

Political Support for Decentralization in Colombia and Venezuela

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Introduction

Decentralization is the transfer of political authority, administrative responsibilities, or financial resources from a national government to regional and local governments. It may allow public officials who are closer to citizens to make decisions about education, healthcare, infrastructure, taxation, and other public services. Supporters often argue that decentralization improves responsiveness, accountability, public participation, and administrative efficiency. However, transferring authority away from the national government also changes the distribution of political power. National politicians may lose control over public resources, while governors, mayors, regional parties, and local political organizations gain new influence.

For this reason, decentralization cannot be understood only as an administrative reform intended to improve government performance. It is also a political decision shaped by the interests of parties and elected officials. Politicians may endorse decentralization because they believe it will strengthen democracy, but they may also support it because their party is more competitive in regional or municipal elections than at the national level.

Maria Escobar-Lemmon examines this political dimension in her 2003 article, “Political Support for Decentralization: An Analysis of the Colombian and Venezuelan Legislatures.” Her central question is not simply why Colombia and Venezuela adopted decentralizing reforms. Instead, she asks which individual legislators supported decentralization strongly enough to introduce legislation transferring authority or resources to subnational governments.

This focus is important because introducing a bill requires greater commitment than expressing general approval. A legislator who initiates decentralizing legislation publicly associates with the reform, invests political effort in it, and risks opposition from actors who benefit from centralized government. Escobar-Lemmon therefore uses bill initiation as an indicator of particularly strong legislative support.

The article argues that legislators’ positions were influenced by electoral incentives, party organization, public confidence in government, and the economic characteristics of the districts they represented. Its findings support the broader argument that politicians are more likely to transfer power when their parties expect better electoral opportunities at the subnational level. At the same time, the differences between Colombia and Venezuela demonstrate that constitutional design alone cannot explain decentralization. A formally federal country may remain highly centralized, while a

formally unitary country may transfer substantial authority to local and regional governments.

This essay examines Escobar-Lemmon's research question, theoretical framework, data, methodology, findings, and contribution to the study of decentralization. It also evaluates the limitations of using legislative bill initiation to measure political support and considers how later research has strengthened or qualified her conclusions.

Understanding Political Decentralization

Decentralization is not a single reform. It can occur in political, administrative, and fiscal forms. These dimensions often overlap, but they should not be treated as identical.

Political decentralization gives citizens or subnational institutions greater influence over political decision-making. Direct elections for mayors and governors are common examples. Instead of being appointed by the central government, subnational leaders receive an independent electoral mandate from local voters.

Administrative decentralization transfers responsibility for planning, managing, or delivering public services. A national ministry may transfer responsibility for schools, hospitals, roads, or water systems to departments, states, or municipalities.

Fiscal decentralization concerns the distribution of revenue and expenditure authority. It may allow subnational governments to collect taxes, receive automatic transfers from the national budget, borrow funds, or decide how public money is spent.

Falleti (2005) argues that decentralization should be understood as "a process" rather than as one isolated institutional change. The order in which political, administrative, and fiscal reforms occur can influence the eventual balance of power between national and subnational governments. For example, giving municipalities responsibility for public services without providing adequate revenue may increase their obligations without meaningfully increasing their autonomy.

This distinction helps explain why formal constitutional labels can be misleading. Colombia was constitutionally organized as a unitary state, while Venezuela was formally a federal republic. Nevertheless, Colombia's political parties and local institutions provided significant space for regional political influence. Venezuela, despite its federal designation, was governed for decades through highly centralized national institutions and tightly controlled political parties.

The key issue is therefore not whether a country calls itself federal or unitary. The more important questions concern who controls public revenue, who selects political candidates, who appoints subnational officials, and which level of government is accountable to voters.

Decentralization in Latin America

During much of the twentieth century, many Latin American countries concentrated political and financial authority in national capitals. Local governments often possessed limited revenue, weak administrative capacity, and little control over major public services.

This pattern began to change during the 1980s and 1990s. Economic crisis, democratization, public dissatisfaction, pressure for improved services, and declining confidence in traditional political institutions encouraged governments to transfer authority to regional and municipal levels. Decentralization was presented as a way to strengthen democracy by bringing government closer to citizens.

However, the reforms also created political opportunities. Direct elections for governors and mayors established new offices that could serve as alternative career paths for politicians. Regional leaders gained platforms from which they could challenge national party elites, develop independent organizations, and eventually compete for the presidency.

O'Neill (2003) explains this behavior through electoral strategy. According to her argument, decentralization becomes attractive to parties when their support is more secure in subnational elections than in national contests. National politicians may willingly transfer power because decentralization gives their party access to offices and resources that it might otherwise lose.

