



Keystone Institutions of Democratic Governance Across Indigenous North America

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Defining and examining democracy in non-Western contexts is a conceptual challenge. This is largely because scholars of contemporary political systems outside of anthropology can envision no alternative pathways other than Western expressions of democracy. Such thinking inhibits our understanding of past, and indeed future, democratic systems. In this paper, we argue that there is no such thing as a “democracy,” but rather there are institutions that facilitate democratic governance. More specifically, we argue that in Indigenous North America “keystone institutions” facilitated complex institutional arrangements and broad participation by a citizenry in the distribution of power and authority. While these characteristics define such Western democratic institutions as the Athenian assembly, the Icelandic Althing, or the U.S. Congress, we argue that comparable keystone institutions of governance can be identified across Indigenous North America. To illustrate these points, we provide a series of cases that demonstrate the variability in the forms that democratic keystone institutions might take. We specifically focus on axes of variability related to the scale and scope of participation facilitated by each institution, the degree to which the institutions distribute power equitably, and the complexity and formality of the institutional arrangements held together by the keystone institution. Importantly, we argue that the concept of the keystone institution as an analytical tool for seeking out the emergence and role of democratic forms of governance transcends the utility of dichotomous categories such as Western/non-Western or state/non-state that limit productive comparative frameworks and the inclusion of non-traditional case studies of democracy in global conversations.

Keywords: democracy, institutions, Indigenous, North America, archaeology, collective action

INTRODUCTION

Conventional scholarship places the beginnings of democracy in the West (Muhlberger and Paine, 1993, p. 23). As Chou and Beausoleil (2015, p. 1) reflect, democracy’s past and future “is one premised on the export of democratic institutions, developed within a particular cultural context in the West, that has as its culmination the end of history and the triumph of Western liberal democracy in all corners of the globe.” There seems to be no version of this history in which the West does not play a leading role in the formation and development of democratic governance. Yet,

as we argue here, there are many examples of democratic institutions that play critical roles in non-Western societies, and in some cases such institutions influenced those very bastions of ancestral democracies held by scholars as the origin of Western political traditions. In fact, in Graeber and Wengrow's (2021) recent book, they point out that non-Western forms of democratic practices and institutions are everywhere one looks in terms of the archaeological literature, from state-level societies, like those of central Mexico, the Indus Valley, or Mesopotamia, to the Haudenosaunee of northeastern North America.

The inclusion of non-Western expressions of democracy within broader intellectual discourse remains a conceptual challenge, largely because scholars of contemporary political systems continue to argue that there are "no democratic alternatives to what is routinely called the Western model of democracy, only non-democratic ones" (Alexander, 2005, p. 159; cf. Isakhan and Stockwell, 2011; Przeworski, 2015; Youngs, 2015a,b). In this sense, theorizing about such conditions has translated into common sense, and it has become difficult to imagine a democratic past and future that can be disentangled from Western iterations (Zakaria, 1997, p. 26). This is despite the well-documented evidence for many sorts of democratic institutions, particularly in the Middle East, India, China, and Africa, both contemporary (e.g., Soroush, 2000; Jenco, 2010; Isakhan and Stockwell, 2011; March, 2013; Lamont et al., 2015) and archaeologically/historically (see Blanton and Fargher, 2008, 2011, 2016; Blanton et al., 2021).

As a response to such conceptual constraints, researchers of comparative politics have routinely focused on long-established conceptions of core democratic principles such as the rule of law, popular sovereignty, and freedom or liberty as important foundations for democratic theorizing (Chou and Beausoleil, 2015, p. 2). Archaeologists have focused on developing frameworks to evaluate the many dimensions and range of collective strategies employed by pre-modern states, both Western and non-Western, and the ways that these strategies can be translated for cross-cultural and cross-temporal comparison (e.g., Blanton and Fargher, 2016; Blanton et al., 2021). As Zakaria (1997, p. 24) poses in reference to contemporary discourse on modern democracies: "Western liberal democracy might prove to be not the final destination, but just one of many possible exits." From an archaeological and historical perspective, we alter this statement, and suggest that, similarly, Western conceptions of democracy might not be the singular trailhead of the democratic path, but one of many possible democratic starting points.

In this article, we review and compare the historical contexts, development, characteristics, and mechanics of institutions of democratic governance across four regions of Indigenous North America. While recently scholars have issued challenges to Western-centric narratives of democracy, few have considered the institutions of non-state societies as forms of democratic governance. Such institutions are often relegated to processes of "cooperation" or "egalitarianism" in the context of studies that seek to illuminate the development of generalized human behaviors (e.g., Trigger, 1990; Stanish, 2017). Indeed, the term "government" itself is rarely used to describe non-state political

apparatuses (*sensu* Giddens, 1985; Carballo et al., 2012; Roscoe, 2013). Consequently, state-level societies remain the focus of the robust analytical frameworks that have been developed to examine the forms, characters, and "goodness" of governments across archaeological and historical cases (e.g., Blanton and Fargher, 2016; Blanton et al., 2021). By framing the study of democratic institutions as a historical question that does not necessarily begin with the state, we provide a starting point for a more critical inclusion of non-state forms of governance. More importantly, we introduce the concept of the keystone institution to highlight the important, central role that democratic institutions often play in binding together webs of institutional arrangements and to explore when, where, and why democratic institutions sometimes fulfill these roles over other forms of hierarchical, autocratically organized governments.

One of the main challenges that we wish to overcome is the tendency to apply generalizations of what is or is not democratic that, based on varying and often changing criteria, are at times either overly ambiguous or wildly constraining. Such definitions may depend on systems of representation, notions of liberty and freedom, or in some cases the presence of institutions that facilitate direct vote. These debates and descriptions often regard democracy as a characteristic of society. We argue, however, that democracy in this regard does not exist. Rather, there are only institutions, organizations of people that carry out objectives using regularized practices and norms, labor, and resources (Holland-Lulewicz et al., 2020, p. 1), that facilitate democratic forms of governance. That is, particular institutions, built and maintained by individuals and groups, are responsible for giving democratic character to a particular form of governance. Such institutions accomplish this by facilitating wide participation in processes of governance and/or providing a mechanism for the equitable distribution of power and authority. Keystone institutions do so through their ability to crosscut and bind together complex institutional arrangements. Such arrangements may include disparate, diverse, sometimes autonomous, and sometimes contentious positionalities. Despite this diversity and the potential for dissonance, both keystone institutions and those institutions or persons they bind together constitute the structural basis of society, though such structures are of course always negotiable and subject to historical and processual change. As in the ecological sense, keystone institutions are critical to the success, sustainability, and life of a given sociopolitical system. We argue that this keystone characteristic is a defining feature of democratic institutions that can be empirically identified across contemporary, historical, and archaeological cases and, as an analytical tool, can facilitate productive cross-cultural comparison.

