

Political Support for Decentralization in Colombia and Venezuela

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Introduction

Decentralization transfers political authority, administrative responsibility, or fiscal resources from national institutions to regional and local governments. Although such reforms are often justified in terms of responsiveness, participation, accountability, or service delivery, they also redistribute political power. Governors, mayors, regional parties, and local organizations may gain authority that national legislators or party leaders previously controlled. Maria Escobar-Lemmon's 2003 article, "Political Support for Decentralization: An Analysis of the Colombian and Venezuelan Legislatures," examines this political dimension by asking which legislators demonstrated sufficiently strong support for decentralization to introduce decentralizing bills. Using legislators rather than countries as the unit of analysis, the study tests whether party electoral incentives, citizen trust, and district wealth help explain bill initiation in Colombia and Venezuela. Its central finding is that legislators were more likely to support decentralization when their parties had stronger future electoral prospects at subnational levels, while public trust and regional wealth also affected support in the two cases (Escobar-Lemmon, 2003).

Decentralization as a Political, Administrative, and Fiscal Process

Decentralization is not one institutional act. Political decentralization can create direct elections or increase the authority of subnational officials; administrative decentralization can transfer responsibility for services such as education, health, roads, or water; and fiscal decentralization can alter taxation, transfers, borrowing, or expenditure authority. These forms may proceed in different sequences and can produce different distributions of power. Falletti (2005) therefore treats decentralization as a process in which the order of reforms matters. A municipality that receives new service responsibilities without sufficient revenue may become more burdened without becoming substantially more autonomous. Formal constitutional labels are similarly incomplete. Colombia remained a unitary state while transferring significant political and fiscal authority, whereas Venezuela's federal constitution coexisted for many years with centralized parties and national control. The more informative questions concern who selects candidates, who controls public money,

which officials are directly accountable to local voters, and how national and regional actors expect institutional change to affect their future political opportunities.

Colombia and Venezuela Before and During Reform

Colombia's Liberal and Conservative parties dominated national politics for much of the twentieth century, yet their internal organizations contained strong regional factions. Fiscal decentralization developed over time, and a major political change came with legislation establishing direct mayoral elections; Colombians first elected mayors directly in 1988. The 1991 Constitution subsequently expanded subnational authority and introduced direct election of departmental governors. Legislators with strong regional political networks could therefore view decentralization as a means of strengthening local allies and resources without necessarily opposing their national party. Venezuela followed a different institutional path. Its constitution described a federal republic, but Democratic Action and COPEI exercised highly centralized control over political careers for much of the post-1958 period. The Presidential Commission for State Reform, or COPRE, was created in 1984, and reforms at the end of the decade established direct elections for state governors and mayors. Venezuelans first elected those offices directly in December 1989, creating new subnational bases of electoral legitimacy and political careers.

Research Design and Main Findings

Escobar-Lemmon uses bill initiation as the dependent variable because introducing legislation demonstrates a more active form of support than merely voting for a proposal placed on the agenda by someone else. The study analyzes Colombian legislators from two congressional periods, 1986–1990 and 1994–1998, and Venezuelan legislators across four periods between 1979 and 1998. Because the outcome is binary—whether a legislator introduced a decentralizing bill—the analysis uses logistic regression to estimate how party membership, electoral performance, public confidence, regional characteristics, and related variables influenced the probability of initiation. The evidence generally supports the electoral-incentive argument. Parties whose prospects were stronger at subnational than national levels had greater reason to transfer authority toward offices they might control. Citizen trust and district wealth also mattered, though their effects differed across the two countries. These findings do not show that every individual legislator acted from one motive; statistical relationships identify patterns among institutional and electoral conditions rather than private intentions (Escobar-Lemmon, 2003).

In Colombia, the results indicate that party and regional incentives shaped sponsorship of decentralizing measures. Conservative legislators showed a greater propensity to initiate such bills in the periods examined, but this should not be interpreted as meaning that one party alone produced the country's decentralization. Liberal presidents and legislators also shaped major reforms, and

sponsorship is different from final enactment and design. Colombia's relatively decentralized party organization made local political networks especially important to legislative careers. In Venezuela, COPEI legislators displayed strong support for decentralizing proposals, while district wealth also influenced the probability of sponsorship. Wealthier states could have stronger incentives to seek fiscal authority or retain more resources, though the meaning of wealth depends on each reform's transfer rules. Direct elections later strengthened regional political leaders and reduced aspects of national party control. The comparison therefore supports an electoral explanation without reducing decentralization to one party, one ideological commitment, or one constitutional form.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The study's main strength is its focus on variation within countries. Country-level comparisons can identify that one state decentralized more than another but cannot show why legislators operating under the same constitution differed in their support. Bill initiation also provides a useful behavioral indicator because it requires legislators to invest effort and associate themselves publicly with a proposal. The comparative design is valuable because Colombia and Venezuela shared presidential institutions and established parties while differing in constitutional structure and party organization. Nevertheless, bill initiation remains an incomplete measure. A legislator may strongly support decentralization through committee work, amendments, negotiations, co-sponsorship, speeches, or final votes without introducing a bill. Decentralizing measures also vary in scope: direct local elections, fiscal transfers, and administrative delegation are not equivalent. Statistical associations cannot establish the precise motivation of an individual legislator, and the period studied ends in 1998. Later developments can alter the parties, regional institutions, and incentives that earlier decentralization helped create.

Broader Significance

Escobar-Lemmon's analysis contributes to a broader understanding of institutional reform by showing that national politicians can rationally support transferring power away from the center when the new arrangement offers electoral opportunities elsewhere. Decentralization therefore need not reflect a selfless surrender of authority or a simple ideological commitment to local government. It can emerge from overlapping motives that include democratic reform, service concerns, constituency preferences, party strategy, regional economic interests, and individual career opportunities. The Colombian and Venezuelan cases also demonstrate why federal and unitary labels should not be used as shortcuts for actual political power. A formally unitary country can create strong elected subnational governments, while a formal federation can remain centralized through party control and fiscal institutions. The article's value lies in linking institutional change with the incentives of the legislators who must authorize it while leaving room for other explanations and for differences between sponsorship, enactment, implementation, and the long-term consequences of reform.

Conclusion

Political support for decentralization in Colombia and Venezuela was shaped by more than administrative theories about efficient government. Escobar-Lemmon's evidence shows that legislators responded to electoral prospects, party organization, citizen trust, and regional economic conditions when deciding whether to introduce decentralizing legislation. Colombia's decentralized party networks and reforms culminating in direct mayoral elections in 1988 and gubernatorial elections under the 1991 Constitution created one set of incentives; Venezuela's centralized party system and the introduction of direct state and municipal elections in 1989 created another. The comparison supports the argument that politicians may transfer authority when subnational competition offers political opportunities that the national arena does not. At the same time, bill initiation cannot capture every form of support, and statistical relationships do not reveal a legislator's private motivation. The study is therefore strongest as an explanation of patterned incentives during a particular reform era rather than as a universal theory that predicts every decentralization decision or later political consequence.

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