**Electing Governors:**

**The Introduction of Regional Elections in Latin America’s Unitary Countries**

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For a host of reasons, unitary countries around the world are experimenting with institutional reforms that strengthen their regional governments – the intermediate level between national and local governments that have usually been associated with federalism rather than unitarism (Hooghe and Marks 2016). In federal systems, these intermediate governments are the very constituent units that share sovereignty with the center, endowed with powers that are constitutionally guaranteed and not subject to unilateral encroachment by the national government. In unitary cases, which remain far more numerous in the world today, intermediate governments where they exist tend to be less significant than local governments at the lowest tier, and less commonly run by officials who are directly elected in their own right.[[1]](#footnote-1) In recent decades, however, many unitary countries have introduced direct elections for the chief executives of intermediate governments (henceforth “governors”), who as a result are no longer appointed by the center. With a few exceptions (e.g. Belgium 1993, Iraq 2005), federalism remains a “bridge too far” for most unitary systems, and in this context the decision to elect governors has emerged as a popular reform designed to derive some of the presumed benefits of political decentralization without formally federalizing.

Consider, for example, the case of Latin America. Here, while the set of countries that is federal in design has remained surprisingly stable for well over a century (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela), several unitary countries have witnessed the introduction of gubernatorial elections in recent decades: Colombia in 1992, Peru in 2002, Bolivia in 2005, and Chile in 2021. In each of these four cases, the decision by the center to surrender the right to appoint governors carried great symbolic weight and appeared to presage the construction of potentially much more decentralized political systems. Despite variation among these countries (including in their levels of economic development and institutional strength, for example), in each case the appointment of governors had functioned as an important tool of state formation beginning in the 19th century – in contrast to federal cases where subnational units retained the authority to select their own governors (Mazzuca 2021, 136). Against the backdrop of internecine civil wars and centrifugal pressures from territorial challengers, the ability of the center to appoint governors (and to remove them when they proved disobedient) helped the state try to monopolize its legitimate use of force. Why, then, have numerous countries surrendered this hard-won prerogative over the past three decades, and what are the consequences of this common institutional reform for the territorial distribution of power within countries? What impact, if any, has this single institutional change had on outcomes like the quality of democracy, the strength of political parties, and the capacity of the state?

This paper uses the concept of instrumental incoherence (Faguet and Shami 2022) to argue that, despite the similar embrace of democracy as the reason to decentralize, the politicians who controlled the center in these four countries were animated by very specific and often highly short-term political objectives. These different objectives led to particular design choices as they set about decentralizing, and those choices in turn had distinct long-term effects that can be mapped out over time. Rather than just engaging in a cross-national comparison of the discrete decision to decentralize when it took place (whether that was 1992, 2002, 2005 or 2021), the paper adopts a cross-temporal perspective that is also sensitive to change in multiple dimensions beyond the electoral arena to fully make sense of what changed as a result of decentralization, and what did not.

Although politicians in these four countries ostensibly did the same thing when they opted to introduce gubernatorial elections, they were animated by quite distinct goals and shaped by country-specific challenges; as a result this single reform resonated very differently in each case. In Colombia, for example, gubernatorial elections were introduced as part of a constitutional reform that sought to end that country’s lengthy internal armed conflict with multiple guerrilla insurgencies by opening up space for political actors outside the two traditional parties. In Bolivia, regional elections were introduced not to end a civil war but rather to prevent one from breaking out by allowing the country’s disaffected eastern departments to elect their own governors at a time when they had dramatically lost influence in the national government. In Peru, regional elections were introduced in the course of a transition to democracy by a president who was seeking to distinguish himself from the outgoing authoritarian regime of Alberto Fujimori (whose market-oriented policies he very much favored). Much more recently, establishment politicians in Chile introduced gubernatorial elections as a way to boost the legitimacy of the post-Pinochet democratic order in the midst of deepening socioeconomic protests. Latin America’s unitary countries have thus gone down the same institutional pathway, and more or less at the same “world historical time,” but for reasons that do not have a generic cause.

If gubernatorial elections were introduced not due to some abstract commitment to democracy, but rather as a solution to some very concrete political problems, how did those solutions play out over time? In Colombia, reformers who sought to open up the political system by enabling nontraditional parties to contest regional elections unwittingly ended up taking apart the country’s two-party system, which had been in place since the 1840s and was widely considered one of Latin America’s most stable party systems. This outcome can be traced to the fateful decision to simultaneously adopt not just political decentralization but forms of fiscal decentralization that severely undermined the leverage of national party leaders. In Bolivia, reforms that were adopted to politically contain and isolate economic elites in the eastern half of the country gave those elites a platform to pull the national government toward their preferred ideological position. The decision to allow not just regional elections but also departmental autonomy gave the country’s most economically dynamic department (Santa Cruz) tremendous national leverage. In Peru, President Alejandro Toledo’s interest in decentralization for purely short-term electoral reasons led to the paralysis of reform once his party lost the “inaugural” regional elections. Design decisions that made fiscal decentralization contingent on the amalgamation of existing regions, and that allowed regional movements to contest regional elections without running in national contests, have generated a profound political chasm between national and regional levels of government. In Chile, when the national government finally agreed to regional elections three decades after Pinochet left power, they did so only on the condition that the center would continue to appoint delegates to each region, who will likely be able to check the power of elected governors.

