, but they stop short of becoming hegemonic within the local state. While village chiefs proudly recount their past throughout rural Senegal, the depth of that history – and the degree to which it extends beyond any given

³³ Interview, Tivaouane Department, May 14, 2013. ³⁴ For example, Hilgers (2011).

³⁵ Interview, village chief, Fatick Region, May 7, 2013. ³⁶ Laitin (1986, 159, 177).

³⁷ Echoing language heard in rural Senegal, Yoruba deny the idea that there is a meaningful religious cleavage, stating to the contrast that "we are all one family" (1986, 136).

village – varies significantly, meaning that social identities more often than not serve to delimit group divisions within the local state.³⁸

This suggests that social institutions shape political outcomes most strongly when they are tied to widely recognized and locally internalized identities. Comparing the postcolonial performance of Indian states, Singh (2015a, 2015b) similarly documents how states that have strong subnational identities outperform those that lack them. Singh chronicles how politicians in some Indian states actively nurtured the development of subnational identities for political ends only to find themselves subsequently constrained by their earlier political strategy. Once subnational identities are internalized by the population, elites are obligated to meet citizen demands for further welfare investments.³⁹ Ultimately, Singh draws a similar conclusion: states are more likely to invest in citizen welfare when there is “a match between the political-administrative unit that has jurisdiction over social policy and the locus of collective identification.”⁴⁰

Locally hegemonic identities of this nature translate into measurable political behavior by reorienting preferences toward group goals. To the extent that individuals’ attachment to their group identities can explain otherwise “irrational” behavior by altering their preferences, we know that self-interested actors do not always define their self-interest narrowly.⁴¹ Rather, possessing a local collective identity can establish claims to community resources that change how local elites order their priorities. This produces what Collins (2006) refers to as “goal congruence” as identification with a group valorizes group goals while also raising the cost of individual opportunism. To wit, one rural Senegalese politician clarified that it was impossible to ignore demands on the local state by autochthonous residents “in their ancestral villages” because they held an unquestionable right to community membership.⁴² While they may not have all voted for him, the politician’s recognition that they held a shared community identity, tied to an idea of descent from the community’s past, altered his political behavior.

More forcefully, shared group membership generates a distinct sense of common purpose. This is exemplified most clearly in the pervasive language of “social cohesion” and the concern over intra-elite splits.⁴³ Despite the right to discipline councilors who miss three meetings in a row, for example, a mayor in the territory of the former Saloum Kingdom noted, “we don’t do it, because

³⁸ For example, one mayor explained how he had run for office in order to defend his ethnic group, which he perceived as being in competition with other ethnicities in the community, a clear reference to the late-colonial arrival of Wolof peanut farmers. Upon winning office, his co-ethnics were clearly favored, revealing that while group identities matter here as well, in acephalous areas, they serve to demarcate groups *within* the identity, fracturing the second level of play (Interview, Tambacounda Region, March 19, 2013).

³⁹ Singh (2015a, chapter 3). ⁴⁰ Singh (2015a, 5). ⁴¹ Akerlof and Kranton (2000).

⁴² Interview, councilor, Kaolack Region, May 4, 2013.

⁴³ See Schaffer (1998) on Senegalese norms of social cohesion.

it's not good for social cohesion.”⁴⁴ The mayor spoke at length of his displeasure with the poor attendance of some councilors, but group-oriented preferences outweighed his individual inclination to sanction.

Indeed, shared group membership has been found to foster a sense of common goals, to lead individuals to act in the interest of the group, and to increase sharing among in-group members.⁴⁵ Lab experiments revealed that individuals strongly prefer in-group members – even in cases of randomly assigned group membership – and not only are individuals more likely to opt for social-welfare-enhancing choices when paired with fellow in-group members, they are also more charitable to fellow group members who receive lower payoffs.⁴⁶ Outside of behavioral economics and social psychology, political scientists have repeatedly shown that within-group members are better able to overcome collective action dilemmas, be it via shared norms, rules, or preferences to reach better outcomes.⁴⁷ The creation of new formal institutions can create or emphasize existing social ties by virtue of how institutional boundaries can demonstrate shared commonalities. In this way, decentralization and other similar reforms are capable of “rais[ing] the ceiling of participant identity” by facilitating collective action at a higher level than would previously have been possible based on informal, daily interactions alone.⁴⁸

The Social Network Mechanism

Social identities reorient actor preferences toward group goals and imbue them with meaning. How group boundaries are understood is intimately tied to the social networks that these identities are embedded within. Individuals have been widely shown to be more likely to cooperate with those they share social connections with, and such ties can help them overcome ethnic or other demographic divisions.⁴⁹ This is the second mechanism animating institutional congruence: dense social network ties carry social institutions into the political preferences of decision-makers.

