July 20, 2021

Revision Memo

Dear Editors and Anonymous Reviewers,

Please find enclosed a revised version of “The Political Origins of Education Decentralization.” I am grateful to the editors for the opportunity to revise this piece and to the reviewers for a thoughtful reading of my manuscript and excellent comments. I begin by highlighting four major changes to the manuscript since its first submission. A point-by-point reply to the reviewers follows. I hope you find the manuscript greatly improved.

**Major Changes**

1. Reviewer 1 suggests I more fully position my argument with respect to the broader literature on decentralization. In response, I have more fully fleshed out two ways in which my work is a departure from prominent existing scholarship on decentralization, alongside what I think are important contributions to the literature on education. I have clarified these contributions on the front-end.
2. Reviewer 2 recommends that I integrate Hertel-Fernandez policy as weapon concept. I find this concept useful and have incorporated it into the argument section. This resolves some of R1’s concerns regarding concept development.
3. Reviewer 2 notes inconsistency in the dependent variable. I am interested in explaining when incumbents advance education decentralization. This is an original contribution to the literature on decentralization because most studies focus on explaining when decentralization initiatives are successfully enacted (or not). I have streamlined the manuscript to focus on this DV more clearly.
4. Reviewer 1 suggests I frame the paper as a theory building exercise and suggests placing less attention to the quantitative results. In response to this and point 3 above, I have eliminated the regression portion, giving me more space to develop the theory and concepts, and address other reviewer concerns. I do keep a plausibility test that speaks to my theory’s implications for understanding when decentralization succeeds.

**Reply to Reviewer 1**

1. Framing: “This article should be more centered on decentralization politics in general.”

I thank the reviewer for pushing me on this point. My work advances the literature on decentralization in several ways that I think are important and I have fleshed out these insights further. First, I show that my work builds on scholarship on the political benefits of political decentralization (Bohlken 2016; Niedzwiecki 2018; O’Neill 2003, 2005). What is new, in the context of decentralization politics, is the idea that incumbents use decentralization to demobilize political opponents. Second, I demonstrate that administrative decentralization can be pursued without concurrent political and fiscal decentralization, a break from how more recent works conceptualize decentralization. Alongside a paragraph detailing its contribution to education politics, these points now anchor the piece more fully in the extant literature.

1. Departure: “For example, how do the theory developed in the manuscript and the cases of education decentralization in El Salvador and Paraguay draw on, but also depart from, the work of Tulia Falleti?”

I’ve thought a lot about this point. I’ve concluded that Falleti (2010) doesn’t have much to say about education decentralization (understood as a type of administrative reform) in the *absence of political or fiscal decentralization*. As she states in her book, "Although it is analytically conceivable that only one or two types of decentralization could occur, in reality, administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization are highly intertwined. For example, political decentralization is very likely to lead to demands for fiscal decentralization, which, in turn, is likely to lead to administrative decentralization” (19). The case of El Salvador shows this isn’t generally true. This issue also crops up in other newer work in decentralization, like Anjali Thomas Bohlken’s (2016) book. Bohlken shows that political decentralization is possible in the absence of fiscal and administrative devolution. This point and connection to Bohlken now features more prominently in the piece and distinguishes my work from that of Falleti.

I also make a stronger connection between my work and that of Sara Niedzwiecki (2018). Specifically, I show how my work relates to the idea that electoral politics frames how decentralization operates in practice. My study is a departure from this still because my emphasis is, of course, on decentralization as a tool to demobilize the opposition, which occurs before implementation.

1. Concepts: “The theory section should present and elaborate on the concept of “teachers’ union link to the opposition” or OUL… Electoral competition and electoral strategy also need to be defined and discussed in more depth.”

I thank the reviewer for this point. I’ve replaced teacher’s union link with language about associational ties and have expanded on what I mean by electoral competition. I replace “electoral strategy” with the more specific mechanism of decentralization as political weapon.

1. Argument: “Also, why are teacher-party links so strong and stable? A central finding by Steve Levitsky and Victoria Murillo is that parties are often disloyal to unions. In the 1990s, there was partisan de-alignment, when labor-based parties imposed market-oriented reforms on longstanding union allies. So why were parties loyal to teachers? More discussion of the loyalty dilemmas of parties, and why parties might be more loyal to teachers vs. other workers would be helpful.”

I thank the reviewer for this point. I do not assume that party union ties are permanent. As Chambers-Ju has shown, union makeup has shifted the organizations partisan affiliations over time. I have clarified in text that what matter is whether or not incumbents perceive an opposition-union linkage as important to the opposition’s electoral odds.

