

# The geo-constitution: Understanding the intersection of geography and political institutions

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## ABSTRA

This paper draws on existing work in the discipline of human geography and cognate fields in order to develop the concept of the 'geo-constitution'. This concept aims to: (1) highlight the importance of intersections between geography and political institutions in the constitution of government; (2) consider the path-dependent development of political institutions and their impact on statecraft and citizenship; (3) explore the implications of this for political reform. The paper provides an overview of current thinking in political geography and applies the concept of the geo-constitution to the example of devolution and localism in the United Kingdom.

**KEYWORDS:** political institutions, the geographical division of political power, the geography of democracy, the geo-constitution, devolution, localism

## I Introduction

More than two thousand years ago, the Athenian *demos* created a set of political institutions to enable their engagement in *kratos* ('the people, rule') and ever since, democracy has been mediated through the establishment and operation of institutions to realise some degree of popular sovereignty (Arblaster, 2002). In large modern democracies such institutions depend upon the process and practice of representation (Pitkin, 1967). The scale of the franchise and the complex nature of the matters in hand require that a small number of people are elected to govern on our behalf. This process of representation is necessarily geographical; representatives are generally chosen on the basis of a geographically-divided franchise in the expectation that they represent the needs of that particular group while also governing in the wider interests of the polity-at-large (Forest, 2008). Furthermore, there is a distinct geography to each of the political institutions to which people are elected (including bodies such as community councils, local authorities, urban and regional assemblies, national parliaments and international organisations). In any polity, these political institutions are embedded in a particular geographical division of power determining their jurisdiction and autonomy in relation to central-local relations (Berry, 1987; Clark, 1984; Maas, 1959). Moreover, once established, there is an uneven geography in relation to the outcome of political practices and decision making as the spatial architecture of the system will reflect and reinforce geographical differences in demography, economy, history, culture and social organisation (Agnew, 1987; Johnston and Pattie, 2003; Massey, 1991).

Democracy is thus unthinkable and unworkable without attention to its geography. Democracy requires geo-demographic boundaries (Dahl, 1989; Shapiro and Hacker-Cordon, 1999), and it works through functioning relationships between the demos and their representatives that are mediated through place and across space (Clarke et al, 2017). It is the geography of representative institutions that enables democracy's core characteristics such as authority (identifying people who are charged to make decisions), having legitimacy for that authority and the associated responsibility, as well as accountability back to the demos. The institutions and associated practices also provide the scaffolding around which much social organisation and civic activity takes place including elections, organising, lobbying and mobilising.

This paper argues that recent scholarship in political geography as well as broader policy developments have tended to emphasise the importance of the non-institutionalised aspects of politics and political practice rather more than the nature and operation of representative political institutions. In this regard, political geography has been productively opened up to explore important questions such as the impact of globalisation on national sovereignty and citizenship (Agnew, 2009; Anderson, 2002; McConnell, 2010), the spatial politics of citizenship (Marston and Mitchell, 2004; Staeheli et al 2012; Secor, 2003), the geography of social movements (Miller, 2016; Nicholls, 2009) and the complex nature of political subjectivity (Gibson-Graham, 2006). While this has widened and deepened the scope of geographical research in relation to politics, it has also tended to leave its more obviously-political subject matter such as representative institutions and the geography of government rather neglected.

This paper makes the case for human geographers to revisit their intellectual legacy and bring a stronger spatial perspective to bear on understanding the nature and operation of political institutions. The spatial architecture of existing political institutions, the ways in which they inter-relate across space, the degree of local autonomy over decision-making and finance, as well as the extent to which they foster meaningful engagement with citizens, all contribute to the health and vitality of political systems. At a time when governments and citizens in many different polities are experimenting with new institutional arrangements and new forms of mediated communication in order to improve the outcomes of political decision making, this geography is becoming more prominent and increasingly important in the trajectory of political systems (and for examples from a range of different places see Corbridge et al, 2005; Heller, 2001; Faguet, 2014; Fung and Wright, 2003).

For a combination of reasons that are outlined in the opening part of this paper, human geographers have tended to hide their light under a bushel in relation to this agenda in recent years. Scholars

have issued stark warnings about the dangers of spatial fetishism in relation to the nation-state, the region, the community and locality (Agnew, 2009; Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Purcell, 2006). The spatial scales at which political institution-building has tended to settle have been problematized by human geographers who have focused on trans-spatial relationships and networks, and the porosity of geographical borders (Allen, 2016; Amin, 2004; Massey, 2005). There has been talk of a 'territorial trap' in relation to understanding national sovereignty (Agnew, 2009) and the idea of the region (Allen and Cochrane, 2007), as well as a 'local trap' in relation to community-oriented policy work (Purcell, 2006). While usefully highlighting the complexity of the spatiality of social and political life that always exceeds its geographical borders, this perspective has tended to underplay the continued importance of geography for understanding the operation of politics. In an attempt to increase the sophistication of analysis there is a danger that geographers overlook the importance of a spatial perspective for understanding contemporary changes in political institutions such as those associated with devolution, decentralisation and localism.