Critically, what differs is not what bestows social status within villages. Rural African social relations are largely determined by family lineage structures, such as the ability to claim descent from the zone's founding families. This renders elite status highly path-dependent, meaning that *who* comprises the local elite of any given village is relatively consistent. What does differ is the structure of relationships between elites *across* villages. Because social networks are relatively sticky in the short run, local elites face circumscribed choices as to

⁴⁴ Interview, Kaffrine Region, April 24, 2013.

⁴⁵ Brewer (1979); Tajfel and Turner (1986); Transue (2007); Shayo (2009); and Grossman and Baldassarri (2012).

⁴⁶ Fowler and Kam (2007); Chen and Li (2009); and Goette et al. (2006).

⁴⁷ Bates (1983); Ostrom (1990); Miguel and Gugerty (2005); Habyarimana et al. (2007); and Singh (2011).

⁴⁸ Gould (1991, 21–22). ⁴⁹ Glaeser et al. (2000); Dionne (2015); and Leonard et al. (2010).

whether or not to invest in their network ties. This is in part because their own claims to authority and resources often depend on reinforcing the value of the network as a whole. In this way, social networks are themselves “historically embedded.”⁵⁰ Networks promote cooperation, in other words, not only because they enable trust or friendship but also because they are durable.⁵¹ Critically, network structure is as consequential as an individual’s ties to it since it is only in the aggregate that these ties collectively allow for mutually beneficial outcomes.⁵² For this reason, understanding elite behavior demands that we take into account “the shape of these [social] networks, whether cohesive or fragmented; the interdependencies they created . . . the opportunities for action, reaction, maneuvers and adjustments.”⁵³

My theory stipulates that when elites share dense social ties that extend throughout the local government, they behave differently. Social networks have been shown to generate positive social properties by enabling cooperation, evidenced in the literature on social capital.⁵⁴ The literature on social distance shows that individuals are more generous and prosocial to members of their social networks in anticipation of reciprocal exchanges.⁵⁵ While we know that one’s behavior is sharply influenced by one’s social relations, therefore, I theorize that the nature of cross-village social ties matters for how local elites approach local distributional politics because of three specific effects on local political action: (a) they circulate information about group goals and group boundaries; (b) this informational dimension produces rewards and costs of individual behavior; and (c) they reinforce the internalization of social institutions.⁵⁶

NETWORKS CIRCULATE INFORMATION. Social relations shape the flow of information. In dense networks, local elites are not only more likely to know each other socially, they are also more likely to communicate and observe each other’s preferences and needs. Reflecting this, a village chief in Diourbel Region reported finding his local government fair and transparent in its distribution choices. “We know the neediest villages, we know that some need priority . . . all of the villages are old here, and we all know each other,” he argued. In his local government, he concluded, “all the villages are united and engaged.”⁵⁷ Answers of this nature are common in historically centralized areas. When asked how he would evaluate the introduction of democratic decentralization, a village chief in Louga Region, himself an ethnic minority in the zone, commented similarly, “in this zone at least, it has succeeded because many villages are related, and we know each other. When we see each other, we all discuss, we find a coherence . . . our ties prevent conflicts.”⁵⁸ In this way, social network

⁵⁰ Granovetter (1985, 486). ⁵¹ Axelrod (2006, 182).

⁵² Coleman (1988); Putnam (1993); and Gould (1991). ⁵³ Barkey (2008, 17).

⁵⁴ Putnam (1993) and Woolcock (2010). ⁵⁵ Leider et al. (2009) and Apicella et al. (2012).

⁵⁶ Granovetter (1985) and Raub and Weesie (1990). ⁵⁷ Interview, February 15, 2016.

⁵⁸ Interview, February 20, 2016.

ties communicate and reinforce the value of group goals, while at the same time reducing perceptions of local politics as a zero-sum game by first spreading information about relative needs.

