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## Revolution from below: The rise of local politics and the fall of Bolivia's party system

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## REVOLUTION FROM BELOW The Rise of Local Politics and the Fall of Bolivia's Party System

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## REVOLUTION FROM BELOW

### The Rise of Local Politics and the Fall of Bolivia's Party System<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

For 50 years Bolivia's political party system was a surprisingly robust component of an otherwise fragile democracy. How did a gas pipeline dispute spark a revolution that overturned the political system, destroyed existing political parties, and re-cast the relationship between state and society? I examine how the arrival of local government shifted the nation's politics from a typical 20th century, left-right axis of competition deeply unsuited to a society like Bolivia, to an ethnic and cultural axis more closely aligned with its major social cleavage. This shift made elite parties redundant, and transformed the country's politics by facilitating the rise of structurally distinct political organizations, and a new indigenous political class. Decentralization was the trigger – not the cause – that made Bolivia's latent cleavage political, sparking revolution from below. I suggest a folk theorem of identitarian cleavage, and outline a mechanism linking deep social cleavage to sudden political change.

**Keywords:** Cleavage theory, political parties, elite politics, decentralization, Latin America, Bolivia

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## 1. Introduction

During the second half of the twentieth century, Bolivia's political party system was a surprisingly robust component of an otherwise fragile democracy. Although the country suffered some 190 coups<sup>3</sup> in its first 190 years of independence (Klein 1992, Dunkerley 1984), from 1953 onwards its politics was characterized by a system of political parties arrayed along a left-right axis typical of the twentieth century, which was remarkably stable (Centellas 2009, Sabatini 2003). Such was the dominance of this system that the same parties – indeed the same individuals – survived coups, economic shocks, periodic civil disturbances, guerrilla insurgency, hyperinflation and economic meltdown, and striking social change, returning again and again to take up the reins of power. Why, then, did this system suddenly, unexpectedly collapse around 2003?

Bolivia's 1952-53 revolution overturned an oligarchic political system, extended full citizenship rights and education to the indigenous majority, broke up the *haciendas* and distributed land to the highland peasantry, and nationalized its mines. Between the 1951 and 1956 elections, the number of registered voters increased from 205,000 to 1.13 million (Nohlen 1995). Following this vast social and economic upheaval, national politics coalesced around the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (National Revolutionary Movement, MNR) – a multiclass coalition party that straddled the center – with smaller parties to its right and left (Bonifaz 2016, Dukerley 1984, Klein 1992, Levitsky 2001). After the restoration of democracy in 1982, the system congealed further around *Acción Democrática Nacionalista* (National Democratic Action, ADN) on

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<sup>3</sup> At various points in its history, during periods of chronic instability, Bolivia suffered multiple palace coups in a single day. Many of these “governments” were so ephemeral that counting them is difficult. Experts disagree on the total number.

the right, the MNR in the center, and the *Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Movement of the Revolutionary Left, MIR) – and its later offshoot the *Movimiento Bolivia Libre* (Free Bolivia Movement, MBL) – on the left. Together these three forces reliably captured between 60-75 percent of the vote in national elections during the 1980s and 1990s.

The degree of dominance in Bolivian politics is hard to overstate. The leader of the 1952 revolution, and of the MNR, was Victor Paz Estenssoro. The 1956 election brought to power his close ally Hernán Siles Zuazo, also of the MNR, who in 1960 handed the presidency back to Paz Estenssoro. Paz Estenssoro was re-elected in 1964, but then quickly overthrown by his vice-president, an air force general. Omitting military regimes, the electoral sequence is as follows:

**Table 1: Elected Presidents of Bolivia**

Year	Party*	President
1952	MNR	Victor Paz Estenssoro
1956	MNR	Hernán Siles Zuazo
1960	MNR	Victor Paz Estenssoro
1964	MNR	Victor Paz Estenssoro
1982	MNRI-MIR §	Hernán Siles Zuazo
1985	MNR	Victor Paz Estenssoro
1989	MIR	Jaime Paz Zamora
1993	MNR	Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada
1997	ADN-MIR	Hugo Banzer
2002	MNR	Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada

\* Governing party, or lead party(s) of a governing coalition.

§ The MNRI was a leftist offshoot of the main MNR.

*Data source:* Nohlen 2005

Even this list understates the lock a small number of parties and people had on power.