In this regard, this paper was partly stimulated by my own research into the development of localism in the United Kingdom (UK), and further reinforced by my experience as a Commissioner serving on Locality's Commission on Localism that met to hear evidence and develop a series of policy and practical recommendations during 2017 (Locality, 2017; Wills, 2016). [note 1] In both sets of activities I was struck by the extent to which academic researchers as well as policy activists tended to downplay the importance of political institutions in the rationale and implementation of policy-making and practice that was designed to shift the balance of power towards citizens and away from the state. Even though localism is an explicitly political endeavour, seeking to devolve authority, responsibility and capacity to smaller units of the polity, it has generally been understood through attention to social organisation. Thus in relation to localist policy there has been a tendency to agitate for social activists and community representatives to take up the mantle of local leadership (evident in talk of the 'Big Society' and the 'Third Way'), by-passing the role of local political structures in this kind of reform. Likewise, in relation to the academic commentary, there has been a tendency to focus on the importance of civil society, social capital, social movements and networks of third sector organisations in mediating local political activity rather than attending to the importance of political structures. These trends are particularly apparent within contemporary human geography and this paper seeks to explain and address this neglect. In so doing I make the case for focusing on the concept of the geo-constitution.

In the next section I explore why political institutions are so often overlooked in relation to socio-cultural factors, with a particular focus on human geographical research. I then look in more detail at the intellectual ideas and scholarship bequeathed to human geography and cognate disciplines in

order to present the concept of the geo-constitution. This concept alerts us to the importance of the intersection of geography and political institutions in the constitution of any government, and the impact of this on the practice and outcomes of politics. In making this case I draw on insights from economic and political geography as well as political science in order to highlight the way that path-dependent institutional development has a profound impact on the practice of statecraft and citizenship and the prospects for institutional reform. In the final section of the paper I explore an example of political reform, in this case from the UK, to demonstrate the benefits of applying geo-constitutional thinking in relation to making sense of efforts to reconfigure political-institutional geography.

## **II Unpacking the relationship between society and its political institutions**

There are obvious reasons why it is hard to disentangle the role played by political institutions from the influence of the socio-culture in which they sit. Political institutions have been developed in particular geographical contexts, formed in response to particular local requirements that demanded institutional mediation. While these requirements are often benign, reflecting the need for community self-organisation over collective concerns, political institutions have also been developed at times of conflict and war whereby local elites sought to protect their own power and status (Fukuyama, 2014; Tilly, 2007). This tension between the need for good government and the requirements of the local elite to protect their interests has been cast into the political geography of all polities, democracies or not. Moreover, change to political systems has often tended to come from 'outside' as demonstrated by the social movements and collective action that successfully shifted political regimes away from communism or fascism, or towards civil rights, social justice and good government, in a range of different geographic locations during the twentieth century (Edwards, 2009; McAdam, 1982; Putnam, 2001). Social organisation and social movements have been crucial to the democratisation of political regimes across the world and they have demonstrated the power of social organisation to facilitate demands for political reform and to realise the creation of new political institutions (Diamond, 1999; O'Loughlin et al, 1998; Isin, 2002).

This situation has understandably led to a prioritisation of socio-culture over attention to political structures in academic debate. In conservative thinking, civil society is understood to be prior to politics, providing "the source of political norms and institutions, rather than establishing a politics that is supposed to dictate to society" (Cahoone, 2002, 11). Embracing the importance of a local cultural inheritance, this vein of thought argues that politics and its structures should work with the grain of locally-developed social cultures, supporting civil society and self-organisation, rather than

using political intervention to reform or 'improve' local practice (see also Nisbet, 1953; Oakeshott, 1962). More recently, Robert Putnam (1993, 2001) has similarly highlighted the ways in which local social organisation generates the rich social relationships and experiences that can underpin good government, helping to develop leadership, social cohesion and trust. These arguments reinforce the notion that local social relationships and intermediate institutions (family, faith and community) are critical in generating the social and cultural characteristics on which citizenship and government depend. Such ideas are common in conservative, communitarian and republican thought (MacIntyre, 1981; Sandel, 1996) and have played a very significant role in mainstream politics over the past thirty years.

However, there is a risk that this analysis leads people to neglect the role that political institutions can play in mediating and reconfiguring social life and culture. If we assume that socio-culture always trumps the political, there is a danger in neglecting the symbiosis between them, and the extent to which political institutions influence what is possible, both in relation to statecraft (what is done by political representatives and how they do it) and citizenship (how government is experienced and to what extent people are involved in the decisions being made). As the American politician and commentator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan put it: "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself" (cited in Brooks, 2011, 321). This attention to the potential power of political institutions to shape society and culture has been missing in much scholarship, commentary and policy activism in recent years (see also Fischer, 2016).

Moreover, this neglect is rather at odds with the fact that social organisation is struggling to fill the space allotted to it in theory. Many civil society organisations have been in decline (Putnam, 2001), neighbourhoods have been frayed by increased rates of mobility (Cahoone, 2002) and cries for active citizenship often fall on deaf-ears (Oldfield, 1990). In this context, politicians tend to try to fill the socio-political vacuum with new ideas and related legislation to activate the citizenry (Bacqué, Biewener, 2013; Rowson et al, 2012). However, recent reform has also focused on changing the geography of political institutions and their operation rather more than the question of social organisation, and this highlights the importance of attending to the geo-constitution of any polity, as explicated in more detail later on in this paper.