Herein the remainder of this article, we first review the major tenets of an institutional approach and introduce the concept of the keystone institution, with particular attention to its utility in exploring forms of governance. We then provide four case studies from across Indigenous North America with the goal of formally comparing the roles and histories of democratic keystone institutions within a range of non-Western, non-state institutional arrangements. More specifically, we argue that democratic institutions often emerge as keystone institutions that

serve to integrate, manage, and maintain complex institutional constellations. Finally, we pose that the concept of the keystone institution as an analytical tool for describing the emergence, roles, and variability of democratic forms of governance is useful in transcending the utility of dichotomous categories that limit more inclusive comparative frameworks.

KEYSTONE INSTITUTIONS

Institutions are defined here as organizations of people that carry out objectives using regularized practices and norms, labor, and resources (Holland-Lulewicz et al., 2020, p. 1; Kowalewski and Birch, 2020). This definition aligns with what Douglass North (1990, p. 73) refers to as organizations: purposive entities designed by their creators to emphasize objectives defined by the opportunities afforded by the structure of society. As a note, while our definition aligns with North's organizations, his use of the term institution refers to the structures, norms, or "rules of the game" that actually structure such social, political, or economic interactions (North, 1990). Rom Harré (1979) defined institutions as "...an interlocking double-structure of persons-as-role holders or office-bearers and the like, and of social practices involving both expressive and practice-based aims and outcomes." Blanton and Fargher (2016, p. 41), in their work on comparative governance in pre-modern and modern states explicitly focus on institutions, noting that particular "groups" are defined by the "network of individuals who participate in a system of activities specified by the charter of a particular domain-purposed institution." They go on to note that in complex societies there will be multiple different institutional contexts for cooperation that sit side by side (Blanton and Fargher, 2016, p. 41). Holland-Lulewicz et al. (2020) describe what they refer to as "institutional constellations" or "arrangements," the totality of institutions, and the relationships between institutions, that give form to society. Similar to Blanton and Fargher (2016), we choose here to focus on the emergence, development, form, character, maintenance, and roles of institutions that facilitate inclusive modes of government, and that serve to mediate and discourage the centralization of power or authority around any single individual, role, or entity.

Beyond individual institutions however, the real power of an institutional approach lies in its recognition that the properties of individual institutions are just as important to understand as the overall arrangement of institutions, the complexity and form of their arrangement, and the ways they articulate with one another in broad institutional constellations. Indeed, Kowalewski and Birch (2020, p. 30) argue that what is often called "society" is actually the arrangement of interactions among institutions, "the push and pull between institutions having their own objectives". Referencing archaeological approaches, they go on to point out how archaeological information on institutions is often hidden by conceptual packages like "cultures," types of "societies," or particular "modes of production" (Kowalewski and Birch, 2020, p. 34). In this way, in archaeology an institutional approach allows us to avoid abstraction and misplaced reification of particular concepts (Kowalewski and Birch, 2020, p. 34). In this

regard, we might apply this same logic to the use of "democracy" as a conceptual unit. Abstract, misplaced concreteness of "democracy" as a meaningful analytical concept actually obscures the institutions that facilitate democratic governance. In this way, "democracies" do not emerge or fail. Instead, institutions are built, managed, and transformed through human action.

Societies are typically composed of a range of institutions that deal with distinct realms of decision-making and objectives (Bondarenko et al., 2020; Holland-Lulewicz et al., 2020; Kowalewski and Birch, 2020). Kowalewski and Birch (2020, p. 38) argue that diminishing the diversity of institutions, or over-centralizing their functions (e.g., in a totalitarian arrangement), means that success in addressing critical problems will be diminished. Keystone institutions that are totalizing in their nature, attempting to bind institutions together through autocratic control, may be more fragile and inflexible than institutional arrangements that consist of many distinct parts, articulated with one another in complex ways. Indeed, Kowalewski and Birch (2020, p. 40) use the example of the strength of a single, thick filament against the strength of a braided cable. Keystone institutions are the central tether to which other institutions are braided, bound, or otherwise articulated. When these keystone institutions serve as the point of governance, a product of this braiding process is the opportunity and potential for widespread participation in governance and the distribution of power and authority among distinct, though interconnected, institutions via the keystone institution, key principles and characteristics of democratic governance.

Drawing on our four cases from across Indigenous North America, we pose that forms of governance can be analyzed, measured, and defined by their roles as "keystone institutions." Of course, many institutions that may be considered keystone institutions might not facilitate the democratic forms of interaction described above (e.g., the totalitarian state from Kowalewski and Birch, 2020). While not all keystone institutions may be collective or democratic in character, in our brief review of the literature it does seem that such institutions play a critical role in premodern societies in North America and elsewhere that were invested in inclusive governance. Importantly, keystone institutions themselves may vary along a spectrum of internal organization and in the ways that they bind together institutional arrangements. That is, there is variation in how broadly participation is afforded to a citizenry, the actual nature of that participation, and in how well or widely power and authority are actually distributed. For example, a given government, such as a contemporary federal government, may facilitate extremely wide participation in the process of governance, but this participation may, for example, be primarily limited to voting. Citizen voice, interest, and sentiment may have negligible effect on actual policy outcomes (Gilens and Page, 2014). So, while participation is broad, the actual distribution of power may be quite narrow, with real authority vested in a limited number of representatives across a relatively small number of interconnected institutions. This is of course not always the case, and as researchers have effectively demonstrated, there are many cases where federal governments provide a range of mechanisms beyond voting that facilitate effective participation and serve as "good

governance” (e.g., Blanton and Fargher, 2008; Blanton et al., 2021). Further, even keystone institutions that facilitate citizen voice may not impinge on the ability of individuals to amass power and navigate institutional arrangements that facilitate self-interested motives and objectives. As we will explore, certain forms of hierarchy and inequity in balances of power are not necessarily effectively mediated through democratic governance. Indeed, these axes of variation can be compared across both culturally and historically diverse cases, across space and time, and regardless of arbitrary categorizations (e.g., the West v. the rest) or misplaced reifications of overgeneralizations (e.g., democratic or not).