In this way, political decentralization in the form of gubernatorial elections is intimately tied to some of the most important political phenomena in each country, including the collapse of the party system in Colombia, the significant taming of a socialist project in Bolivia, and the deep territorial disconnect that has made Peru nearly ungovernable. Rather than considering any of these long-term effects as random, each can be traced back to specific design choices on the part of politicians with specific problems to solve. Furthermore, it was not just the introduction of gubernatorial elections that mattered, but rather the specific design decision to combine political decentralization with a) generous forms of fiscal decentralization in Colombia, b) a permissive departmental autonomy statute in Bolivia, c) the re-drawing of regional borders in Peru, and d) the maintenance of presidential appointees in Chile. As will become clear in the country narratives below, some of these design combinations actually augmented the effects of decentralization (as in Colombia and Bolivia) while some dampened these effects (as in Peru and Chile).

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section assesses the theoretical literature on decentralization to situate the approach adopted here. Section three assesses the period before the onset of reform in order to document the various political purposes that were served by the long-standing practice of appointing, rather than electing, governors. Because of the importance of mapping politicians’ reform objectives onto the specific contexts of the countries in which they are operating, the body of the paper is then organized around four country narratives. The goal here is to maintain analytical focus on the distinct political imperatives that motivated reformers, as well as the results over time of the particular designs they adopted. While enough time has elapsed to examine the cross-temporal impacts of institutional reform in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru, the more recent adoption of reform in Chile (in 2021) necessarily allows for only a more speculative discussion. Section five concludes with reflections on institutional reform and instrumental incoherence.

**Decentralization as Institutional Design**

Although decentralization has implications for policy making and implementation, it is more properly understood as an institutional reform rather than as a “mere” policy reform. This is because, despite the many different forms that it can take, decentralization always affects the rules that govern who gets to do what and with whose money in a multi-tiered political system. The most common tactic to deal with the multifaceted nature of decentralization is to disaggregate it into its three main dimensions: political, administrative, and fiscal. Political decentralization refers to the “who” in the sentence above and most commonly implies the use of elections rather than appointments to select subnational chief executives. But other related rules belong in this category too, including whether subnational elections are held concurrently with national elections, and whether parties can contest subnational elections without also having to compete in national elections. Administrative decentralization refers to the responsibilities assigned to subnational governments and can occur independently of political decentralization. Finally, fiscal decentralization changes the rules that govern both the type and amount of revenues under the control of subnational governments, which can include not just the devolution of tax bases but the transfer of centrally-collected revenues on an automatic basis. All of these decentralizing changes are distinct from deconcentration, which is a reform that takes place within the national government and that occurs when nationally-controlled officials increase their presence in subnational territories.

One of the most distinctive features of decentralization is that it can be used to advance so many different purposes; perhaps few reforms can be used as a means to pursue such a broad range of objectives. In Latin America, decentralization has appealed to many actors as a way to strengthen democracy, not just by multiplying the number of votes that citizens can use to influence their government in a liberal/representative fashion, but also because it is a requisite for the participatory reforms that have instituted non-voting based types of influence (Faguet 2012). All things equal, third wave democracies are more democratic than the region’s earlier experiences with democracy, which typically involved the national appointment of subnational officials. In a negative sense, decentralization can also promote democracy by making authoritarian reversals less likely. Beyond democracy, economic development and public security are the two other most commonly cited rationales for decentralization. A large literature suggests that when subnational governments are elected, fiscally empowered, and responsible for critical sectors like infrastructure, health, and education, they can be important motors of economic development. With respect to security, decentralization has formed an important part of post-conflict settlements (as in Colombia and El Salvador), and many other countries have introduced internal security reforms that expand subnational control over policing (even as responsibility for external security remains centralized).

While democracy, development and security are the most commonly invoked “official” reasons to decentralize, in practice politicians are motivated by other pressures that often have little to do with their stated objectives. In theorizing these “real” causes, scholars have drawn heavily on the rationalist strain of the new institutionalism to explain why politicians do the unthinkable and surrender power. According to Kathleen O’Neill (2005), parties can face powerful incentives to decentralize when they believe their control of the national government is temporary, and when they enjoy stronger organizational capacity around the country than their rivals. Tulia Falleti (2010) argues that national and subnational officials prefer different sequences of decentralization, and that the balance of power between them determines which sequence is adopted. When subnational actors initiate the process, for example, they prefer to start with political decentralization in ways that enable them to demand subsequent delegations of fiscal revenue. According to Tyler Dickovick (2007), national politicians make strategic decisions about which subnational level to privilege, often favoring decentralization to municipal governments to weaken the intermediate governments they find more threatening.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although the distinction between decentralization that results from top-down vs. bottom-up pressures can be useful to parse out differences between cases (Eaton 2004), in every case it is national politicians at the top who ultimately make the decision to decentralize. These and other theoretical approaches are illuminating, but general explanations of decentralization can be less satisfying than accounts that are grounded in the idiosyncratic (but no less determinative) pressures that emerge in specific country contexts, as my four country narratives below suggest.

A final word is in order about the significance of institutional design in the context of high levels of institutional volatility. Why study the content of institutional choice in a region marked by pervasive institutional weakness and/or frequently successful attempts by powerful politicians to simply subvert institutional constraints? More specifically, why should we care about recent episodes of decentralization given the reality that in many cases they simply set in motion recentralizing changes that reversed course? Precisely because they often support decentralization because it suits their short term interests rather than out of any deeply held normative commitment, when the political winds shift, the same politicians who decentralized may seek to claw back resources and authority (Dickovick and Eaton 2013). But this is another reason why the distinction between the dimensions of decentralization matters; while certain administrative tasks have indeed been returned to the center and fiscal transfers cut in some cases, political decentralization in the form of direct elections for subnational chief executives has proved to be remarkably sticky, which increases the importance of understanding why it happened and how it changed politics.