In contrast, weak networks impede the flow of information and amplify the costs of sociopolitical exclusion. This can be relatively permanent in the medium term, for example, a newcomer village with no connections to its neighbors has few means to demand local representation. But it can also arise from short-term fluctuations in political fortunes. One village chief who was a political ally of his local government's former mayor told me that while he used to be well-informed, he really did not know what the current administration was doing because no one from his village or those he had social ties with currently held seats on the local council.⁵⁹ Critically, the difference is not that formal rules are better understood in historically centralized areas. I find little meaningful difference in village chiefs' knowledge about the legal structure of decentralization.⁶⁰ Rather, network ties may matter most for circulating *informal* sources of information, such as norms of comportment, discourse about the boundaries of local political cleavages, and gossip about poorly and well-performing elites. If a narrow cleavage dominates local politics, the ability of others to monitor the behavior of elites and to at the least try to sanction opportunistic behavior is inhibited, even if those actors are aware of the formal rules of the local state.

NETWORKS GENERATE EXTERNAL COSTS AND REWARDS. By circulating information about elite behavior, networks enable citizens and elites alike to sanction poorly viewed behavior and to reward behavior that is deemed good. The ability of social networks to generate external costs and rewards extends elites' time horizons. This leads actors away from exploiting partners because the short-run gains cannot compensate for the long-run costs that a damaged reputation incurs.⁶¹ "In this way, mutual abstention from attempts to exploit partners, based on conditional cooperation, can become individually profitable," write Raub and Weesie (1990, 647). Elites in dense networks are more likely to forgo defection that might produce short-term rents, such as embezzling funds for a local development project, if they think that their reputation will suffer.

Networks also highlight the reputational benefits of well-viewed behavior. The fact that individuals desire social status and prestige and that "local status

⁵⁹ Interview, Kaffrine Region, February 18, 2017.

⁶⁰ In an original survey of local elites introduced in Chapter 4, respondents can almost all correctly identify who is in charge of *état-civil* paperwork (97 percent can do so across the country) and they are equally likely to correctly identify the local government as being in charge of primary education and health. There is likewise no ambiguity as to who one should contact in the case of a land-related dispute: 61 percent of respondents in historically acephalous areas cite the rural council or mayor, as do 64 percent of respondents in historically centralized areas.

⁶¹ Greif (2006).

has a price and can be traded for material things that have value” is increasingly recognized in political science.⁶² These insights have long been at the core of work on social networks in rural Africa.⁶³ Experimental and survey data tell us as well that individuals are willing to sacrifice their own consumption to improve their status, that they will seek relative and absolute status rewards as ends in and of themselves, and that they engage in more prosocial behavior when their actions are public or their identity revealed.⁶⁴ To the extent that social status generates both material and social benefits, local elites in rural West Africa are hesitant to violate local social norms that could undermine their position in the community.⁶⁵

Local officials both acutely observe and are observed by the community they serve, leading one councilor to explain “this isn’t like Dakar . . . our politicians *live* in the same community.”⁶⁶ These pressures are particularly demanding in communities where actors’ social, economic, and private worlds are closely connected.⁶⁷ As one mayor in Senegal’s south wryly commented, “of course the [central] state doesn’t care . . . they are far from the population. At the local level, we are always seen – at baptisms, at weddings, at the market . . .”⁶⁸ This echoes neatly the description that one local mayor in Burkina Faso gives of his work:

you must be humble, very social, help the community and always be available. There is no time to sleep here because someone can come wake you up at one in the morning to ask for money or your help. You must always have your door open from midnight to the morning. It is not easy. You always have to sacrifice yourself for others. (Barry and Hagberg 2019, 29)

Consequently, while the creation of local governments created a new venue within which elites could pursue their interests, it also created new constraints

⁶² Notably, McClendon’s (2018) recent work on the role of envy and status in political life, though also Cowen and Sutter (1997); Tsai (2007); and Paller (2014). From other disciplines, this argument also draws on Akerlof (1997); Loch et al. (2001); Besley and Ghatak (2008); and Frank (1985, 10).

⁶³ Berry (1985) and Hyden (2006).

⁶⁴ Ball and Eckel (1998, 162); Weiss and Fershtman (1998, 802); Heffetz and Frank (2010, 20–21); and Huberman et al. (2004). From a different perspective, Kahan (2003, 71) suggests a *logic of reciprocity*, whereby individuals contribute to public goods provisions when they feel others are helping because they are also motivated by honor, altruism, etc. In contrast, when they feel others are not helping, they are less likely to help out of hurt pride or anger even when their own material interest is held constant.

⁶⁵ On the benefits of social status, see Goode (1978); Hawkes et al. (1993); and Weiss and Fershtman (1998, 802).

⁶⁶ Interview, February 13, 2017.