INDIGENOUS NORTH AMERICA

In the following North American case studies, we illustrate instances in which keystone institutions emerged and served to integrate complex institutional constellations that, in turn, facilitated “democracy.” In each case, democratic arrangements of institutions emerged that encouraged broad governance through the effective linking and cross-cutting of component institutions. In the southeast, councils emerged across Muskogean-speaking communities as a way to integrate disparate decision-making institutions at multiple sociopolitical scales. Among Northern Iroquoian societies in the northeast, an intricate clan system served as the socio-structural architecture for democratically-based institutions of governance. Across the Puebloan Southwest, a network of religious sodalities emerged as a way to integrate diverse populations and disperse sociopolitical power. And in the Coast Salish region of the northwest, we explore a case where keystone institutions were situational, neither fixed in time nor space, but durable nonetheless, tied to the potlatches hosted by multi-family corporate Houses, events that served to regulate and make possible a system of decentralized, autonomous institutions. For each case, we review the mechanics of each institution as keystone institutions, and the materiality of these institutions, namely architecture, that would have facilitated and inscribed the actual institutionalization of democratic practice.

Ancestral Muskogean Councils of the Southeast

Today, the Muscogee Nation lies within the bounds of the modern state of Oklahoma. However, for thousands of years, Ancestral Muskogean peoples occupied the Southern Appalachian region and south through the modern states of Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. Ancestral Muskogean refers to both the people who lived in this region and who spoke various forms of the Muskogean language family. Because many of these groups built and used councils as a form of governance and as an institution of consensus-building, we refer to the genealogies of these institutions as Ancestral Muskogean, though we use archaeological, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic accounts of councils from sources primarily derived from members and ancestors of the Muscogee Nation specifically (see Thompson et al., 2022).

Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri’s (2001, p. 68–73) *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks* provides a valuable account of Ancestral Muskogean political institutions. They note that one of the most important tasks of Ancestral Muskogean governance is maintaining harmony within the community. In recognizing the constraints of classic collective action problems, noting that differences in perceptions, personalities, and interests are the perennial seeds of social conflict, modes of Ancestral Muskogean governance provide solutions to these problems through specific social and political institutions and their representatives. While the “laws of nature” provide a set of primary guiding principles for behavior, engagements, and decision-making, the secondary principle of Ancestral Muskogean governance is that of democratic consensus and is meant to clarify the remaining ambiguities of the political landscape. The main institution responsible for such processes, composed of interlinked centers of decision-making, with checks and balances intended to facilitate wide participation in social and political life, and to avoid the development of a permanent political elite, is that of the council.

Council houses are circular in form and range between 12 and 37 m in diameter, able to host hundreds of people (Thompson, 2009). Council houses have been identified archaeologically across the Ancestral Muskogean homeland over long periods of time, with the earliest known council houses dating to at least the sixth century CE (Thompson et al., 2022). Ethnohistoric accounts from the sixteenth century describe the intricately structured interiors of these buildings, with particular seating arrangements and detailed histories painted upon the walls (Shapiro and Hahn, 1990, p. 512). The emergence of the council house was likely associated with the broader appearance of the ceremonial square ground, a particular arrangement of settlement features including mounds, plazas, council houses, and other attendant structures (Thompson et al., 2022; though such square grounds sometimes do not include attendant, permanent architecture or earthen constructions and may predate the emergence of council houses in the region). Square grounds continue to operate today among descendant communities and council houses continue to be used as forums for civic engagement in political processes.

We argue that the council emerged as a keystone institution in the sixth century CE and continues to serve to organize a complicated entanglement of disparate, situational decision-making bodies (Thompson et al., 2022). The emergence of these institutions was contextualized by increased sedentism, intensified intra- and inter-regional interactions, and the nascent formalization of villages/communities as indicated by the emergence of the classic form of the Ancestral Muskogean square ground. We argue that the council as a democratically-based keystone institution works to coordinate multiple, overlapping, informal, and potentially competing institutions including those of individuals, households, lineages, corporate groups, sodalities, and/or clans.

As Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri (2001, p. 75–80) describe, the institution of the council provides a formalized space for decisions of community councils, regional councils, clan mothers, beloved men and women, and other community members drawn from a diverse set of autonomous institutions

to be made after conferences in which conflicting views are discussed. In this way, decision-making is explicitly non-hierarchical and does not involve the vertical alignment of superior/inferior relationships. While *mekkos* (often interpreted by the Spanish as meaning chief) have been wholesale translated by archaeologists as serving classic chiefly roles, their political powers were limited and constrained as members of the council. Indeed, *mekkos* were more akin to executives of the council, whose service was to uphold the principles and decisions decided on through council-based decision-making. *Mekkos* lacked an inherent source of authority outside of the context of the council (Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri, 2001, p. 79–80). Additionally, at the regional level, different kinds of *mekkos* and different scales of councils replicated across discrete communities and regions were not beholden to one another in any hierarchical scheme like the ethnographically derived concept of the chiefdom would imply.