For now, however, it is important to explore the ways in which these debates about the relationship between socio-culture and political institutions have played out in the discipline of human geography. Not surprisingly, there has been a similar focus on the role of civil society, community-based social capital, networked governance and social movements in explaining geographical trends

in political life. These interests can be seen across the subdivisions of the discipline in development, economic, health, historical, political, social and urban geography. In every field there has been a focus on the ways in which social organisation and civil society contribute to political and policy possibilities. However, this research agenda has also been reinforced by a particularly strong collective antipathy to liberal democracy in favour of a form of radical politics that is understood to take place beyond the institutions of parliament, councils and official political organisations. This strand of thinking has been developed since the 1970s as part of geography's 'radical turn', and it has been further reinforced through the adoption of Foucauldian discourses about neoliberalism and governmentality, as well as the deployment of a particular type of theorising about politics that prioritises conflict over consensus (Mouffe, 2005) and revolutionary transformation over reform (Hardt and Negri, 2001; Rancière, 2001).

Human geography had a particularly pronounced turn to radical ideas during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in tandem with wider social movements of the day, and this has left a leftist 'structure of feeling' in the discipline. The adoption of marxist theory was predicated on an antipathy to the perceived limitations of liberal theory and practice, most famously developed in David Harvey's (1973) *Social Justice and the City*. Rather than looking to established institutions of government to foster greater justice in urban life, Harvey advocated more radical upheaval in order to reshape the social relations of the city. He called for scholars to make a commitment to revolutionary social theory in order to foster social justice, and in so doing, he advocated the adoption of social theory and related interventions to achieve political ends. As marxism became more widely adopted during the 1980s, these ideas became further entrenched and they helped to underpin a focus on social organisation and social theory rather than questions of political institutions and related developments in political theory (Gilbert, 2009; Howell, 1993).

During the 1990s this antipathy to liberal institutions was further entrenched by an interest in Foucault's work and his concept of governmentality. While Foucault (1978) developed the idea of governmentality in relation to his history of political administration in Europe, 'governmentality' has since generated its own sub-field, coming to mean the way in which political discourse facilitates government at a distance, shaping the 'conduct of conduct' (Rose, 1999). These ideas have provided a mechanism to explore the ways in which politicians use the state to try to recalibrate local behaviour, subjectivity and identity in order to better manage their own populations (Desforges et al, 2005; Raco, 2003). As such, the notion of governmentality has provided a means to explore the illiberal nature of liberalism, a state of affairs that is understood to have been intensified during neo-liberal policy developments over the past 30 years (Brown, 2015; Cruikshank, 1999). An understanding of neo-liberal governmentality as being parasitic upon and yet antithetical to liberal

democracy has further reinforced ideological hostility to what are understood to be liberal political institutions and ideas in 'so-called democratic' societies (Barnett, 2005, 2008a).

Furthermore, interest in a number of post-structural approaches to political theory have tended to reinforce the legacy of marxism such that radical change is positively counterpoised to the compromise and consensus associated with mainstream politics. In geography, there has been considerable interest in the work of Chantal Mouffe (2005) and her distinction between 'the political' and 'politics' (see for example, Purcell, 2008, 2013), and Jacques Rancière (2001) and his notion of 'politics' and 'police' (see for example, Swyngedouw, 2009; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015). Echoing the arguments made by marxist geographers in the 1970s and 1980s, these approaches have a prescriptive view of what constitutes 'proper politics' against which ordinary politics is judged to have failed. As Barnett (2008a, 1638, emphasis in original) puts it "abstractly derived ideals of what democracy *should be* are appealed to as regulative principles against which real-world political processes are evaluated". Such ideals concern a prioritisation of struggle and conflict over consensus and the common good and as Mark Purcell puts it in his overview of this tradition of thought:

"There exists a shared idea among these theorists that the question of democracy is the question of the relationship between the proper power of the people – all people – and the entities that have expropriated and organized that power into routinized institutions like the state, the corporation, the party, the union, the church, the family, and so on. If the gist of modern political theory is an effort to legitimate the transfer of popular power to these institutions, democracy is then simply the struggle of people to take that power again. Democracy is the act of voiding the social contract, or more accurately, resolving to act as if the contract never existed in the first place" (Purcell, 2013, 73).

Given that this perspective understands mainstream political institutions as being antithetical to democracy, and corrosive of popular sovereignty, the emphasis is placed on social movements that can foster revolutionary change and overturn the political institutions that already exist.

For more than a decade, Clive Barnett and his co-authors (Barnett, 2004, 2008a, 2012, 2017; Barnett and Low, 2004; Barnett and Bridge, 2013) have been highlighting the limitations of these ideas in human geography and their implications for understanding what they call 'ordinary democratic politics' (see Barnett, 2008, 1637). As Barnett (2008a, 1637) puts it, geographers have neglected "the sites and procedures of ordinary democratic politics, such as elections, parties, or parliamentary procedures". I take up this challenge later on in this paper, trying to build on the important work that has already been done to flesh out Barnett and Bridge's (2013, 2024) call for a renewed 'institutional imagination' and make the case for the concept of the geo-constitution in supporting this work.