⁶⁷ Although close ties with other elites can lead to collusion in non-electoral settings, Grossman and Baldassarri (2012) find that democratically elected leaders are more responsive to the welfare needs of constituents. Similar effects of elections have been found in Liberia (Baldwin 2015).

⁶⁸ Interview, Kolda Region, April 11, 2013.

on elite behavior via local behavioral norms embedded within elite social relations. The devolution of local development projects, the annual distribution of seed and fertilizer from the central government, the resolution of particularly sticky land disputes, etc. have all gained new institutional fora under decentralization, but because they are close to home and by extension close to friends and family, elites risk wide-ranging social sanctions if they are perceived as too self-interested in these transactions. As one village chief mused, “whether [local officials] do good or bad, they do it to themselves.”⁶⁹ When elites’ social networks are narrow, limited perhaps to their own village, they can more easily pursue their individual- or village-based interests because they act toward the first level of the village alone. In networks that are fragmented or weak, information about reputations and behavior is less likely to circulate widely, undermining the effectiveness of social sanctioning.⁷⁰

NETWORKS REINFORCE THE INTERNALIZATION OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS. I have argued that local elites in rural Senegal feel the weight of history, embedded in long histories of social cooperation. Social networks not only shape behavior by producing positive and negative external sanctions but also because they are deeply internalized. This helps explain why rural Senegalese inhabiting the former territories of precolonial kingdoms speak of “social cohesion” as an apparent and evident reality. To illustrate, I draw on a casual conversation between my research assistant, myself, and an elderly villager who stopped by to inquire after my research assistants and I’s stay in a local government in Louga Region in 2017. The elderly villager was happy to hear that we found the community hospitable and welcoming. Things are peaceful here, he commented, noting that Mr. Diouf, a local household head whose horse cart we had hired that day, must have told us this as well. The prime virtue of the area, he continued, is that everyone knows and cares about each other, unlike in the country’s bustling capital of Dakar, and because the community had “social cohesion” after years of cohabitation, which kept things peaceful. “If Diouf [the horse cart driver] told you something, and you were to later tell it to someone else, that person would certainly tell you that if it was Diouf who told you, then certainly Diouf has told you everything,” he explained. We all know each other, the villager concluded, and that is the community’s strength.⁷¹ Embedded within this anecdote is the very logic that animates why social institutions are so powerful: the elderly villager takes for granted that his community is cohesive, that this is rooted in their shared history, cueing the identity mechanism, and their social relations, cueing the role of network ties. This is viewed as naturally producing trust, peace, and reciprocal generosity in the community. In other words, people behave in

⁶⁹ Interview, Saint-Louis Region, February 16, 2013. ⁷⁰ Platteau and Abraham (2002, 108).

⁷¹ Fieldnotes, Kebemer Department, February 7, 2017.

accordance with local social institutions because they assume that to do so is good, proper, and natural.

Norms can be effective without external sanctions, whether positive or negative. Individuals regularly sanction their own behavior for purely internal reasons, what Olson (1965) dubs “social” costs and benefits, such as guilt, shame, or self-esteem.⁷² If individuals value behavior that accords with a social institution, they comply because it is “intrinsically rewarding” or, conversely, because their deviance would be internally punishing.⁷³ This is not to deny the material trade-offs that individuals face when opting to follow social prescriptions of this kind, yet individuals often act to avoid a guilty conscience even in settings where they risk few external costs.⁷⁴ In her work on social norms, Bicchieri (2006, 23) emphasizes the tendency of people to rely on norms as heuristics that guide their behavior, resulting in far more compliance than that expected by the average social scientist. People comply because they fear punishment, but also because they have a “desire to please” or because they simply believe that a norm is well-founded.

Because social institutions are self-enforcing within groups, one’s social networks stipulate the norms we internalize. What we see others do (or not do) informs what we think is correct and how we think we should behave as group members.⁷⁵ This has numerous effects on social behavior: individuals trust that others will behave appropriately, it encourages reciprocity, and, critically, it can limit the necessity for negative sanctions because the internalization of social norms makes such behavior less likely precisely because of internal sanctions like guilt and shame.⁷⁶

Elites living in dense communities have ample opportunity to internalize the preferences of community members, facilitating their willingness to cooperate and to act altruistically toward fellow community members. While some who truly prefer short-term gains continue to abide by local social institutions because they fear social sanction, others may do so because they simply think it is the correct course of action. For many, these two influences are likely conflated. Where social institutions are splintered within the local state, elites do not see the majority as capable of generating external, reputational sanctions, nor do they face internal rewards for behaving “well” because their political worlds only weakly overlap with their social ones. If someone believes that not all community members are equally deserving, they are unlikely to feel shame or guilt for not sacrificing their most immediate individual preference for the needs of others.

