

Institutions and the Legislative Success of 'Strong' Presidents: An Analysis of Government Bills in Chile

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This paper examines the approval of government bills in Chile, evaluating the effect of presidential prerogatives and policy substance, and considering both bill-specific and contextual effects. The results show that presidential prerogatives over financial policy, as well as the ability to affect the congressional agenda through urgent bill scheduling, significantly influence government bill approval. As expected, government success is enhanced during the honeymoon period. However, changes in public approval of the president do not appear to exert a significant effect on the passage of presidential bills.

Keywords: bill approval; presidential powers; policy domains.

Among scholars of presidentialism, the policy success of governments was once considered to be a consequential factor in the stability of democratic regimes (Linz 1990, Shugart and Carey 1992, Mainwaring 1993). Today, questions of policy conflict and inter-branch bargaining remain central in presidentialism research. We know considerably more about presidential prerogatives, electoral rules, and party discipline than we did 30 years ago. However, several aspects of the lawmaking process remain unexplored, hindering our understanding of presidential systems outside the United States. The fate of the government's legislative programme is one such fundamental and understudied issue.

With the president as the chief proponent of major policy reforms and the effectiveness of governments stemming principally from the approval of executive-initiated bills, empirical analysis of such proposals reveals crucial aspects of presidential politics. Certain single-nation studies have begun exploring in greater detail those mechanisms that facilitate or obstruct the passage of legislation (Llanos 2001, Alston and Mueller 2005), and some recent works have also presented aggregate data on the approval of such proposals (Figueiredo and Limongi 2000, Cheibub *et al.* 2004). But statistical analyses of the success of individual initiatives are rare, hindering our understanding of the various forces systematically influencing the approval of government legislative programmes.¹ This paper contributes to filling this void in the presidentialism literature by examining the success of government proposals in Chile.

The Chilean executive is representative of the institutionally-powerful Latin American president. Chile normally ranks high across most institutional

9. We collected this data from the electronic archives of the Chilean Congress (*Cámara de Diputados*). For bills where online information was lacking, we collected information from the Library of Congress in Chile (*Biblioteca del Congreso*).
10. In these models, unexplained variation between groups and unexplained variation within groups have random variability.
11. The data comes from polls conducted by Centro de Estudios Públicos, publicly available at <http://www.cepchile.cl>.
12. According to Article 17 of the internal rules of Congress, bills are 'archived' (killed) following two years without a committee report. Data on bills passed as of December 2007.
13. We ran these models using STATA's (10.1) command `xtmelogit`. We checked our results using the `lmer` command in R 2.7.2 software, and found identical results.
14. The coefficients that appear significant in model 1 are also significant in the fixed-effects model. These results are available from the authors upon request.
15. This is the standard deviation of the estimated mean level of legislative success per congressional period (the intercept).
16. Based on estimates for model 1 with other variables at their means.
17. These predictions are for bills without urgencies that are not constitutional reforms.
18. For incentives under the two-member electoral system see Magar *et al.* (1998).
19. The almost unanimous opposition to the use of urgencies by Chilean legislators is reflected in a series of interviews reported by Siavelis (2000, p. 152).
20. Personal interview, Santiago, Chile, 14 November 2002.

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