In Ancestral Muskogean societies, councils served as keystone institutions that bound together and negotiated collective action among potentially competing realms of situational decision-making (i.e., households, lineages, Tribal towns, regions, clans). As institutions, they provide a political space for participants within a given network (or set of nested networks) to come together to participate in the process of government. Representatives are drawn from and represent cross-cutting lineages, clans, households, and communities, with the result that each were (and are) represented within the council as a whole. Voices are heard, discussed, and considered until consensus is reached. As the *mekko* represents a particular role within the context of the council, the *mekkos* themselves serve at the will and service of the council and of the general populace who participate in the system of governance. Indeed, the *mekko* was likely not a hereditary position. Instead, this role was filled on the basis of personal qualities, competency, and potential to effectively take on the responsibilities of the role. As such, the council house is a physical representation and formalization of entanglements between different decision-making circles and individuals with varying degrees of power, authority, and representation. It is also a durable, physical symbol of the checks put in place on those seeking to exercise power beyond what is afforded to them by society. It is likely that increasing tensions between such circles and the nascent emergence (or potential for the emergence) of sociopolitical and economic inequality, as well as the need to maintain newly emphasized geographic boundaries, led to the formation of the permanent institution of democratic governance that continues to prove successful today, ca. 1,500 years later (Thompson et al., 2022).

Northern Iroquoian Clans

The term Northern Iroquoian refers to both a linguistic group and a cultural pattern shared by populations who historically occupied the Lower Great Lakes, Finger Lakes, and Susquehanna and St. Lawrence River Valleys of northeastern North America. These groups were primarily the ancestors of the contemporary Huron-Wendat Nation, Nations formerly comprising the Haudenosaunee confederacy, and various Wyandot communities in Canada and the United States. From the seventeenth century onwards, Europeans referred

to these societies as the Huron, Iroquois, Erie, Neutral, and Susquehannock, although other Iroquoian-speaking populations were also present in the eastern North American landscape.

Prior to the colonial era, Northern Iroquoians lived in villages comprised of longhouses, often surrounded by palisade walls. The longhouse-based extended family was the basic unit of production and consumption. Longhouses were occupied by groups of related women, together with their spouses and children. Titles and names were inherited through the female line and although matrilineal residence was the norm, males in high-ranking lineages remained in their natal homes (Trigger, 1978). In the seventeenth century, Iroquoian peoples were organized into multiple political confederacies. Each confederacy was comprised of allied Nations, consisting of one or more village-communities that occupied distinct settlement clusters. Villages, nations, and the confederacy all held councils, which were typically held in the longhouses of influential lineages. The keystone institution that cross-cut and bound all of the aforementioned institutional arrangements—from the household to the confederacy—was the clan.

Clans did not govern in and of themselves. Rather, they structured the function of institutions of interdependence and governance throughout the Iroquoian world. As such, the social and structural architecture of good government (as per Blanton et al., 2021) was facilitated by the scaffolding of the clan system. Clans help to balance collective action and autonomy in flexible ways that permitted both political freedom and political equality, essential qualities of democracy (Munck, 2016).

The clan as a social-structural construct likely emerged in the Archaic period (~8,000–1,000 BC) of the eastern Woodlands in order to facilitate relations among social groups spread widely across the landscape (Anderson, 2002; Thomas et al., 2005). Clans may have initially emerged as a means of structuring relations and interactions among dispersed peoples and their periodic aggregations. However, when people came together to form permanent villages, the functions of clans remained essentially the same: providing a basis for rules of interaction, categories of relatedness, expectations regarding cooperation and reciprocity, and roles in ritual and political institutions and events. In this way, these clans may be among the most durable *and* flexible institutions in Indigenous North America.

As keystone institutions, clans structured participation in institutions of governance. Leadership was heritable within clans and both male and female positions of authority were associated with names passed down from generation to generation within the clan (Wonderley and Sempowski, 2019, p. 6); both achieved and ascribed status were recognized (Trigger, 1976; LaBelle, 2013). Both men and women held their own councils. Male clan representatives were nominated by senior women of the clan (Fenton, 1998, p. 215). Women's—and especially clan mothers'—counsel was a prerequisite for all manner of political action in Iroquoian society, including decisions about warfare and external relations (Magee, 2008).

Each clan segment had civil and military leaders who sat on political councils that discussed and made decisions about domestic and external affairs at multiple social and spatial

scales. Among both the Wendat and the Haudenosaunee, clans historically controlled seats on the confederacy council (Tooker, 1964, p. 43; Morgan, 1851, p. 61). Although council seats were distributed within the Nation (Fenton, 1998), it was the clan who determined which individual was elevated to those positions. Clan representatives held a considerable amount of influence. However, the balance between clans ensured that no one individual or group accrued too much power. Members of a village or Nation may agree that the leader of a clan segment could represent them, but that did not give the representative any right to interfere in the affairs of any clan segment but his own (Trigger, 1976, p. 58). This ensured that decision-making remained consensus-based, and that the ability to achieve both collective action at a distance and preserve local autonomy remained intact.

The social-structural groupings of clans into moieties and phratries permitted larger-scale divisions for ceremonial and political reasons. Moieties allowed multiple clans to come together to form a dual division. Phratries functioned in essentially the same way but split the population into three groups. The Relation of 1648 suggests that there were “three principal Captains” of the Huron-Wendat, an interpretation bolstered by later historic sources (Steckley, 1982, p. 29). These phratry representatives were involved in an elaborate negotiation to repair diplomatic ties between the Huron-Wendat and the Jesuits involving gifts given by Huron-Wendat clan segments and phratry heads to the Jesuits, and from the Jesuits to the representatives of the eight Huron-Wendat clans (Trigger, 1976, p. 749). The involvement of multiple articulations of clan segment, clan, and phratry leadership in these negotiations speaks to the flexibility and durability of the clan as a keystone institution.

Totalizing, strongly centralized institutions are less effective than cross-cutting and interdependent institutions when it comes to achieving societal goals (Kowalewski and Birch, 2020). Blanton et al. (2021) argue that cooperative, collective, democratic, or consensus-based institutions will function as “good governance” primarily by integrating, aligning, or quelling tension between the disparate and overlapping institutions that comprise society. In this way, Iroquoian clans functioned as keystone institutions that created strong social webs of good governance as opposed to tall towers.