⁷² Elster (1989, 131) and Coleman (1990b, 243). ⁷³ Horne (2001, 4) and Opp (1979, 792).

⁷⁴ For example, Axelrod (1986, 1104) observes that experimental participants justify their decisions to be more equitable than narrow theories of rational choice would predict with responses such as “you have to live with yourself.”

⁷⁵ Axelrod (1986, 1105). ⁷⁶ See here Platteau (2000, 300).

How Cross-village Social Institutions Generate Institutional Congruence

Decentralization creates a new layer of governance between the central state and the village, each home to its own enduring hierarchies and sociopolitical dynamics. I have argued that this effectively produces a two-level game as local elites must balance between the social and political pressures emanating from their villages while at the same time responding to the demands of cross-village political negotiations at the level of the local state itself. Understanding variation in local government performance necessitates theorizing how local elites resolve this unique redistributive dilemma.

The theory of institutional congruence outlined here offers one such lens: local elites find it easier to negotiate across villages at the second level when the formal jurisdictional boundaries of the local state encompass shared, cross-village social institutions inherited from precolonial states. Specifically, this endows local elites with more prosocial preferences by reorienting them toward group-based goals informed by a shared sense of social identification and reinforced through social network effects. The creation of new local administrative units thus unintentionally netted social institutions stretching across the many villages of the local state in some cases, easing elite negotiations within the local state. Where local government boundaries pool villages with dispersed social institutions, negotiations at the second level are more contentious and prone to capture by individual- or village-based opportunism.

The argument is displayed visually in Figure 1.1, which offers a schematic representation of how divergent precolonial political geographies generate distinct predictions for redistribution following the introduction of decentralization reforms. Taking each circle as a village scaled to population size, Figure 1.1 illustrates how divergent precolonial political structures (Figure 1.1a) generate distinct distributive outcomes (Figure 1.1d). Specifically, the delimitation of local government borders (Figure 1.1b) captures villages with a shared history under a precolonial state under high congruence, while pooling villages with no shared historical identification in areas of low congruence. This generates a shared social identity that is reinforced by dense social ties among elites across villages in cases of high congruence (Figure 1.1c). The theory's prediction can be seen in (Figure 1.1d): public goods should be distributed more evenly across space in areas of high congruence, while a few large villages prove able to capture the local state in contexts of low congruence.⁷⁷

At its core, this argument echoes an enduring idea that social context can determine the nature of formal institutional politics. The most prominent corollary in political science – whereby strikingly different development outcomes are found within the same country as a result of a long-gone past – is

⁷⁷ This is schematized in Figure 1.1 as a function of population, though as my empirics show in Chapters 4 and 6, the political cleavages in historically acephalous areas remain diverse.