Escobar-Lemmon builds on this perspective but changes the level of analysis. Instead of examining only why national governments decentralize, she investigates variation among individual legislators. Her approach recognizes that members of the same legislature do not necessarily have identical incentives.

The Colombian Context

Colombia was formally a unitary republic, but regional political interests remained influential. The Liberal and Conservative parties dominated national politics for much of the twentieth century, yet their internal structures were relatively decentralized. Regional leaders and competing party factions had considerable influence over candidate selection.

An important step toward fiscal decentralization occurred through the 1968 constitutional reform, which established mechanisms for transferring national revenue to departments and municipalities. The process later became more explicitly political. Legislation approved in 1986 introduced direct mayoral elections, and Colombian voters elected mayors directly for the first time in 1988.

The 1991 Constitution deepened the process by authorizing the direct election of departmental governors, increasing subnational autonomy, and expanding the framework for intergovernmental

transfers. Colombia remained constitutionally unitary, but its local and departmental governments gained greater political visibility and responsibility.

The organization of the Colombian parties affected legislators' incentives. Garman et al. (2001) observe that candidate selection within both the Liberal and Conservative parties was comparatively decentralized. Multiple party lists and strong regional factions meant that legislators were often accountable not only to national party leaders but also to local political networks.

A Colombian legislator could therefore benefit from decentralization if it increased resources available to local allies or strengthened the legislator's regional political base. Supporting decentralization did not necessarily represent opposition to the party. It could instead serve the interests of a party faction operating within a particular department.

The Venezuelan Context

Venezuela presented a different institutional arrangement. Its constitution described the country as federal, but political and financial authority remained highly centralized for much of the post-1958 democratic period.

National politics were dominated primarily by Democratic Action, known as AD, and the Social Christian Party, known as COPEI. These parties developed disciplined organizations that strongly influenced candidate selection, public employment, legislative behavior, and access to government resources.

The political system provided stability for several decades, but it also became associated with centralized decision-making, patronage, and declining responsiveness. By the 1980s, economic difficulties and public dissatisfaction placed increasing pressure on the established parties.

The Presidential Commission for State Reform, commonly known as COPRE, was created in 1984 to develop proposals for political and administrative reform. Decentralizing measures approved near the end of the decade created direct elections for mayors and state governors. Venezuelans first elected these officials directly in December 1989, not in 1988 as the original draft suggested.

The reforms transformed political careers. Governors and mayors could build personal support, demonstrate administrative performance, and challenge national party authorities. Regional leadership consequently became an important route to national prominence.

This development was particularly significant because Venezuela's national parties had previously exercised centralized control over political careers. Decentralization gave regional figures an electoral legitimacy that did not depend entirely on the national leadership.

The Research Question

Escobar-Lemmon asks which legislators were sufficiently committed to decentralization to introduce a decentralizing bill. This question shifts attention from the general merits of decentralization to the political incentives faced by individual lawmakers.

The article begins from an apparent contradiction. National legislators possess authority within the central government. Decentralization transfers authority, revenue, and political visibility away from that government. Why would national legislators voluntarily support a reform that could reduce the power of the institution in which they serve?

The proposed answer is that legislators are not concerned only with the immediate authority of the national legislature. They also consider their party's future, their own political careers, their regional constituencies, and the opportunities available at different levels of government.

A legislator may support decentralization when the reform strengthens the party's governors, mayors, regional organizations, or local supporters. The legislator may also expect to seek a subnational office in the future. In such cases, transferring authority from the center may reduce national control but increase the legislator's long-term political opportunities.

Escobar-Lemmon's principal expectation is therefore that legislators from parties with stronger subnational than national electoral prospects will be more likely to initiate decentralizing bills. The article summarizes the logic by stating that decentralization receives support from parties whose "future electoral prospects are better at the subnational level" (Escobar-Lemmon, 2003, p. 683).

The study also considers whether support is affected by public trust and district wealth. Legislators may respond to constituents who have greater confidence in subnational institutions than in the national government. Representatives from wealthier regions may also favor decentralization because their districts possess a stronger tax base, more administrative capacity, or more resources to retain.

Data and Research Method

Escobar-Lemmon assembled information about members of the Colombian and Venezuelan legislatures and identified which legislators introduced decentralizing bills.

For Colombia, the study examined legislators serving in two congressional periods, from 1986 to 1990 and from 1994 to 1998. These periods covered important phases before and after the 1991 Constitution.

For Venezuela, the study examined four legislative periods between 1979 and 1998. This longer period allowed the author to compare legislative behavior before and after the introduction of direct elections for governors and mayors.