Sodalities of the Puebloan Southwest

The Puebloan towns of the southwestern U.S. are concentrated, and have been so for over 1,000 years, in the four corners region, though primarily across northeastern and east-central Arizona and northwestern and west-central New Mexico. At the time of European contact in the sixteenth century, across dozens of towns, seven mutually unintelligible languages from four unique language groups were being spoken, six of these languages continue to be spoken today among contemporary Puebloan towns (Ware, 2014, p. 21). The practices, traditions, languages, and histories of these towns did not constitute a monolithic culture. Yet, for 2,000 years, these communities lived among one another, linked together through a complex arrangement of familial, residential, and non-kin-based institutions organized

in a way to facilitate a balanced system of governance both within communities and between autonomous towns through an integrated and accommodating system of secret societies and religious cults known as sodalities. These sodalities served as keystone institutions, facilitating the diverse participation in the livelihood and survival of Puebloan towns and mediating the distribution of political, ritual, and economic power across a mosaic social landscape.

Generally, Puebloan towns can be split into the Eastern and Western Pueblos. The Western Pueblos of eastern Arizona (e.g., Hopi) and west-central New Mexico (e.g., Zuni) remained primarily bound together through systems of kin over many generations. The Eastern Pueblos along the Rio Grande river however, saw the de-emphasis of kin-based institutions in favor of a system of non-kin-based sodalities at some point in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, though they may have played key roles within these Puebloan societies as early as the seventh or eighth century (Ware, 2018a, p. 272, 2014, p. 131). Sodalities, also referred to as secret societies or ritual societies/cults, were present across all Puebloan towns. While their primary responsibility is to manage communal rituals, this fundamentally extended to the management of many secular aspects of community governance (Ortiz, 1969; Ware, 2018b, p. 652–653).

There existed, and still exist, dozens of sodalities, each tasked with particular ritual and/or secular responsibilities. Most of these sodalities have a home pueblo, that is, the origins of particular sodalities can be traced back to particular pueblos, where the secret knowledge requisite for membership continues to be held (Ware, 2018b, p. 652). As such, most sodalities have “chapters” in each of the Puebloan towns, and new members often must travel to the appropriate originating town for training, sometimes even performing rituals and religious rites in the language of the originating town (Ware, 2018a, p. 273, 2018b, p. 653). Most importantly, membership is not determined by kinship or residence. On the contrary, membership fundamentally crosscuts kinship boundaries, critically mediating the potential divisiveness of kin-based contention and factionalism (Ware, 2018b, p. 653). And, as most sodalities are pan-Puebloan, their integrative function extends beyond the boundaries of individual towns.

General consensus among archaeologists posits that sodalities emerged as important keystone institutions sometime between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Their function was to regulate agricultural and irrigation systems, organize political affairs, and integrate diverse populations coalescing in large aggregate towns (Dozier, 1970; Adams, 1991; Ware, 2014, 2018a,b; Mills and Ferguson, 2018; Ortman, 2018; Plog, 2018; Clark et al., 2019). Taking as a point of departure the social history of one town, Tewa, Ortman (2018, p. 72) outlines this process, arguing that sodalities, as non-kin based organizations, first emerged in contexts organized around unilineal kin groups, and that these sodalities gradually supplanted lineage-based forms of governance and organization. This initial emergence of sodalities is associated with the emergence of integrative architecture—kivas—sometime between the eighth and ninth centuries. Kivas likely served as places for dispersed avunculates of matrilineal groups (groups of matrilineally related males,

dispersed across towns and communities through a matrilineal system of residence) to meet and fulfill responsibilities to their lineages (Ware, 2014; Plog, 2018, p. 94). Sometime in the mid-eleventh century, there was a breakdown of the system of descent group ranking and centrality of lineage-based systems of organization, a movement characterized by the transition from closed, kin-based leadership to open, sodality-based leadership once these sodalities detached from their original lineage-based institutions (Ware, 2014, p. 131; Plog, 2018, p. 122–123).

It is likely that ranked descent groups emerged as small farming villages grew throughout the eighth century, and as more groups coalesced, a system of ranking developed based on seniority (Ware, 2014, p. 131). In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, newly independent sodalities began to challenge and eventually usurp the political power and organizational centrality of kin-based groups (Ware, 2014, p. 131). Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, following a rapid expansion of aggregate towns, coalescing in the context of large scale in-migration across the northern Rio Grande, Clark et al. (2019, p. 282) argue that the “elevated importance of sodalities in subordinating lineages and other groups became apparent in the unitary plaza-oriented settlements of the fourteenth-century.” Indeed, they go further, to suggest that “in rejecting hierarchical organizations and emphasizing communal institutions and spaces...” these societies may have been more participatory and inclusive than many contemporary democratic states (Clark et al., 2019, p. 282).

Once central to holding together the complex array of institutional arrangements that defined Puebloan societies, sodalities became responsible for rituals, secular decision-making, rain and water control, curing illness, controlling witchcraft, success in hunting and warfare, maintaining social conformity, and the initiation of youth among many others (Ware, 2018a, p. 272). Internally, sodalities are generally hierarchical, with priests at the top of a limited membership. In regard to governance, the priesthood performs the critical role of appointing, or ratifying the appointment of, all religious and secular leaders (Ware, 2018a, p. 272).

Sodality membership itself is often voluntary, with membership not determined by kinship or residence. As such, the latent function of such groups is to explicitly and effectively bind together those belonging to different residential groups and lineages (Ware, 2014, p. 34–39). In this way, power and authority across the Puebloan world were exercised by groups, not individuals (Ware, 2014, p. 41). Sodalities themselves were ranked, with a single, most important sodality occupying the apical position within the system, with the lead priest of the lead sodality serving as the head priest, and the individual in the community with the most imbued political power (though in many cases, power was shared among a coalition of chiefs and priests; Ware, 2014, p. 67). However, “the power of individual leaders is still held in check by the countervailing power of the ritual associations to which the leaders belong” (Ware, 2014, p. 101) and the power of both sodalities and their leaders was moderated by other ritual sodalities that shared widely the responsibilities of community governance (Ware, 2014, p. 41).

