April 30, 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 reviewers for a thoughtful reading of my manuscript. Their engagement with my work has made the piece stronger. I begin by highlighting major changes to the manuscript since its first submission. A point-by-point reply to the reviewers follows.

Major Changes

1. R1 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.
2. R2 notes inconsistency in the dependent variable—am I talking about decentralization outcomes or the pursuing of decentralization? My manuscript is interested in the first, but as I elaborate in my response below, this has implications for the second. I do flesh out this distinction in the paper and focus more clearly on the determinants of decisions to decentralize.
3. R1 suggests a conceptual beefing up of the article. I have redrawn the theoretical section to focus on actors and incentives.
4. R1 suggests I frame the paper as theory building and suggests placing less attention to the quantative results. I agree. I have placed more focus on the case studies and the theoretical discussion as a theory building exercise with a quantitative plausibility test instead of the regression as the main part of the paper. This gives me more space to develop the theory and concepts, R1 wanted.

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).

Falleti’s stance springs from her analytical focus on “big countries”, whereas piecemeal decentralization initiatives are much more common in smaller, unitary countries. This is a point that 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 work now features more prominently in the piece and distinguishes my work from that of Falleti. (I’ll note also that the analytical point that small countries and their experiences with decentralization can inform theories of what happens in bigger countries, which only clicked for me with your engagement with my work, is now highlighted in the conclusion.) ***It does raise the question of scope conditions, perhaps my theory applies only to unitary countries. But this is an empirical question that deserves more attention on the other side of the debate.***

I do 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.”

Teacher’s union link to the opposition (OUL)

Electoral competition

In order to be conceptually more precise, I replace “electoral strategy” with the particular mechanism that I study, which is the demobilization of the opposition. I also discuss this at length in re-named argument section.

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.”
2. 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.”
3. 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 they 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 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 have left this task to future work but I have made a nod to this end in the conclusion.

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.”
2. 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

References

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