**Before the Onset of Reform: Centralism through Appointed Governors**

To appreciate the significance of the recent decision to introduce gubernatorial elections in many of Latin America’s unitary countries, a discussion is in order of the role that appointment procedures played before the onset of reform. This background serves to showcase a key pattern, which is the central state’s generally limited monopoly over the use of violence across the national territory in these cases. For decades this weakness put the onus on the center’s ability to at least be able to appoint and remove regional authorities. Against such a backdrop, and considering that state formation is very much an ongoing process in several of these countries, giving up this prerogative would be no small thing.

Of my four cases, only Colombia has experienced a federal form of government in the past, and some (e.g. Wibbels 2005) consider it federal today due to the nature of the changes that were introduced in its 1991 Constitution, which nevertheless formally defines the country as a decentralized, unitary republic. Between 1863 and 1886, Colombia was governed by one of the most decentralized federal systems the world has ever seen, identifying the then nine regions as sovereign states (*Estados Soberanos*), and enabling them to elect their own authorities, write their own laws, design their own judicial systems, create their own armies, and even determine the width of their own railroad tracks (Cruz 2011). By letting each state define its own electoral law, the constitution assured that the “dominant party in each state would monopolize representation in both federal legislative chambers, excluding the minority party and making violence the only way to achieve political change” (Cruz 2011, 114). Ultimately federalism led to “organized anarchy” and a powerful backlash in the form of the highly centralizing 1886 Constitution (Park 1985, 297), which gave presidents the right to appoint all governors and governors in turn the right to appoint all mayors. For more than a century, the center’s power to appoint governors operated as a key tool of governance, enabling presidents to build support for their legislative programs in a party system riven with internal factions and limited party discipline.

In contrast to Colombia, Peru not only had no equivalent past episode of federalism, but a much more limited experience with stable constitutional rule and much more pervasive regime volatility. Under both elected civilian governments and military and civilian authoritarian regimes, the central government located on the coast in Lima used the appointment of regional authorities as a tool to counter high levels of territorial fragmentation, especially important in the poorer and more densely populated highland regions. Elected regional governments appeared only in the 1979 Constitution, which was written by an assembly elected in the end phase of military rule, and which was then overwhelmed by the realities of the lethal internal armed conflict that broke out the following year in 1980. Not only were gubernatorial elections not held, but large swathes of the country were put under direct military rule in the attempt to defeat the Shining Path insurgency (Burt 2007). Only when President Alán Garcia (1985-1990) sensed the certain defeat of his party in the 1990 presidential elections did he move to introduce regional elections in the hopes of holding onto some degree of power (Kim 1992). These elections were then suspended when democracy collapsed yet again in 1992 with the self-coup of Alberto Fujimori, who proceeded to return to the norm of appointing all regional authorities from the center.

The prerogative to appoint regional authorities likewise emerges as a key feature of Bolivia’s history; even when the pro-federal Liberal side based in the region of La Paz won the 1898-99 Federal War against the Conservatives centered in the region of Chuquisaca, upon their victory they decided not to actually introduce elections for regional officials after all, and instead continued to appoint prefects for the country’s eight regions (nine after the subdivision of the Beni in 1938). Fifty years after the conclusion of the Federal War, the logic of Bolivia’s 1952 revolution produced a new spate of centralizing changes that accentuated even further the political and functional dependence of regional governments on the center (Roca 1999). For example, the party that led the revolution and took control of the national government (the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* or MNR) used that control even to suppress elections for mayor in the nine departmental capitals (Eaton 2007). Military rule in Bolivia (1964-1982) was similarly unkind to any practice of regional autonomy, and Bolivia entered its current period of democratic rule in 1982 with intermediate-level governments that were among the weakest in Latin America. Although Bolivia did subsequently adopt highly significant decentralizing reforms in the 1990s, these reforms privileged devolution to the municipal rather than the departmental level out of deep-seated fears by then President Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada that regionalization could be the recipe for the Yugoslav-style break up of Bolivia (Sánchez de Losada and Faguet 2015).

Whereas real and perceived fears of territorial fragmentation and violence in the context of weak states have thus loomed large in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, the Chilean case diverges from this pattern even as it developed the longest-lived attachment to the norm of appointed governors (called *intendentes*). In Chile, the very early consolidation of the state in the 1830s largely put to rest the threat of territorial challengers to the authority of the national government in Santiago, in contrast to the other three cases. The 1891 civil war, for example, was fought not between regional leaders but rather pitted the national Congress against a President (José Manuel Balmaceda) whose attempt to pursue a more statist development model they opposed (Eaton 2004). Over time, Chile experienced waves of decentralization (1891-1924) and centralization (1830-1891 and 1924-1933), but these affected only the municipal level of government (and the question of municipal autonomy), and not the 25 provinces into which Chile was divided at the intermediate-level, which were consistently governed by appointees from Santiago. A major disruption at the intermediate level in Chile took place under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, who unilaterally replaced the 25 provinces with 13 regions. The regions were designed to operate not as governments but as administrative divisions to facilitate the work of the national government (and were referred to by their number rather than their names to demonstrate that they were not meant to represent regional identities). When democracy was restored in 1990, the regions were converted into governments (which the right hoped to control in a few southern regions), but not with elected regional chief executives (Bland 2003).