As Ware points out, “cross-culturally, sodalities thrive in multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic contexts, where interethnic

relationships need to be continually negotiated and potential conflicts mediated” (Ware, 2018a, p. 273; also see Lowie, 1954; Little, 1965; Banton, 1968; Sills, 1968; Anderson, 1971). The sodality system of the Puebloan southwest met these challenges as a keystone institution that served to facilitate a form of distributed governance that “cross-cut local communities and crossed language boundaries to form a broad set of regional interactions based on ritual that, among other things, helped to address the inherent risks associated with small, isolated farming populations” (Ware, 2018a, p. 273).

Coast Salish Houses of the Pacific Northwest

Societies of the Northwest Coast of North America, and particularly those of the Coast Salish region of southwestern British Columbia and northwestern Washington, offer another useful example of democratic currents in Indigenous governance. The political systems in place at the time of contact with European nation states, and likely for centuries if not millennia preceding that contact (Angelbeck and Grier, 2012), incorporated both broadly inclusive, bottom-up elements and formal regulating events hosted by particular institutions. In combination, this system acted as a form of non-institutionalized governance (Grier and Angelbeck, 2017). Houses, defined here as in the Straussian sense (see Ames, 2006) as “corporate bodies holding estates made up of material and immaterial wealth perpetuating themselves through the transmission of names, goods, and titles down hereditary lines” (Lévi-Strauss, 1982, p. 174), were the primary socioeconomic units of Coast Salish societies. As keystone institutions, they organized and hosted integrative potlaches at varying intervals that served to drive a situational form of governance that encouraged broad, meaningful participation by constituents.

Coast Salish politics have been described by Angelbeck and Grier (2012) as decentralized, in that regional political systems were essentially composed of various autonomous actors. These actors were typically the heads of large, multifamily households. Though sometimes referred to as “House Chiefs” (e.g., Ames, 1995, 2006; Coupland, 2006), the position was not a formal title or office. Rather, it was generally assumed by the highest-ranking member of the household. Household leadership was earned, and in turn leadership represented household interests on the political stage. However, political leadership was drawn from a higher stratum of titled nobles, meaning those who had the most direct ties to founding ancestors, inherited names, and held title over household corporeal resources. In this sense there were divisions within society that kept some House chiefs from positions of political leadership and its accompanying authority and prestige (Suttles, 1960; Angelbeck and Grier, 2012).

Among the Coast Salish groups, systems of social hierarchy were far less formalized than among other groups of the coast (Suttles, 1987; Coupland, 2006). Indeed, while there remained a strong focus on class distinction and prestige, formal systems of social ranking were far less emphasized among the southern Coast Salish (Suttles and Lane, 1990, p. 494). In addition, counterbalancing the emphasis on leadership often used to

describe these societies, among the Coast Salish in particular, there was substantive freedom for families and individuals to change or to move houses. Families had much more economic autonomy within their houses and were less constrained by the authority of house leaders and their membership in a house (Suttles, 1987, 1990; Suttles and Lane, 1990; Coupland, 2006). These principles are reflected in the materiality of Coast Salish plank houses, the physical buildings housing the constituent families of a larger corporate household (Suttles, 1991, p. 215; Grier, 2006). Among the Coast Salish, families had their own hearths and own food stores, and there were no permanent communal or central hearths (Suttles, 1990, p. 464; Coupland et al., 2009, p. 95). These plank houses were built so that sections could be added or removed to accommodate the movement of people as well as the hosting of large integrative events (Suttles, 1991). Coast Salish households were decidedly collective systems, defined by the effective integration of autonomous nuclear families and tied to other households through institutional events, relationships, and movements, and importantly, by potlatches. This stands in contrast to the hierarchy seen in other societies of the Northwestern Coast defined by the surrender of autonomy to a more communalistic household in a dialectical relationship (Coupland et al., 2009, p. 84; Angelbeck and Grier, 2012).

Households were thus the key institutions in regional politics, being connected to other households via a complex and decentralized network of local and regional ties established through both the movement of families across households (Coupland et al., 2009) and the integrative events, namely potlatches, hosted by individual households and house heads. Angelbeck and McLay (2011), Angelbeck and Grier (2012) provide useful summaries of how this decentralized system worked to coordinate and facilitate action at multiple scales. The latter study used the framework of anarchism to illuminate the nature of decentralized regional politics in Coast Salish societies, arguing that complex regional interactions can be affected without recourse to political centralization, or in this case, without a permanent keystone institution that serves to bind together institutional arrangements.

Less explored in such analyses of decentralized forms of governance are the mechanisms that can and have coordinated heterogeneous and heterarchical networks of autonomous actors. As Grier and Angelbeck (2017) describe, consensus-based decision-making facilitates broad participation and equitably disperses power and authority across interconnected, yet autonomous parts. Such heterogeneous networks can be quite complicated and messy, particularly as the number of interacting agents increases—a notion cogently articulated in the scalar stress arguments advanced by Johnson (1982). A central node of coordination in Coast Salish networks was in fact the renowned potlatch, an event that was hosted within and by specific Houses. In both anthropology and popular perception, the potlatch has been viewed as a competitive ceremony or feast involving intense competition for prestige amongst wealthy high-status rivals, resulting in incredible levels of largess and destruction of property.

However, a broader read of the ethnographic record of the potlatch reveals how it provided the institutional framework for Coast Salish political engagement, coordinated action, and resource management in service of both collective and individual ends. Suttles (1960, p. 303) is quite clear on this point, arguing that the potlatch must be understood “as a regulating mechanism within the total socio-economic system”. Trosper (2002) more specifically argues that throughout the Northwest Coast the potlatch must be viewed as a system of governance. Indeed, in the case of the Coast Salish in particular, given the less formal expression of social ranking compared to other Northwest Coast societies, and the relative autonomy of families within and between households, the potlatch did not have the singular or primary function of establishing and maintaining individual or ideal group rankings to the extent seen elsewhere (Suttles, 1987, p. 41), though it did still accomplish these objectives. Instead, we might better understand the potlatch among the Coast Salish as an integrative mechanism facilitated by households that served to bind together institutional arrangements, arrangements that archaeologists have shown to have deep, millennia-long histories.