However, it is interesting that economic geography has already had an institutional turn. A number of its leading scholars have sought to explore the ways in which institutions shape economic practices and outcomes, and the role of public policy in institution-building and reform (Amin and Thrift, 1995; Farole et al, 2011; Storper, 2013; and for a review, see Tomaney, 2014). These scholars argue that institutions facilitate the operation of the economy and shape the way that things take place on the ground, identifying a wide range of local and overlapping institutions (in civil society, state services, and business networks) that mediate economic development. In deploying the concept of the geo-constitution I aim to highlight the extent to which there are parallels in relation to political geography; the structure, inter-relationships and operation of political institutions across different scales is critical to the practices and outcomes of politics.

Developing a renewed institutional imagination in relation to political geography will require a more open – and less pre-committed - approach to theory, more akin to that already found amongst colleagues in economic geography (see for example Barnes and Sheppard, 2009). However, it will also require a more open approach to the question of borders. In recent years, human geographers have highlighted the importance of networks and topological connections across space rather more than the importance of borders and boundaries (Amin, 2004; Massey, 2005). As our geographical fixity has taken on less salience in social life and we manage complicated social relationships across very wide distances, it has been logical to assume that geographic location has become less important in public life, politics and government too. Yet despite the fact that our geographic communities have become more spread-out across space and we now form many relationships without spatial propinquity (Calhoun, 1998), it does not mean that geographical boundaries have lost their importance in relation to the organisation and practice of politics. Although the scale of social, economic and cultural life has been extended dramatically, the roles of geographically-bounded institutions have been reconfigured rather than overturned (Brenner, 1999; Morgan, 2007). Many of our political institutions, particularly those that rely on representation, are still organised around geographic constituencies that require proof of residence and citizenship to vote and stand for office. There is no sign that this is likely to change in the future, even if such representative institutions are complemented by other, more spatially fluid forms of political organisation.

Refocusing the attention of political geographers on questions concerning the structure, nature and operation of political institutions will demand an appreciation of the role of geo-demographic borders in political life, a sensitivity to the nuances of liberalism and statecraft, as well as attention to the intersections between political institutions and society without prioritising the latter over the former. As indicated in this section, these demands are triply-counter-cultural for contemporary

political geographers. Yet by rethinking these established shibboleths, it would be possible to develop greater clarity and more practical purchase on understanding the intersection of geography and politics. In the following section, I explore some of the existing geographical scholarship that can help in this work, incorporating some of the most useful ideas into the concept of the geo-constitution.

### III The case for the geo-constitution: building on the foundations

Taking up the challenge of addressing the geography of political institutions and their impact on society is perhaps less daunting than might be imagined. There is already a somewhat fragmented literature that has explored a variety of key issues such as the organisation of the franchise, the geography of elections, the operation of political parties, the division of political power across space, the quality of interactions between citizens and their representatives, and the role of place and space in mediating popular challenges to political power. These research areas are listed in Table 1 and the existing literature is then summarised in the text below before I make the case for the concept of the geo-constitution as a way to cohere, focus and advance research in this field.

**Table 1: Understanding the geography of political institutions**

Questions of geography	
The political community to which the institutions apply	Where are the boundaries around ‘the people’? Is national citizenship sufficient in the face of increased rates of international migration? Can the community cohere with increased internal diversity? How can the people deal with forces operational beyond and below the nation-state?
The organisation of the franchise	Who determines the boundaries drawn around constituencies? What are the consequences? What is the balance of geographical representation alongside proportionality in relation to national voting outcomes? To what extent does gerrymandering shape election results? Whose interests are best represented? How do citizens relate to their representatives and exercise their citizenship?
The development and function of political parties	To what extent do political parties represent spatially concentrated populations and interests? To what extent are party allegiances place-dependent, and how does this change? What is the relationship between political parties, local civil society, local government and locally-elected representatives? How do parties mediate popular engagement in politics at all spatial scales?
The geographical division of power	How centralised is political authority and decision making within the polity? To what extent does the uneven distribution of political power across space shape the practices of democratic government? How much autonomy is granted to the local state in

	relation to decision making and finance? How do political institutions relate to each other and the demos?
The formation and action of publics	How do place and space shape the formation and power of publics? How does socio-political capacity differ by place and across space? To what extent do publics become institutionalised in place? How do publics relate to political institutions and their representatives?

Given that citizens are generally entitled to vote for a political representative on the basis of their geographical residence and any national parliament comprises the sum of the representatives who are elected in each part of the country, the map of constituencies and the location of boundaries between them can have profound consequences for the success of political candidates and their ability to form a government. Not surprisingly in this context, the art of gerrymandering is very much alive as the construction of constituencies can be critical in determining the characteristics of the people who end up with political power (Bunge, 1966; Forest, 2008; Morrill, 2004; Sauer, 1918; Taylor, 1973). Moreover, in designing the franchise, great attention needs to be paid to the representation of minority interests and as Forest (2008) suggests, the differentiated residential geography of different social groups becomes critical in political struggles over the way that constituency boundaries are drawn on the map and the extent to which seats are allocated on the basis of proportionality in relation to the national result. In the United States, the distribution of African Americans has been particularly important as political cartographers seek to ‘crack’ or ‘pack’ voters who are known to be more likely to vote in particular ways. Looking at the geographical characteristics of the franchise in Iraq and South Africa, as well as the USA, Forest (2008, 386) rightly argues that “the study of political representation ... must involve not only how ‘the people’ vote but also how ‘the people’ are imagined and how their votes are transformed (or not) into political power”.