For example, Paz Zamora served as Siles' vice-president before becoming president;

likewise Sánchez de Lozada had been Paz Estenssoro's minister of planning; and Banzer – dictator during the 1970s – headed the coalition that sustained Paz Zamora in power.

Given such antecedents, the scale and speed of the system's collapse were extraordinary. In the 2005 general election, the ADN, MIR and MBL were unable to field candidates, and the MNR attracted only six percent of the vote; by 2009 it too had disappeared from the ballot. In 2010 the MNR polled zero votes in 323 of 337 local elections, and ADN did worse. The MIR and MBL have ceased to exist.

Why did the system collapse so suddenly? The proximate cause was civil disturbances linked to a planned gas pipeline to the historic enemy, Chile, which led to the resignation and flight of President Sánchez de Lozada in 2003. Without doubt this political crisis was severe, and included a massacre of protestors by state security forces. But it beggars belief that, in a country where social mobilization is high and protest common, a dispute over a gas pipeline killed off Bolivia's political parties, party system, and indeed the dominant dimension of political contestation. All of these had survived so much worse. Broader economic policy is also not a credible culprit. Although the fiscal balance did spike downwards in 2002, this reflected a sharp fall in revenues, not expenditures, as we shall see below. Poor economic performance, another common claim, is even less credible. The economy had not been in recession since 1986. A system that withstood hyperinflation twenty years earlier was not toppled by 2.7 percent growth.<sup>4</sup>

This paper analyzes the collapse of Bolivia's party system, and the reformulation of its politics, through the joint lenses of cleavage theory and Schattschneider's (1960)

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<sup>4</sup> Yearly GDP growth data available at:  
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=BO>

related concept of dimensional replacement. The result is a theoretical mechanism connecting enduring social cleavages to competitive party systems that can explain sudden, decisive political change. I exploit the wonderful Bolivian Electoral Atlas (Tribunal Supremo Electoral 2010) database that corrects recording errors in previously published election results, providing greater accuracy and detail than hitherto possible.

I argue that in Bolivia's incompletely institutionalized democracy (Mainwaring and Scully 1995), the national political party system was not organized around the major cleavage that characterizes society. It was organized, rather, around a subordinate cleavage relevant for a minority of the population, which was imposed from above by political elites who rode the 1952-53 revolution to power. In the context of a low-income country with partial democratic incorporation, this cleavage became "frozen", sustained by electoral laws that supported elite dominance of Bolivia's politics.

Sweeping decentralization reforms in 1994 had the unintended effect of revealing the underlying conflicts that actually cleave Bolivian society. Complementary reforms to election laws broke the oligopoly that upheld the artificial cleavage. Repeated subnational elections revealed both this misalignment and a new generation of leaders who emerged from the grass-roots of society. Traditional parties, moreover, failed to decentralize themselves internally to accommodate new political actors and surging citizen participation (Faguet 2012). And so Bolivia's parties and party system collapsed under the weight of their own irrelevance and inflexibility.

The insights yielded by this approach are likely applicable beyond the Bolivian case, to Venezuela, Italy, Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru, which also saw their politics

collapse (Morgan 2011, Roberts 2015). The rest of this paper examines the components of my argument one by one.

## **2. Theory: Stability and Collapse in Party Systems**

Let us first follow Sartori (1976) and Mainwaring and Scully (1995) and define parties as political organizations that present candidates at elections and are thereby capable of placing individuals into public office. Party systems are the patterns of interactions resulting from inter-party competition; they are more than the sum of their parties. They can be characterized as stable equilibria in which parties compete for votes by occupying discrete positions in multi-dimensional policy/value space, as well as providing jobs, benefits, and other non-representational goods to partisans.

The decentralization literature is enormous, numbering in the hundreds of papers in political science, public policy, economics, and development studies journals, and thousands of “gray literature” studies and agency reports. But it has little to say about the stability or instability of political party systems, focusing instead on decentralization’s effects on such issues as public investment, service provision, education and health indicators, macroeconomic stability, or hierarchical characteristics of party systems *per se* (Brancati 2006 & 2008; Eaton, Kaiser and Smoke 2011; Faguet 2014; Faguet and Pöschl 2015; Chhibber and Kollman 1998 & 2004; Treisman 2007).

We look to the comparative politics literature for insight. Here, a rich body of work analyzes the origins and characteristics of political party systems. But very little work investigates party system collapse. Four that do are recent contributions by Cyr (2012 and 2015), Lupu (2014) and Morgan (2011).