1. Case Selection: “However, the fact that El Salvador was emerging from a civil war seems to strongly frame decentralization there. The author should acknowledge this difference and explain why it is not a problem for the paired comparison.”

I thank the reviewer for this comment. I now make explicit the point that I think that the democratization period was similar in both countries. I acknowledge that generalized violence characterized rural El Salvador prior to transition, and that this was not the case in Paraguay, though the Paraguayan rural poor also suffered from targeted violence at the hand of political actors prior to transition. What is analytically important is that in both countries political forces entered the democratization process ready to leave violence behind. In both cases, incumbents and previously banned opposition parties were serious about democratization and the opposition was seen as a formidable electoral rival. Thus, there was no question that largely abandoned rural territories would come back into the national fold. The big political question, instead, was who would win the first free election.

1. Correct Coding: “For Table 1, I would also like more evidence that these cases are scored correctly as dichotomous variables. Perhaps add 1-2 bullet points below each coding, to prove that this scoring of cases is correct. For example, if enrollment rates are low, what were they, according to the World Development Indicators?”

I thank the reviewer for this comment. This is an especially important point to me since the cases were selected with care. I’ve gone back and added specific facts and references to help the reader assess whether or not the cases are comparable. Data availability is challenging, so I select to provide information for the closest possible years. For the comparison on the two-party system I select the second election after “return to democracy” because this is the election that the parties fear, and that the demonstrates the establishment of (or perhaps return to) the two-party system. While El Salvador and Paraguay are surely not perfect clones, they are quite similar on the analytical features I reference throughout.

I will note that I had previously written “Low Primary Enrollment Rates” when I meant “Low Primary Completion Rates” which is what is referred to in-text. That has been corrected in the revised manuscript.

1. Other Cases: “There is a good deal of secondary literature on education decentralization in Central America, specifically Nicaragua. Could this be used to inform the analysis? Seems similar (and possibly relevant) to the case of El Salvador.”

I thank the review for this point. Throughout the manuscript I allude to the fact, but never really have the space to note, that there is an extensive literature in economics and public policy on decentralization in Central America. Specifically, the case of EDUCO in El Salvador garnered much attention in the 90s from impact evaluation specialists. However, these studies focus on the effects of the program on learning (Jimenez and Sawada 1998; Meza, Guzman, and De Varela 2004; Reimers 1997; Sawada and Ragatz 2005), not the political origins of these programs. Edwards (2017), an education scholar, does study the politics of EDUCO but from the vantage point of critical international political economy. His emphasis is on how international organizations shaped and packaged EDUCO in the early 2000s for “export” to other countries. Nonetheless he is cited in my piece and informs much of my analysis.

As to Nicaragua more specifically, a review of the secondary literature on education decentralization in that country suggests that my argument could explain its decentralization program as well. First, the decentralization program was initially couched in technical terms: the expansion of and increased efficiency in public education (Arcia and Belli 1990). Second, the government advanced the project in the absence of concurrent political or fiscal devolution; as such it looks a lot like EDUCO (Gershberg and Meade 2005). Third, as reported by Kubal (2003), the program was pushed by the incumbent, conservative government (Chamorro’s) and opposed by the Sandinista-aligned teacher’s union. There are other intriguing parallels and a few key differences but I am afraid I have not done the work to properly understand the politics around it. For example, the fact that Nicaragua features a more fragmented teacher union environment might either strengthen my argument or challenge it. I leave this task to future work.

1. Education access: “I am confused about the argument about educational access. Was decentralization really about expanding educational access? I thought it was about the quality of education. Provide more evidence or cut this discussion.”

I thank the review for these comments. While the vast majority of Latin Americans had access to education by the 1990s, coverage remained a challenge for those living in poor, rural areas. This was particularly true in countries like El Salvador and Paraguay. Quality was certainly a big, perhaps bigger, issue. But given the lack of comparative data on quality of education, I use coverage rates as a proxy for the weakness of the education system.

1. Headings: “Can section headings use more interesting language to summarize what each section is trying to do. For example, on p. 10, instead of “The Argument” perhaps “How Electoral Strategies Shape Decentralization Decisions,” or something like that.”

I thank the reviewer for this useful suggestion. I’ve now changed title headings throughout the manuscript to speak more directly to their content.

1. Conclusion: “Beef up the conclusion – what are the main contributions to the literature? Again, talk to the broader literature on the politics of decentralization and multi-level governance, political parties, and education politics.”