The nature of representation is, in turn, largely dependent upon the political parties that have developed to mediate electoral systems and the process of government-formation. Political parties tend to reflect particular social interests, and/or one part of the population and/or those living in one particular area. Over the last 100 years or so they have come to play a powerful role in selecting political candidates, supporting their election campaigns, and if successful, forming a government based on a previously published manifesto outlining a programme for change and reform (Schattsneider, 1942; Duverger, 1954; de Leon, 2013). Any party will have an uneven distribution of members and elected representatives, as well as different degrees of local support. Over time, ‘heartland areas’ have tended to develop such that certain political parties are able to win local support and see off any competition time and again. While there is nothing inevitable about the

persistence of political traditions over time, the map of voting patterns and political support has often been slower to change than the socio-culture underpinning these trends.

In this regard, Johnston and Pattie (2008, 365; see also Johnston and Pattie, 2003, 2004, 2006), have found that “a party and its belief systems become part of the local culture ... and those areas of strengths become core to its continued quest for votes”. Once established in this way, neighbours can shape each other’s voting preferences through ‘conversion by conversation’ (Johnston and Pattie, 2008, 366) albeit that over time, party allegiances can change and there is growing evidence of much weaker loyalty now than there was in the past (Agnew, 1996; Mair, 2013). Indeed, in this regard, it is important to explore the way in which electors relate to their representatives after elections. Local institutions and cultural norms will shape the ‘spaces of encounter’ between voters and their councillors and members of parliament, influencing electoral behaviour and expectations in future (Clarke et al, 2017, 14).

It is also important to recognise the complex spatial architecture within which political representatives are elected to act within any polity. Political power is always distributed unevenly between central and local government, and this internal geographical division of power determines the distribution of political authority, responsibility and accountability across space (Berry, 1987; Maas, 1959; Smith, 1995). This balance of power shapes the degree to which different levels of government have autonomy and the related scope for experimentation, as well as shaping relationships between different levels of government within any state.

In his typology of geo-political autonomy Clark (1984) anticipates much current interest in the devolution and decentralization of political power by highlighting the ways in which local government is often a vehicle for implementing centrally-determined services or at best, a means for carrying out national objectives with close scrutiny from above. Reinforced by the operation of national political parties which fill positions at the local level in order to follow non-local national agendas (Copus, 2004; Bogdanor, 2009), centralisation is very difficult to reverse. Given that statecraft and citizenship are practiced on the basis of a particular geographical division of power, this entrenches behaviour and expectations with strongly path-dependent effects (Bulpitt, 1983). Gerald Frug (1999, 2014; Barron and Frug, 2005) has been making a strong intellectual argument that we develop a non-zero-sum understanding of political power such that we can see the potential of strong local organisation contributing to the good of the whole rather than setting the local against the interests of the wider polity in what he describes as forms of ‘defensive localism’ (and on the role of cities see also Magnusson (2012)). However, as I explore in the following section, this is

particularly difficult without the institutional infrastructure required to practice forms of more locally-autonomous government and thereby shape behaviour in future.

In addition to the ways that the boundaries of any polity and its constituencies, as well as the geographic division of powers shape the context in which political organisation and action takes place, geography is also an important influence on the extent to which people are able to raise their political voice. Democratic societies have a symbiotic relationship with the public sphere; a metaphorical space that facilitates the formation of public opinion, various interest groups and the formulation of political demands (Barnett, 2004; 2008b; 2014, 2017; Howell, 1993; Iveson, 2007; Staeheli, 2010). The public sphere comprises the space in which citizens are able to organise around particular interests and while this political process has historically been associated with particular spaces that facilitate free expression, information-sharing and organisation such as the coffee houses of eighteenth century London (Habermas, 1989), the urban public squares used for political protests (Mitchell, 1995) and more recently, the internet (Pickerell, 2003), it is important to recognise the extent to which geography mediates rather than determines the processes of public formation. The existence of mediating institutions and 'safe spaces', as well as the prevailing civic and political culture, can be very important in facilitating popular engagement in political life (Evans and Boyte, 1986; Putnam, 1993) and in this regard, research has also explored the way in which public space itself plays a role in supporting – or otherwise – convivial social relations (Koch and Latham, 2012, 2013).

Thus there are already a number of strong ideas that can be brought to bear on any analysis of the geography of political institutions and I want to suggest that these can be captured by the concept of the geo-constitution. The spatial architecture and the internal power-geometry of political institutions determines political authority and responsibility with implications for accountability and related forms of encounter, organising and mobilisation (see Figure 1). In their constitutional documents, nation-states determine the way in which political power is constituted and geographically differentiated, shaping the practice and possibilities of politics at all spatial scales. A constitution is crafted and then remade through the interventions of statecraft and citizenship in different parts of a polity over a long period of time (Loughlin, 2013). The particular historical geography of institution building and associated practice is thus key to understanding the roles, norms and expectations of representatives and citizens within any polity at any particular time. As Hanna Pitkin (1967, 239) put it in her seminal work on political representation: "The historically developed institutional forms, and the culturally ingrained standards of conduct are what flesh out the abstract ideal [of representation], giving it practical import and effective meaning".