The dependent variable was binary. A legislator either initiated a decentralizing bill or did not. Because the outcome had two categories, Escobar-Lemmon used logistic regression, commonly called a logit model. Logistic regression estimates how different political, electoral, and socioeconomic characteristics affect the probability of an event occurring.

The models included variables concerning party membership, electoral performance, public confidence in government, district characteristics, and other features that could influence legislative behavior. Separate analysis was necessary because Colombia and Venezuela differed in constitutional structure, party organization, candidate selection, and the timing of reform.

Using legislators rather than countries as the unit of analysis was an important methodological contribution. A country-level study might identify that Colombia decentralized more extensively during a particular period, but it would not reveal why some legislators supported the reform while others did not.

Findings from Colombia

The Colombian evidence generally supports the argument that party and electoral interests influenced legislative support. Members of the Conservative Party were more likely to initiate decentralizing bills than members of the Liberal Party, although later research shows that Liberal politicians and presidents also played major roles in writing and approving important reforms.

This result illustrates the difference between wanting decentralization and controlling its final design. Conservative legislators may have had strong incentives to sponsor decentralizing measures because the party's regional prospects could compensate for weaknesses at the national level. However, the Conservatives did not consistently control the presidency or a congressional majority. They could advocate reform without being able to determine every element of it.

Colombia's decentralized party organization also encouraged legislators to respond to regional interests. Representatives depended heavily on local factions and electoral networks. A bill that transferred resources to departments or municipalities could strengthen the politicians and organizations upon which the legislator's career depended.

Public trust also influenced support. This finding indicates that legislators did not act solely according to national party strategy. The political attitudes of citizens within their constituencies helped shape the attractiveness of transferring authority.

The Colombian findings therefore reveal several overlapping motivations. Legislators could support decentralization as a democratic reform, a response to public dissatisfaction, a method of empowering regional allies, or an electoral strategy. These motives were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Findings from Venezuela

The Venezuelan results also support an electoral explanation, but they operate within a more centralized party system. COPEI legislators showed a particularly high probability of initiating decentralizing proposals. This pattern was consistent with the party's opportunity to gain influence in state and municipal politics even when its prospects for controlling the national government were uncertain.

District wealth was especially important in Venezuela. Legislators representing wealthier states had stronger reasons to support the transfer of fiscal authority because their regions possessed greater economic resources and potentially greater capacity to benefit from autonomy.

This does not mean that all wealthy regions automatically supported every decentralizing measure. It indicates that the potential economic benefits of reform influenced legislative calculations. A resource-rich or economically productive state might prefer to retain a greater portion of locally generated revenue instead of depending on allocations controlled by the national government.

The Venezuelan case also demonstrates how decentralization can alter political careers and party authority. Directly elected governors and mayors gained independent legitimacy and sometimes developed stronger public profiles than traditional national legislators. Decentralization subsequently contributed to changes within AD and COPEI by empowering regional leaders and creating opportunities for newer political organizations.

Lalander (2003) argues that the reforms weakened aspects of Venezuela's traditional party-dominated system. Political decentralization opened electoral spaces that the established parties could not control as completely as national institutions.

Comparing Colombia and Venezuela

The comparison demonstrates that decentralization does not follow automatically from a country's formal constitutional structure. Colombia was a unitary state that adopted extensive political and fiscal decentralization. Venezuela was formally federal but remained highly centralized in practice until reforms were introduced near the end of the 1980s.

The cases also show the importance of party organization. Colombian parties contained strong regional factions, giving legislators incentives to respond to local political networks. Venezuelan parties were more centralized, but declining national prospects and new opportunities in state and municipal elections encouraged some party members to support reform.

In both countries, decentralization became politically attractive when it offered access to offices, resources, or electoral support outside the national government. This finding reinforces O'Neill's

argument that national politicians may decentralize without abandoning their desire for political influence. They transfer authority because they expect to compete more successfully under the new institutional arrangement.

However, the effects were not identical. Colombia's decentralized political networks allowed regional interests to influence national politics even before the major reforms. In Venezuela, direct elections more clearly disrupted a centralized party hierarchy and created new centers of political leadership.

Strengths of the Study

One major strength of Escobar-Lemmon's research is its focus on variation within countries. Many studies compare highly decentralized and highly centralized states. Such comparisons can overlook disagreements among legislators operating under the same constitution and party system.

The use of bill initiation is also valuable. Voting for a bill may reflect party discipline, coalition bargaining, or pressure from the executive. Introducing legislation requires a legislator to take a more active role.