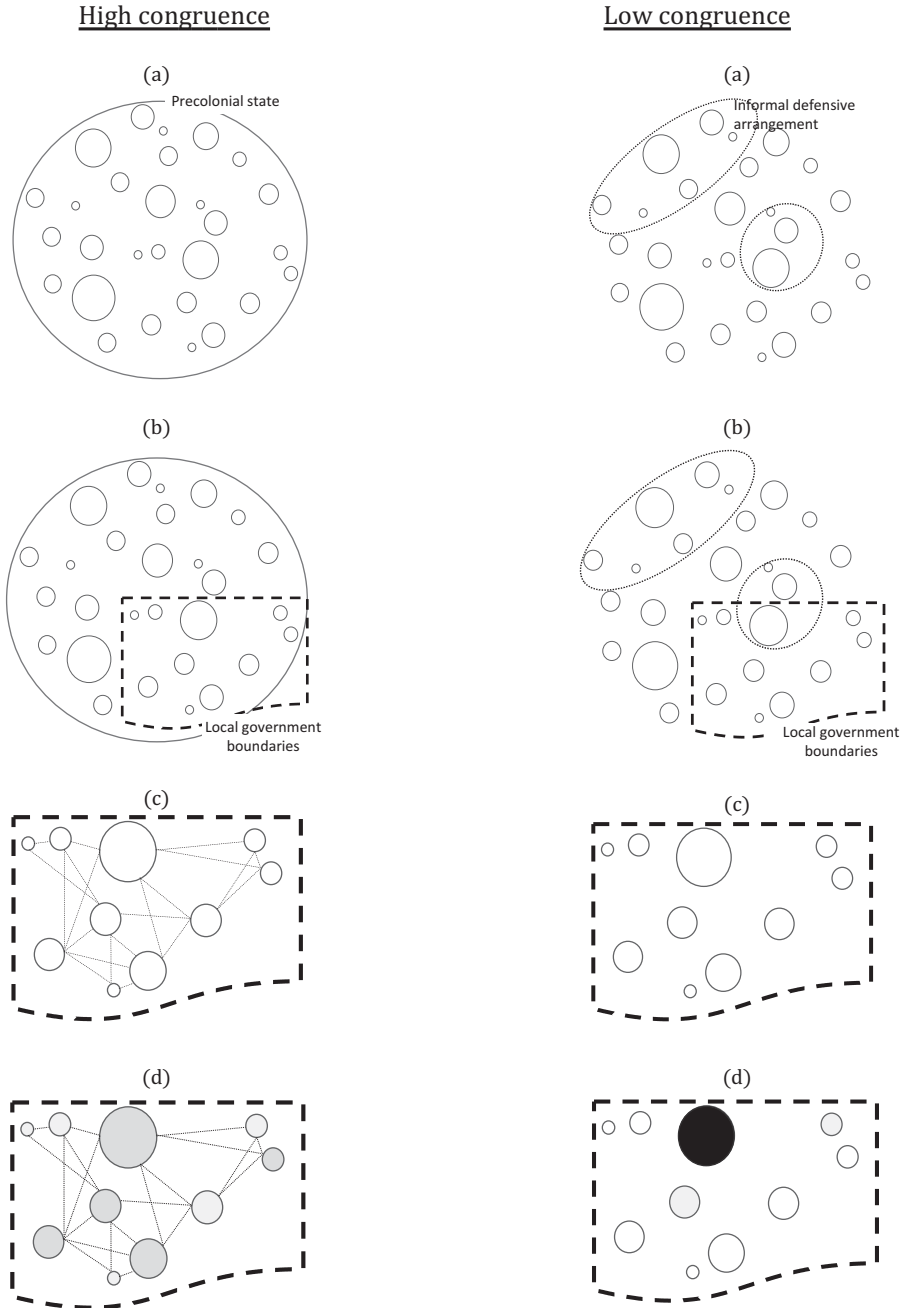


FIGURE 1.1 Redistribution across political geographies – high congruence and low congruence: (a) precolonial political space, (b) decentralization, (c) social ties, and (d) distributive pattern

Putnam's (1993) monumental study of divergent civic traditions in Italy, in which he documents that communities with robust, horizontal social ties inherited from the past perform better following Italy's devolution of power to regional governments. My argument builds on Putnam as well as a small yet high-profile body of work that likewise finds the social dilemmas inherent in governance are eased when formal and informal institutions overlap. This has been shown to create the basis for better self-government, heightening accountability, and improving economic development at different levels of government – from the village to the state – and in very different cultural and institutional contexts – from authoritarian China to Native American reservations in the United States.⁷⁸

Much of this work highlights cognitive mechanisms rooted in relatively durable prescriptive norms.⁷⁹ Many, like Tsai's (2007) well-known work on solidary groups in China or Englebert's (2002b) work on African postcolonial regime, link these norms to leader incentives. According to Tsai, rural Chinese local officials pursue moral standing in the community by meeting societal expectations when the villages they administer are home to embedding and encompassing solidary groups, while for Englebert postcolonial African leaders are rewarded for choosing developmental policies and investing in state-building when the postcolonial state overlaps significantly with precolonial political structures. In other words, the postcolonial African state performs better when it has high degrees of horizontal legitimacy or high agreement over what constitutes the polity. Outcomes are worse when the state remains exogenously grafted onto society.

I seek to advance a more universal claim that brings this small and relatively dispersed body of work together: social institutions create distinct redistributive coalitions when they are congruent with the spatial boundaries of governance. Two core commonalities of this work are important in making this assertion. First, this work shows that an overarching basis of solidarity can facilitate governance even in the face of social diversity.⁸⁰ Institutional congruence does not demand cultural or ethnic homogeneity, in other words, but some shared category of identification must both be present and salient. Understanding how individuals identify locally is important because “who we perceive ourselves to be influences our sense of obligation and responsibility to others.”⁸¹ Second, though not always explicitly theorized and/or measured, these arguments all assume in one way or another that actors are enmeshed in social networks that valorize and reinforce the cognitive properties in question. This reinforces the argument that actor's behavior is not reducible to opportunistic

⁷⁸ For example, Englebert (2002b); Cornell and Kalt (1995); and Tsai (2007). See Chapter 8 for a more detailed discussion.