[INSERT Figure 1 about here]

The concept of the geo-constitution can be used to provide a framework to explore the ways in which institutions have developed in context, coming to shape government, politics and the practice of citizenship. Of course, such institutional geography generates powerful path-dependencies that make it difficult to implement change and/or to generate new institutions. Economic geographers have long explored these issues, aiming to understand the balance between institutionally inherited rigidities and the scope for innovation (Martin, 2010; Martin and Sunley, 1996). While institutions make the economy possible, providing the security that is needed to underpin investment (shaping property rights, labour supply, planning, access to markets etc) these institutions also create rigidities and blockages in the potential for change which can then undermine economic performance. There is a large body of valuable research that has sought to explore these relationships, highlighting the disruptive potential of new technology, organisational processes and cultural preferences, exemplified by powerful examples such as the development of Silicon Valley, platform technology and self-servicing consumers (Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Phillips et al, 2005; Saxenian, 1994). When these insights are applied to political geography they highlight the extent to which institutions both facilitate and limit political possibilities. Moreover, there are significant challenges in changing the institutional structure of any polity. While the spatial infrastructure of political institutions is generally stable, this is both a strength and a weakness from the point of view of political practice as well as research. Stability makes it easier to understand political expectations, to predict behaviour and map likely outcomes, but in relation to research, it generates temptations to focus on the factors that change more quickly, and often with much drama, such as socio-cultural norms, organisational forms and repertoires of collective action, leaving institutions rather neglected (as I outlined earlier on).

Whereas economic change involves a range of actors and what can be relatively fast-moving processes of change that are mediated by markets, in what is sometimes a life-and-death struggle for survival, political institutions are generally subject to a slower rate of reform (Fukuyama, 2014). Indeed, there is no equivalent to the 'hidden hand' of the market that shapes the process of economic reform. While citizen choice, action and sanction are important, they are generally less effective in securing change than might be desired. As such, constitutional and institutional change tends to be episodic, the product of some sort of crisis, prompted by a combination of external geopolitical pressures as well as internal drivers for change (Bogdanor, 2009; Fukuyama, 2014). In this regard it is significant that the documents comprising Britain's 'unwritten constitution' were formulated in response to a series of crises including the problem of an over-bearing powerful monarch (Magna Carta, first signed in 1215), the restoration of the monarchy and the glorious

revolution after the English civil war (Bill of Rights in 1689) and the rise of nationalist sentiment in Scotland (the Scotland Act in 1998).

The particular evolution of any geo-constitution will obviously vary enormously in each national case, but attending to the geography of political institutions and their inter-relationships can facilitate historically-sophisticated analysis as well as comparison between different cases. At a time when there is renewed enthusiasm for political reform in the geography of political institutions and their inter-relationships in a number of very different contexts, there is an opportunity to bring this geographical perspective to bear on wider debates. Moreover, there is a growing body of research outside human geography, in the field of international political-economy that is doing just this (Faguet, 2014; Fischer, 2016; Heller, 2001).

Scholars in political science have been looking at the geo-constitutionalism of political power and its impact in different countries through a combination of research methods and comparative techniques for a long period of time. As Faguet (2014, 3) explains, in his introduction to an account of projects exploring the impact of decentralization in Argentina, Brazil, China, Colombia and Mexico, this work involves: “a detailed knowledge of the institutional, historical, and economic characteristics of a country (or state or region) ... combined with quantitative research on subnational units of analysis, such as municipalities or provinces. By blending deep qualitative knowledge with rigorous quantitative research methods, researchers can approach the elusive goal of explanations that have both generality and a fine-grained, nuanced understanding”. In this case, the projects were focused on understanding the historical-geography of state institutions and their political effects before then looking at the impact of state-led decentralization in each national example, mapping the way that legacy mediates but does not fully determine outcomes that depend on party systems and political incentives including financial arrangements, as well as the degree of openness in relation to civil society organisation (Faguet, 2014; Weingast, 2014). This work illuminates the potential to develop in-depth but comparative analyses of the geography of political institutions and their effects in a range of different contexts, and it has significant implications for the kind of geographical research that could be done around the concept of the geo-constitution in future. In this regard, I look at the case of the UK in the following section.

#### **IV The geo-constitution as a framework for understanding political reform**

In many parts of the world there is growing concern about an apparent ‘crisis’ in the salience and support for democracy. To some extent, this sense of crisis is inevitable as a good democracy will

always feel uncertain as its people organise from below, challenging its leaders to act in new ways in circumstances that are always changing faster than can be accommodated by institutions and their elected representatives (Fukuyama, 2014; Runciman, 2015). Despite this, however, there is a sense in which our political institutions, practices and cultures are particularly out-of-sync with prevailing forms of social organisation and popular culture. The rise of populist parties and politicians and the growing impact of social media are fuelling calls for institutional change (Chawalisz, 2015). There is also a growing tide of support for non-democratic polities that deliver for their people despite the lack of popular voice and sovereignty (Carothers, 2006).