Cyr (2015) examines when social conflicts lead to party-system change, arguing that ruling party elites deploy strategies of inclusion and exclusion to try to neutralize social conflicts and preserve the status quo. The decisions they take shape the impact of societal demands in ways that – intentionally or not – transform the party system. Cyr (2012) examines when parties were able to survive and rebound from national party-system collapses in Bolivia, Peru and Venezuela. She finds that national-level comeback requires command over organizational and social resources. Absent one, a party may be able to survive, but absent both it is likely to collapse alongside the party system.

Lupu focuses on the breakdown of individual political parties, as distinct from party systems. Between 1978 and 2007, he points out, one-quarter of Latin America's parties suddenly became uncompetitive in national elections. Why? Lupu explains this via a combination of "brand dilution": the muddying of party identity through policy switches or opportunistic coalitions, and poor performance in office. Parties with clear, distinct "brands" can withstand a period of poor performance; and parties judged to have wielded power well can withstand brand dilution. But parties that muddy their identities *and* govern badly see support collapse.

This logic is very likely applicable to the MIR and MNR, and possibly the ADN too. But what happened in Bolivia goes beyond the collapse of individual parties. The process Lupu describes is a competitive dynamic in which voters switch preferences amongst established alternatives arrayed along a dominant axis. System collapse, by contrast, is when all the parties collapse and take the dominant axis with them. In competitive terms, it is a singularity that destroys the possibility of a new equilibrium in the pre-existing policy space. Post-collapse, voters will be faced with a new axis of

competition in which preferences are aggregates and policies designed in different ways. This is a fundamentally different phenomenon requiring different theoretical tools.

Morgan (2011) provides such tools, comparing political system collapses in Bolivia, Colombia, Italy and Venezuela. Her theory is based on three distinct types of “linkage” that parties use to intermediate between society and the state: (i) Programmatic linkages, based on universal benefits with low conditionality; (ii) Clientelism, based restricting benefits to well-specified groups; and (iii) Interest incorporation – an intermediate category – where benefits are restricted to a group or interest, but benefit distribution within the group is not controlled by the party. This last category is the least obvious; examples include guaranteed seats on party boards, spaces on party lists, and special channels of access. Parties may blend different types of appeals in their attempts to woo distinct groups of voters.

Each kind of linkage can fail, but for different reasons. Programmatic linkages fail when the programmatic differences between parties become blurred. Crises tend to provoke blurring, especially when interparty agreements and international organizations constrain policy choice to options that violate a party’s ideology. Clientelistic linkages fail when social change increases demand for clientelistic benefits, but economic crisis restricts available resources; decentralization and other reforms that limit resource control can exacerbate resource demand and supply. And interest incorporation degrades when social transformation demands adjustment by party systems to emerging interests, but the organizational constraints of routinized parties make this difficult. Morgan’s theory of party system collapse is simply the sum of all of these factors, or at least those that match a particular system’s major characteristics.

Morgan's theory is carefully argued and matches her Venezuelan evidence well. But it is ultimately built around benefits and their conditionality. While important, benefits are only part of the story, and for Bolivia the less important part. Another is the policy dimensions, or issue areas, along which benefits and services – of any given value – are provided. It is not the same, for example, for a village government to spend \$1000 on vaccines, machetes, or entertainment at the village fair, even if the cost is held constant and the same voters benefit. As parties choose amongst competing options, they also make implicit choices amongst competing values in a way that implies a particular development path for society. Rival parties, in competitive responses, will choose different expenditures based on different values. But they will do so along a given axis that represents coherent combinations in multi-dimensional policy space. This is a system's major axis of political competition, which should match society's underlying characteristics. The targeting of such benefits is a separate question, but not a more important one.

### **Cleavage Theory**

To understand when and why party systems collapse, we must first understand where they came from. We must understand the underlying conflicts of ideas and values that characterize society, and how these map – well or badly – onto a party system. Hence we turn to cleavage theory. In their seminal contribution, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) posit an alternative to the fluid, continuous adjustments assumed by the Downsian (1957) market-like mechanism for understanding how parties position and re-position themselves in response to changing voter sentiment. In their conception, parties and party systems emerge in response to underlying socio-political cleavages

in society. There is ideological and organizational “stickiness” in the process, and political cleavages can become “frozen” even as underlying social characteristics change. Hence adjustment, when it happens, is potentially more dramatic than in a Downsian world.