If the right to appoint regional leaders was a highly valued prerogative for national governments in each of these four cases, why did the center agree to introduce gubernatorial elections, and what were the long-term effects of the specific design decisions they made?

**Colombia: From the National Front to the Collapse of the Traditional Party System**

In Colombia, institutional reformers introduced gubernatorial elections in 1992 in the attempt to end the country’s long civil war and effectuated instead the end of the party system (while the war would last another two decades, formally coming to a conclusion only in 2016 with the Havana Peace Accord). How can these long-term effects for the party system be understood with reference to the motives that animated reformers?

While Colombia is the only one of my four cases in which democracy did not collapse in the 1960s and 1970s, its democratic regime survived in these years due to a highly exclusionary power-sharing agreement in the National Front period (1958-1974) which was negotiated between the two traditional parties as a way to transcend a lethal decade of inter-party violence known as *La Violencia* (1948-1958). To reduce partisan violence, the parties agreed not just to alternate in the presidency, equally share bureaucratic spoils, and hold the same number of seats in Congress, but also to apply the norm of parity vis-a-vis departmental governorships. The National Front worked as a mechanism to end the inter-party conflict, but at the cost of encouraging other non-traditional political actors to embrace violence as the only way to participate in politics. When the Conservative and Liberal parties continued to monopolize appointed governorships after 1974, the decision to adopt political decentralization with the introduction of mayoral elections in 1988 and gubernatorial elections in 1992 offered a way to address the undemocratic legacies of the National Front by enabling nonviolent participation on the part of non-traditional actors.

Against the backdrop of a century of “bipartidismo” (two-party rule), political decentralization worked as intended and brought into office governors whose demographic characteristics and backgrounds were underrepresented among the established political class. After just five years, independent candidates won nearly a third of the governorships (10 out of 32) in the 1997 regional elections (Boudin 2000), including a notable writer (Gustavo Alvarez Gardezábal) in the important department of Valle del Cauca (Restrepo 2004, 84). Subsequent elections brought to power Colombia’s first indigenous governor (Floro Tunubalá) in the department of Cauca in 2001, a former leader of the M-19 insurgency to the governorship of Nariño in 2008 (Antonio Navarro Wolff), and Cauca’s first Afrocolombian governor in 2019 (Elias Larrahondo Carabalí). As Darío Restrepo notes, decentralization also facilitated the emergence of diplomatic efforts on the part of governors in six key departments (Caquetá, Huila, Putumayo, Tolima, Nariño and Cauca) who aggressively questioned the center’s drug eradication policies under the auspices of Plan Colombia (Restreo 2004, 84). Few could dispute that regional elections widened the scope for pluralism in Colombian politics, and that it facilitated the emergence of new parties at the departmental level (Gutierrez Sanín 2007).

But political decentralization did more than just create opportunities for nontraditional actors to wield power at the regional level, it actually led to the unraveling of the country’s long-standing two party system. How? Critical here is the zeal of reformers in the 1991 Constitution who decided not just to introduce elections for governors (which was itself a truly historic reform), but to simultaneously implement a very generous approach to fiscal decentralization as well. According to Articles 356 and 357 of the new Constitution (and the Law 60 that implemented it in 1993), transfers must increase from 26% of national revenues to 46% by 2002. The Constitutional likewise mandated the sharing of 50% of royalties with producer regions. In contrast to the specific transfer mandates, the Constitution introduced only loose earmarks on how these revenues should be spent by departmental governments. Just as important, as Tulia Falleti emphasizes (2010, 141), was the choice that reformers made about which revenues would feed the pool subject to automatic sharing with the departments, and their decision to stipulate that transfers would be a percentage not of ordinary national income but of current income (which includes ordinary and nontax revenue income). Fiscal decentralization in Colombia was so generous that it put at risk Colombia’s famed macroeconomic stability (Alesina 2005). Finally, despite the sense that decentralization was even more generous to municipalities than departments in Colombia (Falleti 2010), it is important to note the tutelary role that legislation gave to governors over municipalities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants (which constitute approximately 94% of Colombia’s 1,122 municipalities).

As Eduardo Dargent and Paula Muñoz argue in their important work on this topic, the combination of political and fiscal decentralization “reduced the power of intermediate-level party leaders over the distribution of selective incentives, making these leaders less important for local politicians, and gave more political and financial autonomy to local candidates, reducing their need to join parties in order to advance their electoral goals.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Worsening matters, the decentralization framework failed to provide for effective mechanisms of intergovernmental coordination, widening the growing hiatus between national and department officials even further (Leyva Boter 2011, 226). Over time, as Margarita Battle (2014, 115) documents, elections in Colombia exhibited growing incongruence between electoral outcomes in national and subnational races, with a notable decline in the territorial coverage of the traditional parties. Just as noteworthy is the rapidity with which local-level deinstitutionalization impacted the national level of politics. Within a decade of the introduction of gubernatorial elections in 1992, the candidates of the two traditional parties failed to win Colombia’s presidential election in 2002 for the first time in the country’s history. One can imagine a counterfactual where the adoption of either political or fiscal decentralization (but not both at the same time) would have posed a far less significant threat to the survival of the traditional party system in Colombia.