In this context, it is hardly surprising that there have been growing demands for political reform from within and without mainstream political structures in many parts of the world. Governments, political activists, academics and think tanks have been advocating a mixed suite of reforms in order to try and (re)enchant democracy and (re)engage people in political life. State-led reforms have been focused on efforts to decentralize political decision-making as well as identifying new institutional innovations that might capture popular interest. In addition, various organisations have proposed more radical measures to create spaces and opportunities for greater citizen-led deliberation in political life (Chawalisz, 2015; Fishkin, 1991; Smith, 2009). Such efforts are focused on improving the relationships between politicians and the public, combining institutional reform with new forms of practice. Echoing the arguments made by John Stuart Mill [1806-1873] more than 150 years ago, many of these interventions seek to create opportunities for democratic engagement by bringing political organisation and decision making closer to the people through decentralisation (Mill, 1861; see also Dahl and Tufte, 1974; Pateman, 1970).

In this regard, support for devolution and localism has been growing in many parts of the world for some considerable time (De Vries, 2000; Faguet, 2014; Fung and Wright, 2003; Treisman, 2007). In many ways, these efforts to reconfigure the geography of government are conceived as a counterpoint to the strong role played by the national state in welfare in the years since WWII (Bennett, 1990) but these developments also encompass countries that never had strong welfare regimes such as Argentina, Brazil and India (Faguet, 2014). These developments are also an echo of a number of radical movements that took off in the 1960s and 1970s whereby people sought to create new local institutions through which to organise poor communities in urban and rural areas in both rich and poor parts of the world (Looker, 2012; Newman, 2012; Schumacher, 1973). In each national context there is a different balance between state-led and bottom-up drivers for reform. This is certainly the case in the UK where demands for greater national and regional sovereignty underpinned the creation of new government institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland during the early 2000s. More recent reform in England, however, to foster localism and city-regional devolution, has

been more connected with perceived failings of the state to deliver good government as well as the need to better manage resources as a contribution to the austerity drive (O'Brien and Pike, 2015; Wills, 2016).

This national policy agenda has attracted considerable academic attention and there is a growing body of published work by human geographers that seeks to explore the rationale and impact of devolution and localism in the UK. This literature has tended to focus either on the ideological implications of this agenda (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Featherstone et al, 2012; Penny, 2016; Tait and Inch, 2016) or its practical strengths and weaknesses (Rodriguez-Pose and Gill, 2005; Tomaney, 2016). Scholars have highlighted its relationship with conservative thought, neo-liberalism and austerity, as well as its limitations in scale and significance. These perspectives reflect the dominance of approaches designed to critique liberal institutions and/or highlight the social over the political, but they fail to address institutional matters in any great depth.

As suggested above, the concept of the geo-constitution can help to provide an alternative view. It highlights the extent to which current policy is shaped by the historical-political-geography of state institutions and the divisions of political power between them. This, in turn, shapes the nature of government and the expectations and practices of citizenship, past, present and future. In relation to contemporary policy development in the UK, the recent moves to devolve and localise power thus need to be understood in the context of the path-dependent historical-geography of government institutions over a much longer time period than is usually the case in the research work completed by human geographers.

Although there is not space to cover the history of political institutions in the UK in any depth here, an overview of the key phases of institutional development and their implications for the geography of statecraft and citizenship are outlined in Table 2. As indicated, there used to be a greater role for parish-scale government, partly through necessity as the capacity of the central state was weak, but since the early nineteenth century, there has been a strong process of centralisation. Local government was subject to ever-greater central intervention in the pursuit of national standards and outcomes. This desire for standardisation was at its peak during the twentieth century and was most clearly demonstrated in the legislative reforms made by national governments in 1945-1951 (Labour), 1979-1997 (Conservative) and 1997-2010 (New Labour). As might be predicted, the British electorate came to expect national standards of service delivery, and this was reinforced by the dominance of national political parties in the operation of local government. People have tended to vote locally on the basis of national partisan affiliations (Bulpitt, 1983; Bogdanor, 2009; Copus, 2004; Loughlin, 2013). Despite the façade of democracy, local government was largely reduced to being

part of the national administrative state, managed by politicians who reflected the views of their national political parties and paymasters, and it lost political credibility and local affection as a result.

**Table 2: The shifting geo-constitution of the British state, from the seventeenth century**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Regime</b>	<b>The major political tradition</b>	<b>The institutional infrastructure of the state</b>	<b>The geography of power relations</b>	<b>The 'civic offer' to citizens</b>
C17th C18th	Juridical	Conservative	Crown, parish, borough	Semi-autonomous localism	To be self-appointed and anointed guardians of order; to serve.
C19th	Governmental	Liberal	Parliament, local authorities (county, city, borough, district)	Central oversight of local expansion	For some: to vote, join a party, stand for office.
C20th	Welfarist	Social democratic	Government, parliament, civil service, local authorities	Centralisation	Universal: to vote, join a party, stand for office, join a movement.
C21st	Localist	Liberal-republican/institutional	Government, parliament, civil service, local authorities, state-funded bodies, civic organisations.	Towards subsidiarity, dispersed away from the centre	Universal: to vote, join a party, stand for office, organise, negotiate, co-produce.

Source: see Wills (2016) for a fuller explication of this table and its contents

While contemporary politicians may declare their ambitions to localise power and reconnect with the citizenry, the geo-constitution means that they face major challenges in achieving their ends. First, there is only weak governmental capacity for localism and very little popular experience of local political autonomy. If they exist, local political institutions are very weak with little autonomy, authority or responsibility. Second, the electorate have been encouraged to expect standardised services across the country as promised to them by national political parties. As such, there is an entrenched centralisation in the British geo-constitution, its political practices, culture and the production of citizenship. Added to this, national politicians are all too eager to wade in to micro-manage the affairs of local government and the people expect them to do so. Although increasing numbers of people now recognise the limits of centralisation and its effects on local democracy, autonomy and civic engagement, overcoming these historically and experientially-entrenched hurdles (or path-dependencies) is very hard to achieve.