What are these cleavages? In Western Europe, two over-arching historical processes produced four key cleavages. The national revolution produced cleavages between: (i) centralizing nation-builders vs. distinct communities (ethnically/religiously/linguistically) in the periphery, and (ii) between the central state vs. the supranational Roman Church. And the industrial revolution produced: (iii) an urban/industrial vs. rural/landholder cleavage, and later (iv) one between workers vs. owners. A society will contain additional cleavages of varying depth and importance. But in Western European countries these are the key conflicts that define political competition. Lipset and Rokkan further show that the center-periphery, state-Church, and land-industry cleavages have marked national party systems deeply, and the owner-worker cleavage is the least important of the four.

The tension between competing logics of functionality vs. territoriality is central to cleavage theory (Hooghe and Marks 2016). Functional conflict concerns the distribution of resources, opportunity, and status amongst functional groups. Citizens vote with others in a similar position wherever they may live, at the risk of inviting conflict within the community. By contrast, territorial conflict is based on commitment to a community, in which citizens vote with their neighbors without regard to economic position. Recent research by Chandler and Tsai (2001) and Sides and Citrin (2007) finds that the role of community and identity are stronger

than Lipset and Rokkan originally thought. This may itself be socially stratified: Card, Dustmann and Preston (2012) find that cultural concerns are of greatest importance amongst the lower-educated.

Two variables that Lipset and Rokkan consider important for the translation of cleavages into party systems are incorporation and representation. Incorporation refers to the extent to which the supporters of a particular movement or party are accorded status as political participants and have full citizenship rights. Representation refers to whether new groups must join established parties to ensure access to representation, or can gain representation on their own. We will see below the importance of these considerations for the case of Bolivia.

European political parties that eventually formed around these key cleavages were expressions of self-conscious solidary groups that express the enduring identities of their members, as distinct from their transient opinions or occupations. These collective identities gave rise to grass-roots movements and hierarchical organizations that prosecuted conflicts between peripheral communities and the nation-state, between secularists and the Church, and eventually between workers and capitalists. Conflicts were enduring and often acrimonious because the social cleavages in which they were anchored were deep, and also because the groups doing combat were strong, bound by solidarity born of lived experience (Hooghe and Marks 2016).

Because the cleavages that divide voters are systematic, their preferences are durably connected in multidimensional policy space. Hence “issue coherence”. Parties thus make programmatic commitments across different issues that are self-reinforcing.

This implies punctuated processes of party system change in response to external shocks, causing sudden jumps between equilibria, or a lurch away from equilibrium altogether.

A second source of stickiness is parties' internal organization. According to Lipset and Rokkan, a party's strategic flexibility on important issues is constrained to the extent it has a loyal constituency, activist volunteers, self-replicating leadership, clear programmatic identity, and possibly a decentralized internal structure. These attributes limit a party's ability to change position on issues of underlying conflict. Parties thus spend most of their lives seeking local, and not global, maxima (Laver and Sargent 2009, Hooghe and Marks 2016). Such discontinuities explain one of cleavage theory's fundamental claims – that party system change comes in the form of rising (new) parties, and not established party adaptation.

### **Dimensional Replacement**

Lipset and Rokkan build on Schattschneider's (1960) theory linking political organization to conflict, especially his notion of dimensional replacement in party competition. "At the root of all politics," says Schattschneider, "is the universal language of conflict."<sup>5</sup> By conflict he does not mean violence, but rather contestation concerning ideas, priorities and resources. Such conflict is highly contagious in democracies. Indeed, by prioritizing participation and inviting intervention in conflict, multiparty democracies are in many ways designed to maximize its contagion. By contrast, one-party states suppress conflict. In democracy, the outcome of any conflict is determined

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<sup>5</sup> p.2.

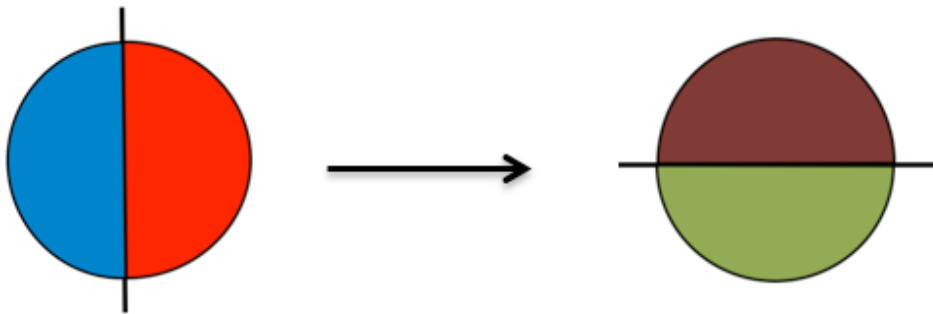
by the extent to which the “audience” becomes involved. Hence in politics, the most important strategy concerns the scope of conflict.