**Bolivia: From the “Catastrophic Impasse” to the Reconciliation of East and West**

In contrast to Colombia, the introduction of gubernatorial elections in Bolivia did not lead to the collapse of the traditional party system but rather marks the culmination of that collapse. Gubernatorial elections were held for the first time in Bolivia on the same day in December 2005 that Evo Morales’s *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement toward Socialism or MAS) won the presidency in a landslide, marking the end of the domination of the three traditional and pro-market parties that had governed Bolivia since the transition to democracy in 1982. While it was the historic election of Morales that made world headlines that day (as Bolivia’s first indigenous president), the introduction of regional elections was also of great significance, and resulted in the defeat of the MAS’s candidate in the country’s four eastern departments. How was it that the election of governors, which was introduced in the attempt to territorially contain and isolate the eastern opposition to the MAS, ultimately enabled that opposition to force major policy compromise and ideological moderation upon the MAS?

In Bolivia, institutional reform was the product of powerful bottom-up demands in the country’s four eastern regions (Beni, Pando, Santa Cruz, and Tarija) for the right to elect their own governors. Led by Santa Cruz, these lowland regions in the so-called half moon (*media luna*) are the site of the country’s most profitable and extensive agribusiness operations and benefited disproportionately from the pro-market policies that were introduced at the national level in 1985 (policies that had simultaneously inflicted real costs on the western, poorer, and more indigenous departments of the highlands). A key turning point in the Bolivian reform narrative came with the 2002 election in which, not only did MAS come out of nowhere to place second in the presidential race, but for the first time since the transition in 1982 the combined vote of the three traditional parties failed to win a majority (Laserna 2004, 57). Although one of those parties (MNR) was still able to build a coalition to secure the presidency in 2002 under Sánchez de Losada, the weakness of his government (which lasted little more than a year) convinced economic and political elites in Santa Cruz that Bolivia’s pro-market model was in jeopardy and that departmental autonomy would be necessary to shield the lowlands from “21st century socialism” (Eaton 2007).

After the resignation of Sánchez de Losada in October 2003 and his replacement by interim president Carlos Mesa, the main civil society organization in Santa Cruz (the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee) began an ultimately successful campaign to demand political decentralization, convening the largest ever public demonstrations in Bolivia in June 2004 and again in January 2005 to demand the introduction of gubernatorial elections (and to unilaterally declare that organization’s leader as de facto governor of the department). In the attempt to appease Santa Cruz and serve out the remainder of Sánchez de Losada’s term, Mesa in April 2005 agreed not just to schedule the first-ever elections for governor that December, but also to allow a referendum on the possibility of departmental autonomy. In that July 2 2006 referendum, Bolivian voters were asked whether or not they wanted to require the Constituent Assembly (also elected that same day) to introduce a “regime of departmental autonomy” that would give departments “executive authority, administrative power, and financial resources…within the framework of national unity.” Although this referendum failed at the national level, it was approved by overwhelming majorities in each of the four eastern departments which proceeded to write “autonomy statues” and to hold wildcat referenda in May and June 2008 that approved these statutes. Bolivia’s institutional impasse then reached its inflection point in September and October of that year, as the highland peasant federation led a blockade of Santa Cruz and the CPSC led attacks on a number of national government institutions, including police stations and the land reform agency. The CPSC was particularly furious about the December 2007 draft of the constitution that had suppressed departmental autonomy in favor of indigenous autonomy (Eaton 2017, 161).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Faced with real violence and the prospect of worse to come, the MAS was forced to make serious concessions in the new Constitution that had the effect of moderating its ideological vision for Bolivia. First, the MAS agreed to let Santa Cruz keep the social service cooperatives (in electricity, utility, and telecom) that had been at the heart of its market-oriented model dating back to the 1950s. Second, and more importantly given how important the agrarian question was in the emergence of the MAS and how much a fear of land invasions had motivated the fears of economic elites, the MAS agreed that new limits on the size of landholdings would not be applied retroactively, in effect protecting the (highly unequal) land tenure regime in the east. Third, Morales agreed to recognize the outcome of the illegal/wildcat referenda autonomy as long as they would be adjusted to conform to the (now heavily) amended Constitution (in a process referred to as “adecuación”). As acknowledged by the MAS’s first-ever Minister of the Autonomies (Carlos Romero), the liberal vision of the departmental autonomy statutes was fundamentally at odds with the attempt by the MAS to create a “plurinational state.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In the wake of this constitutional settlement, the MAS doubled its governorships in the second gubernatorial elections that were held in 2010, but the three eastern departments of Beni, Santa Cruz, and Tarija elected opponents of the MAS once again.[[6]](#footnote-6) Most important is the reelection of wealthy landowner Ruben Costas, who led the attempt to check Morales over the fifteen years that he served as governor of Santa Cruz (2006-2021).

Over the course of Morales’s second presidential administration (2009-2014), the combination of regional elections and departmental autonomy drove the MAS toward policy moderation in ever more obvious ways. In 2009 and 2010, Morales’s hopes to promote food sovereignty through export and price controls led Santa Cruz producers to withhold rice, oil, sugar, and meat from the domestic market, ultimately forcing the government to revoke the controls. In hindsight this was the first sign of a process of reconciliation that culminated in formal meetings between the national government and leading business chambers in Santa Cruz in January 2012 that was billed as a “Great National Accord” (*Gran Acuerdo Nacional*). The MAS then made good on promises exacted by businesses in a number of high profile sectors, agreeing to use force to evict land invaders, relaxing the rules requiring farms to prove productivity, and loosening state controls over the illegal clearing of forests in the east. In the words of Gustavo Pedraza, “the MAS signed onto the Santa Cruz model and not the reverse; the result is a liberal economy with an indigenous face.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Peru: Reform Paralysis and the Growing Disconnect between Lima and the Regions**

In contrast to Colombia and Bolivia, where gubernatorial elections were introduced either to end or prevent civil war, in Peru the decision making process was dominated by highly short-term electoral calculations on the part of a president (Alejandro Toledo) who was deeply ambivalent about reform. Under pressure to quickly schedule gubernatorial elections in the throes of a chaotic transition to democracy, his government endorsed a highly unusual sequential approach to decentralization that made fiscal and administrative devolution contingent on the amalgamation of existing regions, which never happened. How did Toledo’s political calculations end up in a reform that severed the connection between Peru’s national and intermediate-level governments?