I thank the reviewer for this point. I’ve rewritten the conclusion to speak more directly to these points and to connect them to the revised introduction.

**Reply to Reviewer 2**

1. Framework: “I recommend the author incorporate Alexander Hertel-Fernandez’s article “Policy as Political Weapon” which, while not about education decentralization, makes an argument very similar to the author’s.”

I thank the reviewer for highlighting parallels with work by Hertel-Fernandez. In light of my reading of his work, I’ve pushed aside the general notion that incumbents advanced decentralization as an electoral strategy in favor of the more specific idea that the use decentralization as a political weapon to demobilize the opposition. In Hertel-Fernandez’ view, there are three types of weaponized policy: those affecting interest groups organizing, barriers to civic engagement, and weakening state capacity. Decentralization as political weapon is most cleanly related to the first type. Breaking up concentrated authority over education policy fragments teacher organization. The case of El Salvador is an extreme example of this: incumbents advance decentralization in part because it increases contracting and limits the number of employees on public payroll that are unionized. The piece now develops this point in conversation with Hertel-Fernandez. In doing so I am the first to apply the policy as weapon insights to a non-American context and in relation to popular decentralization strategies of the 1990s.

1. Expanding/reframing the technocratic explanation: “When the author argues that the technocratic explanation doesn’t suffice because education was actually already much improved, there are some aspects of this argument that are misleading. The author focuses on primary schooling, but secondary completion rates remained relatively low. Additionally, even if students were more likely to graduate, this doesn’t mean that the quality of education was any good. I suggest the author mention these facts as a way to nuance and strengthen the rebuttal of the technocratic explanation.

I thank the reviewer for this point. I may have leaned too hard on the idea that things were getting better. I think the stronger point is that the picture was actually mixed and that critical information was missing. As you point out, good-ish enrollment rates at the primary level must be considered alongside concerning enrollment trends in secondary. In addition, any reasonable observer might have had lingering concerns over the quality of education. I have no illusions about the sort of education being provided in La Chacra or Mejicanos in San Salvador, for example. But other than common sense, there was literally no evidence regarding the comparative achievement of Latin American students prior to 1993. The first true comparative testing effort that considered a broad swath of Latin American countries was the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) which used data from 1992. But TIMSS included only 5 Latin American countries and the study used a convenience rather than a representative sample, limiting any inferences we can make about the actual state of education in any of these countries. In 2001, UNESCO’s Office for Latin American and the Caribbean concluded that “we do not yet have a time series of education achievement indicators that is sufficiently broad to adequately describe the behavior and trends of such indicators within countries in the region” (UNESCO 2001, 10). In the interim years Latin American countries had made all sorts of changes to their education systems. That by the beginning of the new millennium policymakers across the region still had no tools to assess either the quality of education in their countries or the effectiveness of so-called quality-improving reforms should be highly suspect!

I’ve condensed this discussion to suggest that this alone cannot explain why countries decentralized education.

1. Financial Incentives: “The author mentions [that financial motivations might exist], but it seems to me important that the author addresses head-on why the desire to cut government spending in and of itself is not a viable motivation for education decentralization”

I thank the reviewer for this point. I agree that financial motivations could be seen as a technocratic incentive. I choose to tackle this in the section on ideology because I don’t know that we can divorce cost-cutting measure from neoliberal logics. To address this point, I’ve gone back to the data to see how I could show that this doesn’t matter as much as politics. In terms of debt service, both countries have similar levels of external debt in the 1970s, this shoots up considerable in the mid 1980s before falling in the early 1990s. Interestingly, it is Paraguay and not El Salvador that reaches the higher levels of debt. Yet this wasn’t enough to compel the government to decentralize education. Second, I’ve looked at education spending as a share of GDP over time. By 1989, Paraguay was spending more than half a percentage point more on education than El Salvador, with similar populations sizes and challenges in access. El Salvador steadily raises spending to match Paraguay throughout the 1990s, the time during which EDUCO was in full gear. In short, the case studies suggest that financial motivations may have been another cover for the political incentives that govern when countries advanced social sector reform. For questions of space, I’ve included only the first point in the narrative.

1. Diffusion: “I found the diffusion section unclear. It was unclear whether the author was asserting that banks did not actually condition on decentralization or that they did but it happened after decentralization. Additionally, it would be good for the author to address that there could have been other types of diffusion, like through the hiring of technocrats supportive of neoliberal policy, even if unrelated to loans. Also I didn’t find Figure 3 that helpful. I would either cut it entirely or replace it with a table that provides the year of decentralization and the year of conditionality in the social sector.”