⁷⁹ Simpser et al. (2018, 428). ⁸⁰ For example, Dippel (2014). See also Singh (2015a).

⁸¹ Cramer Walsh (2003, 183).

individual incentives alone, but instead that individuals' preferences are inherently relational.

The experience of rural Senegalese governments that I document reveals more flexibility in when and how institutional congruence is likely to emerge. I suggest that this is not tied to the existence of specific physical institutions, such as the ancestral temples that help maintain village solidary groups in Tsai's study of rural China, or about forms of associational life, as argued by Putnam. My evidence indicates that institutional congruence can emerge out of relatively diffuse stories of a shared past and even under relatively hierarchical social relations. It can emerge across a range of regime types and even in the wake of short-term reform where formal institutions remain far from any indigenous understanding of governance. At the same time, by refocusing the question of institutional congruence onto the dynamics of spatial overlap, I seek to avoid the deterministic bent of earlier work by political scientists such as Eckstein (1966) or Inglehart (1990), who argued that democratic stability demands a congruence between specific cultural norms and formal, democratic institutions.⁸² As the empirical chapters illustrate, the Senegalese case does not suggest that some communities are endowed with prodemocratic norms that are absent elsewhere, but more minimally that the perceived webs of mutual obligation generated by social institutions must map onto the scale of decision-making.

THE LONG-RUN EFFECTS OF PRECOLONIAL POLITICAL ORDER ON PROSPECTS FOR CONGRUENCE

I root the origins of the social institutions in long-defunct precolonial polities. A growing body of evidence demonstrates the ways in which historical political structures can leave behind enduring legacies, be it through formal institutions or cultural beliefs, such as trust and cooperation.⁸³ Because Senegal's precolonial political hierarchies were dismantled under French colonial rule, the legacy I identify is not carried through formal institutional structures. My argument, that institutionalized norms persisted among local elites, who continued to valorize and reinforce regularized expectations of proper comportment for their communities, suggests that the long-run effects of precolonial polities course instead through sociocultural channels.

⁸² For Eckstein (1966, 241, 192), democratic stability emerged when patterns of governance and social authority were highly congruent, dynamics that he identified as being particularly critical in the realms of elite recruitment, competition, and political socialization. I show that the social dynamics of congruence are not tied to the nature of norms at all; villages across rural Senegal value conflict avoidance. What matters is the spatial extent of how social institutions map onto the formal boundaries of decision-making, meaning that any idea of cultural match is insufficient.

⁸³ Examples include, respectfully, Acemoglu et al. (2001) and Becker et al. (2014).

As I introduce in detail in the next chapter, Senegal's precolonial states were robust political organizations with clearly demarcated elite hierarchies. Like all states, the polities that populated West Africa prior to European colonization were run by dominant elite coalitions, wherein elites gained lucrative positions in a kingdom's clientelist organization in exchange for sacrificing their right to engage in short-term predation on others in the polity. In this way, Senegambian states were "natural states": elites forwent competition and deferred to each other's rights and resources.⁸⁴ The importance of intra-elite cooperation in these states is further seen in the fact that decision-making was not absolute in most of the region's precolonial polities but rather mediated through highly structured intra-elite relations. In the trading state of Gajaaga, for example, a royal assembly was held after the annual harvest, with all branches of the ruling Bacili clan meeting to negotiate the state's finances as well as to make major decisions, such as those about war or state expansion.⁸⁵ Such interactions were heavily prescribed; holders of elite status in the West African Sahel were held to a moral code, with an honorable man expected to display values of honesty, generosity and to strive to uphold the social and moral ideals of his community.⁸⁶ Although I ultimately remain agnostic about the exact origins of the social institutions under study in this book, institutionalized norms of intra-elite comportment such as those I identify here lay at the foundation of precolonial West African political order.

My suggestion that intra-elite norms originating in the distant past remain salient today builds on recent findings that norms can persist even after the political system that generated them has disappeared.⁸⁷ Of course, norms often persist because they are tied to formal institutions, such as the chieftaincy, but they can persist just as powerfully because of intergenerational socialization. Indeed, many of Africa's precolonial states fostered imagined communities. De Juan and Koos (2019) show this for the precolonial Bushi Kingdom in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. They document an enduring impact of past processes of social integration – such as the sense of group loyalty fostered by precolonial polities like the Bushi – on prosocial behavior among the Bushi's descendants today. In many ways, I offer a parallel argument: precolonial kingdoms engendered enduring legacies via the social norms they left behind. In the present, intra-elite norms of appropriate comportment shape redistributive strategies and, similar to what De Juan and Koos show for the Bushi, these norms have persisted because of continuing shared identification with the precolonial past.