Over his decade in power (1990-2000), Alberto Fujimori had downgraded regions from governments to mere administrative units, controlled them as Transitional Regional Administrative Councils, and sought to downplay their relevance by continuing to allow municipal elections (Dickovick 2012, Zas Friz 2004). In his (unsuccessful) campaign in 2000 against Fujimori (who won the election but then fled the country), and in his (successful) campaign against Alán García in 2001, Toledo found in decentralization an issue that could both distinguish himself from Fujimori and undercut Garcia, who had introduced decentralization in his earlier period as president in the 1980s. Given Fujimori’s strength in Lima and in the countryside, Toledo embraced decentralization in 2000 as a policy that would bolster his support in departmental capitals and secondary cities. In the 2001 campaign, Toledo promised to hold regional elections immediately and García held him to this promise when the former defeated the latter. Toledo certainly had cause to worry that García’s APRA party would do well in regional elections given that it was the only party that had survived the collapse of the party system under Fujimori (Cameron and Levitsky 2003, Grompone 2005). However, by scheduling the elections early in his administration in 2002, Toledo hoped that his popularity would help produce regional victories for candidates of the Perú Posible party that had served as his electoral vehicle. Bold action vis-à-vis decentralization was also appealing because Toledo’s support for and continuation of Fujimori’s market-oriented economic policies made it hard for him to distinguish himself ideologically.

Less than a year into his administration, Toledo pushed Congress to approve constitutional reforms in March 2002 that identified decentralization as a permanent and irreversible policy of the state (in effect reversing Fujimori’s reversal). In July 2002 Congress passed the framework law for decentralization, which eschewed the simultaneous adoption of decentralizing changes in all three dimensions (political, fiscal and administrative) and established instead an explicitly staged approach. Decentralization would begin in the political sphere with the creation of regional governments on the basis of Peru’s twenty five existing administrative departments. Reflecting the rushed nature of decentralization, it was only the day before regional elections were held on November 20, 2002 that Congress passed the Organic Law of Regional Governments specifying the prerogatives and responsibilities of the governments that were constituted the following day. During the second stage of decentralization, these regional governments were to be replaced by the formation of larger and more viable “macroregions” based on the fusion of two or more regional governments. The regions themselves would formulate plans to amalgamate, and voters would then decide in a special referendum whether to endorse these new macro-regions. Despite the passage in 2004 of a Law of Incentives for the Integration of Regions, voters rejected all five proposals (affecting 16 departments) in the 2005 referendum. During the third stage of decentralization, Lima would then devolve functions in all sectors except education and health, which would only be transferred on a case-by-case basis subsequent to accreditation (Conterno 2007). Finally, fiscal revenues would be transferred as a function of specific administrative responsibilities, and revenue sharing (coparticipación) would be introduced once macro-regions had been created via referendum.

It is hard to imagine an approach to decentralization least likely to produce the meaningful devolution of power. The decision by legislators to hold the referendum on the creation of macroregions *after* elections for regional officials reflects a serious design flaw if the intention was truly to create a smaller (and more viable) number of regional governments. Unsurprisingly, the individuals who were elected as regional presidents and as regional assembly members in 2002 faced strong incentives to campaign against the macro-regions since the possible fusion of regional governments could have resulted in the elimination of their own elected positions. The failure to form macro-regions, upon which all subsequent steps were dependent, meant that decentralization was, in effect, dead upon arrival. Toledo could have responded to this early failure by supporting new legislation to push forward with fiscal and administrative decentralization to the existing departments, but faced no incentives to do so. In the first elections held in 2002, the opposition APRA party emerged as the big winner, electing regional presidents (subsequently re-named governors) in nearly half of Peru’s regions (12 of 25). That Toledo’s party won the election in only one region (Callao) suggests that it was a “major miscalculation” for him (Tanaka 2002). A similar dynamic unfolded in the subsequent round of elections in 2006 during García’s second presidential administration, when the now governing APRA party lost gubernatorial reelection bids in all but one region (after which García also lost his enthusiasm for decentralization).

Political decentration in the absence of meaningful fiscal decentralization has dramatically widened the disconnect between Peru’s national and regional governments. Over time, and thanks to a rule that enables regional movements to contest regional elections without having to organize nationally or run candidates in national elections, national parties have simply lost the ability to win regional elections. By the third round of gubernatorial elections in 2010, purely regional movements had won control over 19 of Peru’s 25 regions. While political decentralization has undeniably widened the range and type of political and socio-economic interests that are represented in government, it has also manifested the deep failure of parties “in their function of aggregating vertical interests from multiple levels of government (Vergara 2011, 78). That regions are governed by movements with no representation at the center, while the center is governed by parties that do not govern in the regions, has denied Peru the kinds of mechanisms that could be used to tackle the tremendous governance challenges that it faces, including the explosive conflicts over mining that have unfolded over the last twenty years. Worse still, while Peru lacks an operative fiscal decentralization framework, it has instituted over the last two decades a highly unequal royalty-sharing system (*canon minero*) to transfer funds to producer regions that has seriously aggravated tensions between favored and disfavored subnational units (Gruber and Orijuela 2018). If Peru is sorely lacking in integrative institutions, much of the blame can be placed on the way decentralization was designed.