In order to research the development of efforts to foster greater localism in England I conducted four different case studies through which to look at the development of both state-led and

community-led localism between 2012 and 2015; a neighbourhood community budget, the work of a local authority, neighbourhood planning and community organising (Wills, 2016). Unexpectedly, all of these projects exposed the lack of local political institutions in urban areas. Most of the English population live in urban areas which lost their parish or neighbourhood political institutions at the time of rapid industrialisation during the nineteenth century and as many as three-quarters of the population do not currently have access to this level of government (NALC, 2015; Poole and Keith-Lucas, 1994). As urban areas grew, their political boundaries were expanded and the old parish-scale structures were superseded by new borough and metropolitan authorities. As national government became more muscular during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this further eroded the local basis of political institutions and decision making through a process of centralisation. While rural areas retained their parishes, these bodies became much weaker with powers moving up to larger units of government and in many instances, local decisions can now be blocked by those taken 'above'. The research thus highlighted pressing questions about the distribution, role and operation of town and parish councils – the most local tier of government – and their inter-relationships with other levels of government machinery.

Whatever the ideological merits of devolution and localism, and a case can be made from both ends of the political spectrum (Featherstone et al, 2012; Williams et al, 2014), this policy reform can never be realised without local political institutions around which people can exercise decision making about their locality. While geographers have usefully highlighted the spatial unevenness of civil society organisations across space, thereby highlighting the extent to which community capacity is highly uneven and likely to widen further under conditions of greater localisation (Mohan, 2011; Clifford, 2012), there is a much bigger issue to be faced in relation to the geo-constitution and its legacies for political practice today. Without a legitimate institutional infra-structure to represent the diversity of local people, to identify shared issues and concerns, to articulate and mobilise around these, and to negotiate with other power-brokers in the locality, meaningful localism is impossible. As such, my research highlighted the need for new institutions and the recalibration of power relations between existing institutions, or a reconstitution of the geo-constitution, if localism was to be realised in any meaningful way.

My research exposed the extent to which a lack of local political institutions and effective relationships with the wider institutional structure stymied the decentralisation of political power, authority and decision making. Taking a geo-constitutional perspective to understand devolution and localism highlighted the importance of the geography of political institutions and their path-dependent impact on practice, expectations and behaviour. As such, this concept of the geo-

constitution could be deployed further in making cross-national comparisons as well as strengthening the contribution made by geographers to what is, rightly, cross-disciplinary work.

## **V Conclusions**

This paper has made the case that academics and policy-makers, and human geographers in particular, pay greater attention to the role of political institutions as being distinct from the socio-cultural context in which they sit. I have argued that the concept of the geo-constitution provides one way of doing this work. This concept has been developed to: (1) highlight the importance of intersections between geography and political institutions in the constitution of national government; (2) consider the path-dependent development of political institutions and their impact on statecraft and citizenship; (3) explore the implications of this for political reform.

The geo-constitution is a concept that was developed as a result of my own efforts to understand efforts to promote devolution and localism in the UK and the reasons why it was proving so difficult to reconfigure the geography of statecraft and citizenship. It provided a framework for illuminating the importance of the geography of political institutions, the way they shape political relationships and decision making, and their stubborn impact on political outcomes. It also exposed the limits of existing research in human geography that has tended to have an *a priori* antipathy to liberal institutions and to prioritise radical social movements over the development and operation of mainstream political institutions. With parallels to work in economic geography, the notion of the geo-constitution demands that greater attention is paid to political institutions and their effects; that political geography has its own 'institutional turn'.

Looking ahead, it would be valuable to develop research programmes to explore the ways in which different geo-constitutional arrangements shape experiences of politics, government and citizenship and how this impacts on the prospects for reform. There are significant opportunities for geographers to deploy the concept of the geo-constitution in highlighting the intersection of geography and politics in different contexts today. As I have tried to do in relation to reform in the UK, the concept can be used to enhance the way in which academics and policy makers think about and embark on institutional reform, reminding us of the extent to which politics is always constituted geographically with major consequences for behaviour, expectations and the scope for change. A geographical imagination can bring important insight into a fast-changing policy field that is designed to reconfigure the geography of political power. There is a great deal at stake and a great deal that political geographers can bring to the table.

## Notes

1 Locality is a national network of hundreds of community-led organisations in England. In 2017, the charity worked with Power to Change to hold a Commission on the Future of Localism, chaired by Sir Bob Kerslake, to meet and consider evidence about the emerging localism policy regime and areas for improvement. The seven commissioners included representatives from community-led organisations, politicians and the academy. The final report was launched in January 2018. The report, entitled *People Power*, contained a number of ideas for future policy work but much of the argument focused on the need to change the culture of government (see: <http://locality.org.uk/our-work/policy/localism-commission/>). At the time of writing, the second stage of the project is being designed around a number of action research projects to explore different ways of political decision making and fostering public engagement.

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