The rationale behind this view—potlatch as governance—lies in the breadth of functions it performed. As an assembly of individuals and political factions, it provided an arena for the assertion and validation of status claims and rights to property. In the context of the potlatch, conflicts were resolved (and sometimes initiated), debts repaid, marriages transacted, deaths recognized, and leadership positions affirmed. Importantly, this process was collective and democratic, in that the validation of changes to the social order asserted by the host came through their acceptance by those in attendance, as signaled through their voluntary participation in the ceremonial proceedings and collective witnessing of the outcomes. In this sense, the potlatch can be thought of as a kind of situational Congress in which legal titles and rights were claimed, established and regulated, and thus society more broadly was reproduced. Importantly, potlatches, the households that hosted them, and the diverse and autonomous constituents bound together through participation in these events, served the role of keystone institution in periodically reaffirming the articulation of institutions that formed the decentralized arrangement of Coast Salish societies.

None of this is to discount the notion that the potlatch acted as an arena of status competition that could simultaneously serve the interests of the wealthy and privileged, reinforcing structural inequalities in Northwest Coast societies. Indeed, giveaways of wealth at potlatches provided elevated status for those who arranged and hosted the event, which in turn offered opportunities to build additional wealth. In this sense, the existence of a keystone institution that promoted broad-based and consensus-driven governance did not stave off inequalities in society, underscoring the perhaps timeless reality that politics, wealth, and inequality are difficult to disentangle even when institutions of “good governance” prevail.

The diversity of functions the potlatch served strongly points to its character not as an event, but as an institution-of-the-moment hosted within and by particular Houses, and as a central regulatory node in Coast Salish society and in Northwest Coast societies more broadly. The “true nature” of the potlatch

has been intensely debated in anthropological circles for well over a century, but the more holistic view of this institution reveals it to be both inclusive and foundational to inclusive governance. In this way, households were critical in facilitating the participation of many families, households, and community leaders in the process of governance through the integration of regularly autonomous institutions, consistent with functions and properties of a democratic keystone institution.

DISCUSSION

In the previous section, we detailed the mechanics, characteristics, and contexts of democratic keystone institutions and processes as manifest across four Indigenous North American regions. These were, and in some cases continue to serve as, institutions that bound together complex institutional constellations. Though each of the keystone institutions we describe are unique and function in very specific, historically situated ways, there are important similarities and differences that can illuminate substantive characteristics of the kinds of institutions that facilitate democratic forms of governance. We focus here specifically on comparing across axes of variation related to (1) degrees of centralization and formalization, (2) aspects of participation, both breadth and kind, and (3) the equitability of power distribution afforded by institutional arrangements and the particular ways these arrangements are articulated through keystone institutions.

Each of the keystone institutions reviewed here exhibit varying degrees and qualities of centralization. On the one hand, each serves as the metaphorical center of particular institutional arrangements. On the other hand, not one of these democratic institutions materializes as a single, autonomous, centralized institution in the same way that we might think of a federal government or other bureaucratic entity (e.g., a congress or national assembly, or “the state.”). Ancestral Muskogean councils, Northern Iroquoian clans, Puebloan sodalities, and Coast Salish houses through the hosting of potlatches, all serve as integrative institutions in one way or another. Although manifesting at different social and spatial scales, each is central to institutional arrangements in that these keystone institutions offer the organizational blueprint or tether for disparate institutions to coalesce to make decisions and confer with one another, or in some cases to explicitly challenge threats to such collective endeavors. In this sense, all of the keystone institutions described here are the basic building-blocks of these processes. Nevertheless, the way that these processes unfold, and the forms of centralization (or decentralization) facilitated, vary substantially.

Ancestral Muskogean councils are materially central, as places where integrative and collective activities explicitly occur. At the same time, there is no single council. The council as an institution is replicated across social and spatial scales. There are village councils, local councils serving multiple villages, and larger regional councils drawing representation from many scales and institutions. While there existed a scalar hierarchy that may give the guise of a centrally integrated system of councils, no such

vertical integration or hierarchical/subordinate system existed. In any case, centralization of decision-making occurred at many scales across many materialized “centers.”

For Northern Iroquoian society, there were many overlapping institutions of governance, each designed to deal with particular social and political realms (e.g., war councils, civic councils, intra-clan governance at multiple socio-spatial scales). The social architecture of governance was distributed horizontally across clans and centralized institutions of decision-making drew differentially from clans, moieties, and phratries, ensuring representation of multiple voices and constituencies. These complex arrangements of relationships provided a strong web of overlapping institutions that at once produced unique, functional epicenters of decision-making, but that, at the same time, regulated against the emergence of a single, centralized body of consensus-building. Such a body of collective decision-making was decidedly dispersed across the many constituent parts of a democratic whole.

The materialization (or non-materialization) of this political model is consistent with clans as keystone institutions over a centralized governing body. Indeed, no specialized architecture was associated with governing. Instead, council meetings and other forms of assembly occurred within the long-houses of particular leaders, usually those from the lineages from which particular council leadership positions were drawn. This is not unlike the assemblies congregated within Coast Salish plank houses by households. The decentralized democracies of the Northwest Coast were dispersed in a similar fashion. In place of clans, households served as the epicenters where collective governance occurred. Instead of hosting formal councils, houses hosted potlatches that served a similar, if less formalized role as councils. In Northern Iroquoia, the permanence of governance structures was imbued in the clan system, not the councils themselves. It would seem that councils, without attendant architecture symbolizing their formalization and permanence, existed only when in session or situationally. Similarly, the integrative governance of the Coast Salish existed only through actual practice, the hosting of a potlatch-as-Congress or -council, not simply as an event.

The sodalities of the Puebloan Southwest, similar to the wide networks of horizontally articulated institutions of Northern Iroquoia, comprised a mostly decentralized system of governance in the sense that power and participation were dispersed across organizational units, including specific sodalities or moieties and within and across specific communities. Sodalities served as the most important institutions of governance within Puebloan communities and drew membership from across disparate lineages, households, clans, and moieties. The sodalities themselves were similar to the system of Northern Iroquoian councils, each with requisite responsibilities. Though unlike Northern Iroquoian councils, sodalities were highly formalized through attendant architecture, namely kivas. Kivas served as permanent, formalized places for legitimizing and validating the system of sodalities and thus for allowing the integration and articulation of complex institutional arrangements. The existence of these Puebloan sodalities allowed the formation of relationships that crosscut familial and residence-based

institutions and funneled social and political power across a distributed network of secret societies.