**Chile: Delayed Reform and The Creation of Dual Regional Executive Authorities**

Although too little time has elapsed to assess the long-term effects of the introduction of gubernatorial elections in Chile, which were first held in 2021, it is possible to analyze the side effects (i.e. short-term motivations) that led to this reform and the institutional design choices made by reformers. Although it is too soon to know, these choices lead one to predict that the effects of gubernatorial elections will be far less profound than what was observed in the three cases above. Motivated by widespread but diffuse protests and a gathering legitimacy crisis, reformers in 2016 finally agreed to hold elections for governor but – in contrast to the other three cases – to insist that elected governors share power in the regions they govern with presidential appointees sent from Santiago (who are now called *delegados* rather than *intendentes*).

At the time of the transition to democracy in Chile, national political leaders on the left and right demonstrated strategic, but limited interest in strengthening subnational governments. On the left side of the political spectrum, municipal democratization appealed to parties that were anxious to remove mayors who had been appointed by Pinochet, especially considering the administrative decentralization that took place under the dictatorship in the health and education sectors. Meanwhile, parties on the right (especially the *Unión Demócrata Independiente*) pushed for the maintenance of the 13 regions that Pinochet had created and that were associated with the country’s neoliberal transformation (Navarette e Higueros 2014). Support for the right was especially strong in the southern region of Araucania. As a result of this ideological bargain between left and right, the regions were kept in place but without any directly elected authorities; not only would the chief executives be appointed from Santiago, but members of the regional assemblies would only be indirectly selected by municipal councilors. Deconcentration rather than decentralization is a better way to describe this institutional design. It took another two decades (until 2009) for the introduction of elections for regional assembly members, and still more delays before Congress could agree to pass legislation that eventually introduced elections for governors (which were not held for another five years, three decades after the dictatorship ended).

A mix of external and internal pressures help explain the very late decision in Chile to finally join the rest of the region in allowing gubernatorial elections, as well as the content of the quite limited reform that was eventually introduced. Externally important is Chile’s status as the only Latin American country other than Mexico to have become a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Advocates of gubernatorial elections consistently noted that Chile was the only country other than Turkey to not hold elections for regional chief executives. Introducing these elections, regardless of the fact that they were actually designed to limit subnational autonomy, provided a visible “checking of the box” in terms of OECD expectations. A more powerful set of pressures emerged within Chile in the form of growing disaffection with the quality of the democracy that had emerged from the dictatorship and the exhaustion of its “electoral-professional” parties in particular, which showed over time a decreasing ability to articulate societal grievances (Altman and Luna 2011). Especially worrisome was the decline in voter turnout due not to a lack of mass-elite congruence in political opinion but rather of a deep-seated frustration with the elitist form of politics in the country (Siavelis 2009). While few protests explicitly demanded decentralization (and some actually articulated grievances with the consequences of Pinochet-era decentralization – such as the waves of protests by secondary students that began in 2006), gubernatorial elections appealed to national party leaders as a concrete and visible reform that could potentially boost the perceived legitimacy of the established democratic order. At the same time, the strength of national parties, high levels of party discipline, and the ability to veto any measures of fiscal decentralization, reassured reformers that gubernatorial elections would not have the kind of results seen in Colombia. Also, in contrast to all three of my other cases, when gubernatorial elections were introduced in Chile, due to COVID-related delays they were scheduled in 2021 concurrently with presidential elections (rather than non-concurrently), which is a design that undercuts their potential to privilege subnational concerns.

Chileans were finally able to elect their governors in 2021, but they elected these leaders to offices whose responsibilities would be severely constrained by the design choices of the national party leaders who enacted reform. Most importantly, rather than replace the figure of the centrally-appointed intendant (*intendente*) with the figure of the directly-elected governor, reformers instituted a hybrid system in which the intendant position was retained but renamed as a presidential delegate in the region(*delegado*). According to Elon Montecinos (2020), this dual authority arrangement means that governors and delegates in the same region will share similar prerogatives and powers. Governors are authorized to articulate regional development plans and coordinate and oversee public services that depend on the regional government, but actually have no political authority over the Regional Ministerial Secretariats (*Secretarías Regionales Ministeriales* or SEREMIS) that control 70-80% of public investment in most regions (Montesinos 2020, 11). It is the presidential delegate and not the elected governor who enjoys the right to appoint the heads of these powerful SEREMIS. Rather than consider this as an episode of institutional layering (Mahoney and Thelen 2010, 16-17), in which the addition of new rules (e.g. elected governors) are added on top of old rules (e.g. appointed intendants/delegates) in ways that change the meaning of old rules, the imbalance of power between the two figures in this institutional design suggests that very little may change in the enforcement of the old (deeply centralist) rules.

Finally, when gubernatorial elections were eventually held on November 21, 2021, they yielded mixed results. On the one hand, the center-left coalition that won the first round of the presidential election that same day (and went onto win in the second round) also won governorships in ten of the (now) 16 regions, with a few of these having served as intendants in the past (Jorge Flies in Magallanes and Rodrigo Díaz in Biobio). On the other hand, two of these governors are independent (non-partisan) candidates who decided to affiliate with the governing coalition, including an environmental activist in northern Antofagasta (Ricardo Díaz). The only right-of-center governor to win office was also an independent candidate, though affiliated with the rightist national coalition Chile Vamos (Luciano Rivas in Araucanía). Perhaps most significantly, the independent candidates who won in Valparaíso and Atacama are not allied with either of the two dominant national coalitions.