The comparative design is another strength. Colombia and Venezuela shared several important features. Both were presidential democracies with long-established political parties and histories of central control. Nevertheless, they differed in formal constitutional design and internal party organization. Comparing them allowed Escobar-Lemmon to examine how similar electoral incentives operated under different institutions.

The article also brings public attitudes and regional economic conditions into the analysis. Political decentralization is not explained entirely by national competition. The expected benefits differ across territories, and legislators may respond to those differences.

Limitations of the Analysis

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations. First, bill initiation is an incomplete measure of support. A legislator may strongly favor decentralization but choose not to introduce a bill because another legislator has already done so. Support may also be expressed through committee work, amendments, negotiations, speeches, co-sponsorship, or final votes.

Second, not every decentralizing bill transfers the same kind or amount of authority. One bill may create direct local elections, while another merely reorganizes administrative responsibilities. Treating these measures as one category may conceal important differences between political, fiscal, and administrative decentralization.

Third, introducing a bill does not guarantee that it will become law. Some legislators may sponsor

proposals for symbolic reasons, knowing that the bills have little chance of approval. Studying enactment and implementation alongside initiation would provide a more complete understanding of political support.

Fourth, electoral data can reveal relationships without proving individual motivation. A legislator from a party with strong regional prospects may sponsor a decentralization bill, but the statistical result cannot establish exactly what that legislator believed. Interviews, legislative debates, party records, and personal documents could provide additional evidence.

Fifth, economic wealth can create competing preferences. Wealthier regions may support decentralization because they expect to retain revenue, while poorer regions may support it because they expect increased transfers or greater attention to local needs. The meaning of district wealth therefore depends on the specific design of the proposed reform.

Finally, the study covers a historical period ending in 1998. Its findings explain the legislative politics surrounding an important era of reform, but they should not be treated as a complete account of later developments. Decentralization can produce feedback effects that transform the parties and incentives that originally created it.

The Broader Effects of Decentralization

Later scholarship confirms that decentralization may have both democratic benefits and unintended consequences. It can increase political competition, create new leadership opportunities, and allow citizens to evaluate local officials directly.

At the same time, it may fragment national party systems. Morgan (2018) argues that the effect of political decentralization on established parties depends on the economic and organizational context in which reform occurs. Parties with weak programmatic identities and declining public support may become especially vulnerable when local elections allow regional competitors to develop.

Decentralization may also reproduce clientelism rather than eliminate it. Local officials can be more accessible to citizens, but they may also be more exposed to pressure from powerful business interests, political families, armed groups, or patronage networks.

Colombia illustrates this danger particularly clearly. In areas where government institutions were weak, guerrilla and paramilitary organizations sometimes attempted to capture or influence newly decentralized resources. Eaton (2006) argues that fiscal and political decentralization created opportunities for armed actors to interfere with local government in parts of the country.

These outcomes do not prove that decentralization is inherently harmful. They demonstrate that its results depend on local administrative capacity, transparency, security, accountability, and the design of intergovernmental institutions.

Conclusion

Escobar-Lemmon's analysis provides an important explanation of political support for decentralization in Colombia and Venezuela. The article demonstrates that national legislators do not support the transfer of authority only because they believe it will improve public administration. Their decisions are also influenced by electoral prospects, party organization, public trust, and the economic interests of the territories they represent.

The Colombian case shows how legislators operating within regionally fragmented parties could use decentralization to strengthen local allies and political networks. Conservative legislators were particularly likely to initiate decentralizing proposals, although the final reform process involved both major parties and the executive branch.

The Venezuelan case shows how members of a centralized party system could support reforms that created alternative political opportunities. COPEI legislators and representatives of wealthier states had especially strong incentives to transfer authority to subnational governments.

The comparison also challenges the assumption that federal systems are necessarily more decentralized than unitary ones. Venezuela's formal federalism coexisted with extensive practical centralization, while unitary Colombia transferred substantial political and fiscal authority to departments and municipalities.

Escobar-Lemmon's use of bill initiation and logistic regression provided a systematic way to identify the characteristics associated with legislative support. However, bill sponsorship does not capture every form of support, and statistical associations cannot reveal every motive behind a legislator's behavior.

The study's most important contribution is its demonstration that decentralization is a political bargain. Authority is transferred because different actors expect to gain or preserve influence under a new territorial arrangement. Some seek stronger democracy and more responsive services, while others see opportunities to protect party power, regional wealth, or personal careers.

Decentralization should therefore not be judged only by the amount of authority moved away from the national government. Its success depends on the form of authority transferred, the resources available to subnational institutions, the accountability of local officials, and the political environment in which the reform is implemented.

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