More specifically, I root the perseverance of social institutions in the persistence of rural social hierarchies. I detail the ways in which rural social hierarchies have been reproduced over time, reinforcing cross-village social institutions

⁸⁴ This is North et al.'s (2009, 15–18, 255) definition of a natural state. ⁸⁵ Bathily (1989, 197).

⁸⁶ See Ly (1967) on the Wolof and Peulh. ⁸⁷ See Lowes et al. (2017) and Dell et al. (2018).

in the process, in the next chapter, but my basic contention is that because social status in the West African Sahel remains strongly tied to histories of settlement, shared claims to descent from a precolonial kingdom constitutes a powerful form of local capital for local actors. Laying claim to descent from a precolonial kingdom provides local elites with a portable identity that not only justifies their own claims to local social status but also that of their relatives and friends by enabling hierarchical claim-making to local authority. The relative continuity in local social organization in the face of a weak and remote colonial state only further assisted in the survival of local mythologies of precolonial preeminence and authority.

In this way, the continued value of shared identification with the precolonial state as well as the continued relevance of local social networks collectively reinforce the narratives communities tell about themselves and the values they believe they should uphold as members thereof. Social order is often rooted in exactly such an idea of shared past, aligning assumptions about what constitutes a legitimate exercise of social or political authority.⁸⁸ As long as local histories inform who can claim local social status, the social institutions that have been passed down should remain relevant. In turn, as long as claims to local elite status remain interdependent across villages, we should see the possibility of institutional congruence.

It merits abundant clarification that I seek to emphasize how social institutions are the product of *active* social processes. I consciously depart from the tendency to flatten political dynamics that enable norms to persist over time among some scholars.⁸⁹ Social institutions are only reproduced to the extent that they are valorized in everyday social interactions by both excluding and enabling certain behaviors.⁹⁰ I locate the legacy of precolonial political order in cross-village sociopolitical relations and not in an inherited “stock” of an attribute, like trust. This serves as a point of caution against romanticizing shared narratives of a bygone political order because the group identities and social networks they rest upon reflect power as much as they do solidarity, to paraphrase Meagher (2005, 225). It is the explicitly distributive nature of social institutions, which rest upon and replicate “hierarchical forms of domination” that leads to their reproduction.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

This chapter presented a theory of institutional congruence to explain variation in the local politics of representation and redistribution under decentralization. By conceptualizing local governance as a two-level game, where local elites

⁸⁸ Connerton (1989). ⁸⁹ For example, Nunn and Wantchekon (2011). ⁹⁰ Nee (1998, 9).

⁹¹ Mahoney (2010, 19).

have to balance between village- and family-based interests on the first level while also negotiating across villages within the local state at the second, I highlight the unique dilemmas facing rural elites under decentralization. Divergent outcomes can be traced to persistent social institutions at the grass-roots, which stipulate and regulate appropriate social behavior, and which have been repurposed following institutional reform. When local governments inherit robust social institutions that stretch across villages, elites face distinct political incentives because their social and political worlds overlap. This constrains opportunism by imposing both reputational costs and internal rewards via the network mechanism at the same time that the identity mechanism valorizes group goals within the local state.

Consequently, when formal and informal institutions are congruent, shared social institutions imbue the majority, if not all, elites with more prosocial preferences toward the group, enabling spatially broader redistributive politics because the local state itself captures elites' boundaries of solidarity. This raises the costs borne by elites for acting toward their village-based interests alone. In contrast, when the overlap between formal and informal institutions is low, the absence of cross-village social norms weakens checks on individual opportunism, rendering local political negotiations a zero-sum endeavor between villages. In this way, decentralization – like any formal institutional reform – did not descend onto blank political terrain, but merely put old identities, conflicts, and debates into new relief, unintentionally generating significant and consequential differences in the capacity of elites to cooperate within the local state.

The next two chapters provide a historical platform for the argument's viability in Senegal, introducing the region's dynamic precolonial state system that interacts with contemporary decentralization reforms to generate variation in institutional congruence. Chapters 4 through 8 turn to empirical tests of my theory's predictions.