**Conclusion**

Comparing the Latin American countries that have introduced gubernatorial elections in recent decades generates three main insights vis–a-vis the study of instrumental incoherence. First, when the analytical focus is limited to just the first-order effects of this similar institutional change, one is struck by a key similarity. In each country, when the center surrendered its appointment prerogative and instead let voters pick governors, voters responded by selecting individuals whose profiles did indeed deviate from their predecessors in office. Political decentralization “worked” in the sense that it brought to power men and women whose political profiles suggested that they could bring fresh perspectives and experiences into subnational governance, rather than simply reproducing the pre-election status quo. In Colombia and Peru, this effect was profound. Gubernatorial elections dramatically subverted the hegemonic grip that Colombia’s two traditional parties had long maintained over subnational governance, and in Peru they empowered a host of new regional movements that now control almost all departmental governments. In Bolivia’s eastern departments, elections strengthened the position of new regional parties that have few prospects of ever winning national office, but that could and did access real power at the regional level. Even in Chile, where political decentralization is likely to have a much more limited impact, the first round of gubernatorial elections in 2021 nevertheless brought independent candidates into office in a quarter of the regions. Advocates of political decentralization who promote it fundamentally as a way to broaden the representativeness of democratic political systems could thus find cause for some degree of celebration in all four of these cases.

Second, to understand more fully the long-term and ultimately quite different consequences that this similar institutional reform has generated in different countries, it is essential to emphasize the diversity of the specific side-effects that drove reformers. While the first-order effects (e.g. a generally more representative democracy) look quite similar, the side effects diverged a great deal and generated some important surprises that only become apparent when the timeframe of the analysis is extended. In Colombia, the urgency of ending a devastating internal armed conflict (which was already three decades old at the time of institutional reform and would last another two decades) pushed reformers to adopt not just political but also fiscal decentralization. This powerful combination (missing from all of my three other cases) led to an almost unimaginable outcome: the collapse of a party system that had been in place for almost 150 years. In Bolivia, gubernatorial elections were adopted as a containment strategy vis-a-vis eastern departments, but governors in these departments refused to be contained and instead used their subnational perches to force change upon a national government with hegemonic pretensions. Gubernatorial elections did not keep the MAS from winning the presidency (which it has done in every election since 2005), but they did alter the orientation of its economic program. Peru is perhaps the most stunning case here; nowhere was the agent of reform (Toledo) more narrowly oriented in his reform objectives (e.g. immediate electoral gains), but nowhere has political decentralization been more impactful in terms of the serious and seemingly unmanageable rift that it has opened up between the national and regional tiers of governance.

Third is the critical importance of adopting a multidimensional approach to the study of institutional reform. Much would be lost by focusing on just the electoral arena as a single dimension of study and limiting the analysis to questions of electoral design, including rules governing concurrent elections, the use of second rounds, or the possibility of purely subnational parties. My analysis shows not just that multi-dimensionality is important to make sense of institutional performance over time, but that even in the precise moment of institutional reform it is necessary to look beyond the electoral dimension. Even in the “simplest” case of Colombia, what is critical is how reformers combined change in two different dimensions of decentralization (political and fiscal). In Bolivia, gubernatorial elections would not have had the outsize impact they have had in the absence of the simultaneous development of regional autonomy statutes. The Peruvian case reminds us that the decentralization literature largely assumes stability in the borders between subnational units, and that such an assumption is problematic when reformers are simultaneously proposing to introduce elections in subnational units and change the dimensions of those units in a separate dimension of reform. In Chile, understanding the electoral formula chosen to elect governors is important (Suárez Cao 2016), but only tells us so much in the absence of attention to the ways that presidential “delegates” will limit their control over bureaucratic assets. In the study of instrumental incoherence, figuring out which dimensions are analytically relevant in order to understand a discrete institutional reform (such as gubernatorial elections) can be hard to determine *ex ante*, and likely requires considerable country-specific knowledge about the cases at hand.

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1. An interesting exception here is Uruguay, whose most important subnational tier is at the intermediate level in the form of 19 departments into which the national territory is divided. Only in 2010 did Uruguay introduce the possibility of creating municipal governments within these departments. In this way Uruguay has moved in the opposite direction from the cases studied here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the more general statement of this approach, see Ricart-Huguet and Sellars 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the more general impact of decentralization on Latin American party systems, see Harbers 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In turn, critics of the Santa Cruz autonomy statue noted that it ignored the issue of indigenous autonomy and reflected a high degree of “departmental centralism” (Lara 2013, 47). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Desafío: Estatutos autonómicos con pactos sociales,” *Cambio*, January 16, 2011, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the 2015 elections, the MAS finally won in Beni but lost again in Santa Cruz and Tarija, and also lost the governorship of La Paz to another leftist party (under the governorship of Felix Patzi). In the most recent elections in 2021 (postponed due to the political crisis in 2019 and COVID outbreak in 2020), the MAS won only three gubernatorial elections (in Chuquisaca, Cochabamba, and Potosí), even as it reclaimed the presidency. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interview with Gustavo Pedraza, former Minister of Sustainable Development, August 30, 2012, Santa Cruz. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)