Just as no single, all encompassing, centralized political entity emerges in any of these cases, the same can be said for leadership positions. As organizations of individuals bound together to achieve a common purpose, none of the keystone institutions described here include autocratic leadership, nor do they allow for such roles to emerge across other institutions. There are certainly important individuals imbued with responsibility, held up by reputation, regarded highly, and who have even accumulated a disproportionately large amount of wealth. In all cases, however, leadership is either limited to the constraints placed on them by the wider institutional body (e.g., the council, checks and balances across sodalities) or distributed across a diverse range of decision-making institutions and confined to wielding any amount of authority within narrowly defined realms (e.g., war councils, women's councils, household matters, etc.). Indeed, a defining feature of the institutional arrangements described here is the distribution of authority across institutions, facilitated by the keystone institution itself. These keystone institutions, while central to broader institutional function, work to distribute power across institutional arrangements.

In the case of Northern Iroquoian politics, leadership and authority are beholden to the councils within which they serve and to their constituents (e.g., the clan members, usually women, who elevated them to leadership roles). Across Muskogean councils, the *mekko* is a specific role within the institution of the council. In this way, leadership is distributed across sociospatial scales, from village councils through regional councils and down through particular households and lineages. In any case, *mekkos* serve primarily as executors and promoters of the decisions reached through council-based consensus. Like Northern Iroquoian leaders, there exists no objective, external source of power.

Similarly, "House Chiefs" of the northwestern coast are representatives of their houses. In fact, they are merely the largest stake-holding member of the house, owning the majority of the estate, but not the entire house. Like the Northern Iroquoian or Ancestral Muskogean leaders in the examples we describe here, such authority is replicated and distributed across institutions, in this case households. Like Northern Iroquoian politics, such distributed authority is materialized through the role of the house as both domestic space and political epicenter, unlike the central, specialized architecture of Ancestral Muskogean councils (though in some cases the council houses of the southeast have been referred to as the "chief's house," metaphorically). While authority shifts between houses throughout different events and times, it remains situationally distributed.

In none of the cases described here is participation completely equitable, neither in access to participation nor in the character of that participation. In the case of the Puebloan Southwest, sodalities are the heart of governance. While they drew membership from across familial and residential institutions, and extended beyond community boundaries as a system of pan-Puebloan socio-ritual networks, binding together households, lineages, clans, and communities, participation in this system is actually quite limited to a small subset of the citizenry.

Those serving in these secret societies, within which power and authority are vested, may have numbered on average only fifty individuals for each community (Ware, 2014). These would have primarily been adult men who chose to take on such a role. Thus, while power is distributed widely across these networks of diverse sodalities, it was at once still concentrated in the hands of a social, political, and ritual elite. This does not mean, of course, that these elite had absolute power. On the contrary, the sodality system included a series of checks to ensure good governance. These checks included cross assigning leadership positions (e.g., one sodality nominating individuals for service in another society), integrating members from distinct moieties, and even processes by which leaders could be removed.

In the case of both Ancestral Muskogean and Northern Iroquoian systems, leaders served as specific representatives of the institutions bound together through the keystone institutions. In the southeast, councils were populated by members from across households, lineages, clans, and towns, representatives of the membership of each of these constituent institutions. Similarly, in the northeast, the clan system ensured that participation was widely distributed across residential and familial units, with direct representation of institutional members by specific leadership from those institutions. While lacking these more formal systems of ensuring wide participation, participation in Coast Salish potlatches was similarly wide, if not wider in regards to the percentage of the total population participating. That said, in the absence of such formalization, leadership remained mostly *ad hoc*, completely dependent on the participation of families and other households and only situationally meaningful within a context of familial autonomy. In all cases, these political arenas, no matter how collective, distributed, or equitable, and no matter how "good" the governance, still often served as venues for individual achievement and status competition. What we have demonstrated, however, is that individual mobility, degree of centralization and formalization, breadth of participation, and distribution of power vary in ways that ultimately support variable forms of democratic governance. The power of an institutional approach, and of a focus on keystone institutions, is that we can avoid approaches to describing and comparing modes of government that overgeneralize from narrow sets of criteria or overly simplified checklists of presence or absence of democratic principles. Instead, we can formally evaluate and compare these features across keystone institutions that facilitate, in different ways, varying forms of democratic governance.

CONCLUSION

The democratic, keystone institutions described here are a subset of institutions that served to aggregate disparate preferences and positionalities into equitable social choice (*sensu* Coleman and Ferejohn, 1986, p. 9). Indeed, democratic institutions, the constraints they impose, and the freedoms they create are alleged to organize choice meaningfully. That is, to ensure that a social or public choice reflects public sentiment

(Coleman and Ferejohn, 1986, p. 14). Through the analytical lens offered here, focusing on keystone institutions, we are able to avoid the misplaced reification of “democracy” as a feature of society. Instead, we highlight that democracy is an assemblage of institutional arrangements and intentional actors. We can move from the ethos of “democracy” to the actual mechanisms that facilitate such forms of governance. Of the most recent writings on the history of democracy, such efforts have either disregarded the potential non-Western origins of democratic institutions (e.g., Keane, 2009), relegated them to some lesser form, for example “primitive democracies” (e.g., Stasavage, 2020), or have not been able to un-anchor democracy from the state, even in non-Western historical contexts (cf. Graeber and Wengrow, 2020). The challenge for archaeologists, or anyone interested in a true comparative approach to governance, is not necessarily to identify principles of democracy, but to identify specific institutions that exhibit and enact democratic principles, and translate across cross-cultural frameworks that allow us to explore the ways that they have been materialized in the past, continue to be

expressed in the present, and how they may be realized in the future.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JH-L and VT contributed to conception and design of the study. JH-L wrote the first draft of the manuscript. JB and CG wrote the Northern Iroquoian and Northwest case study sections respectively. VT and JB contributed heavy editing to the full draft. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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