I thank the reviewer for this point. I have now rewritten and organized this section. The argument is that there is no evidence of conditions placed to encourage decentralization. Later in the 90s, I record two instances of the IMF placing soft conditions (structural benchmarks) on the *implementation* of two decentralization projects that have already cleared the legislature. Thus, limited evidence of IFIs coercing decentralization. The point you raise is more difficult to research. Surely, education ministers and high-level bureaucrats might have borrowed ideas from abroad. But this don’t explain why some countries would chose to fight the unions and the opposition to pursue them.

1. Assumption about number of teachers’ unions: “I don’t know, but this seems to be an important assumption in the argument because if there isn’t national collective bargaining, then does decentralization really represent much of a threat?”

I thank the reviewer for this point. I agree that the easiest cases for my theory are those in which a single teacher’s union has monopoly of teacher representation and collectively bargains with the national government. But assuming they don’t have a negligible membership, any teacher’s union associated with the opposition is a threat and any policy that demobilizes them is helpful to incumbents. I also now bound the argument to suggest that it applies to cases in which unions bargain with the central government.

1. Focus: “I'm not persuaded by the paragraph in the middle on page 10. Why does it matter whether teachers' unions were able to block the reforms? The author’s argument is about the pursuit of reforms, as I understood it.”

I thank the reviewer for this point. I agree that this distracts from the DV and have thus removed it.

1. State-Building: “In the El Salvador case, I wondered whether the government was decentralizing control partially to regain state control of schools. The author mentions that guerillas and teachers’ unions were deeply connected, which made it sound like wresting power away from the unions was also an effort at regaining state capacity. The author should better make the case that this was an electoral strategy rather than a state-building strategy.”

I thank the reviewer for this important point. It matches concerns from reviewer 1 about how the civil war framed the case of El Salvador. Decentralization could be conceived of as an attempt to wrestle these areas away from guerrilla control, via the replacement of escuelas populares, and directly into the national fold. It is difficult to suggest that this was not also a motivation for the incumbent government. Still, two points suggest that decentralization was about more than state building. First, under the terms of the peace agreement the FMLN would abandon violence as a means of political power. By and large, it had given up on territorial claims. The land was for all intent and purposes the government’s. Second, the FMLN abandoned escuelas populares. These were going to be replaced by the government either way. What makes this about electoral competition is the government’s insistence on designing a program that would weaken ANDES presence

1. Dismanteling: “I think the author could make clearer how, in the author’s words, enacting decentralization dismantled the apparatus benefitting the opposition via the teachers’ union. The author makes clear that the teachers were allied with the opposition and that the EDUCO program discouraged the hiring of ANDES teachers in certain areas. But how did this dismantle anything? It sounds more like this created a new ANDES-free structure without touching what was in place. Did they get rid of the escuelas populares altogether?”

I thank the reviewer for this point. Yes, exactly. *Escuelas populares* were entirely replaced by the government with new official schools under a decentralized governance mechanism. Through the mechanisms I describe in the paper, the government excluded and fractured teacher organization in rural areas. I have now expanded on this aspect in the paper.

1. Role of diffusion: “The author states that many of the ideas that CARE pushed came from international organizations, including decentralization.”

I thank the reviewer for this point. My point was that CARE, like many other education reform councils, were exposed to ideas available in the education policy sphere. They encountered, of course, ideas about decentralizing social policy. My claim is that the availability of ideas in favor of decentralization, even when prominently discussed in public for a, are not enough to get buy-in from incumbents. I’ve clarified this in text.

1. Benefit to teachers: “What about the centralized system benefitted [teachers’ unions in Paraguay]?”

I thank the review for this point. Generally, I’m making the case that FEP and other unions were advantaged by centralized bargaining. In an hypothetical decentralization of education project, the question of who would hire, monitor, and pay teachers would likely weaken all teacher organization. Down the line, FEP would use collective bargaining to fight for its own raises. But at the time when CARE was active, it was incumbents’ perceptions about the advantages and disadvantages of centralization that matter. Incumbents that rely on teachers for votes should be wary of giving other the chance to appoint or monitor them. Decentralization was a wedge incumbents were not interested in introducing.

1. Abbreviations: “There were too many abbreviations.”

I thank the reviewer for this point. I found several instances in which generic names fit better, but I like being able to be specific about organizations, for example, and have thus kept common abbreviations for parties and unions.

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