Viewed through this lens, the role of a social movement is to promote conflict by articulating demands (grievances, proposals) in a way that resonates with the most people, thus socializing private conflict and inviting a dominant faction to participate on its side. The role of parties is to craft policy proposals that cohere in three ways: (i) substantively, e.g. by respecting the budget constraint; (ii) electorally, by garnering the broadest support amongst voters; and (iii) financially, by maximizing political contributions subject to (i) and (ii). This means that parties want some conflicts to become social and others to remain private. If movements aim to socialize all the conflicts they touch, parties pick and choose. Government’s role is to manage conflicts.

Political outcomes depend on how people are divided into competing groups, and by extension on which of the many conflicts become dominant. Hence the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power. And the most devastating political strategy is the substitution of conflicts (Schattschneider 1960). Figure 1, for example, shows politics aligned along a classic left/workers vs. right/owners cleavage. In such a system, parties invest heavily not just to convince floating voters that one or the other side of the dominant divide is superior, but also that they are the most competent exponents of that position. Politicians invest throughout their careers to demonstrate their prowess winning votes, and their implementational ability once in office. Emerging rivals who compete with established actors on these terms are ultimately incrementalists, even when they succeed. The way to vanquish established parties – the transformative play – is to substitute the dominant set of conflicts with a new set in a

different dimension. We might read our illustration as the substitution of left-right with a green/environmental vs. brown/dirty-growth axis, for example; or one based on religion, or ethno-linguistic identity. Dimensional replacement destroys the reputations, political capital, and ideological assets of established parties not by sullyng them, but by making them irrelevant in a new politics that divides voters along a different plane.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1: Schattschneider's Dimensional Replacement Theory**



### **3. Bolivia's Political Party System: 1952-2010**

The Nationalist Revolution of 1952-53, which overturned the *ancien régime* and brought sweeping changes to Bolivia's economy and society, was led by the MNR and its maximum leaders, Victor Paz Estenssoro and Hernán Siles Suazo. During the decade that followed, the MNR won general elections overwhelmingly with between 76 and 98<sup>7</sup> percent of the popular vote. This period is best viewed as a new political system in consolidation following a major upheaval, where a still-embryonic opposition abets MNR domination. A decade of democracy was ended by a military coup in 1964. The two stable dictatorships that followed lasted until 1978, bookended by periods of multiple coups and considerable political turmoil. The political system that returned to the fore

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<sup>6</sup> I have arbitrarily drawn both figures as 50-50 electoral splits. But a new dimension of competition could aggregate voters as 60-40, 70-30, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Paz Estenssoro ran unopposed in the 1964 presidential election, winning with 97.9 percent of the vote.



following re-democratization was a consolidated version of the post-revolutionary one. Hence we begin our analysis with the 1979 election, which heralded Bolivia's return to democracy in 1982, and which featured the full panoply of left-right forces that dominated politics until 2003.

To analyse party system collapse, we need to understand the evolution of the main parties that defined the system, and compare their performance to both marginal parties and rising challengers. This task is complicated by the "splinterism" to which politics in Bolivia – like many countries – is prone. This is particularly so on the left, where personal disagreements and battles for leadership compound ideological and programmatic differences, leading small parties – often no more than personal vehicles – to splinter off from the main party, test their electoral strength for one or two cycles, and then (mostly) return to the fold or disappear (Mayorga 2005, Romero 2012).

I begin by aggregating the vote shares of the MIR, MBL, MNR and ADN as Bolivia's "Establishment parties", which defined its major left-right axis of political competition. Through 2003, one of these parties always anchored Bolivia's governments, and another always anchored its opposition.<sup>8</sup> To these I add splinters, which I categorize not as political forces with distinct ideologies, programmes, and electorates, but rather ephemeral pieces of the establishment. The task quickly becomes hairy. For example, the 1980 election featured four variants of the MNR, three of them joined in two broader alliances, and one<sup>9</sup> competing alone. It can also be less than obvious: both the Movement

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<sup>8</sup> The rising MAS quietly provided crucial congressional support for certain legislative bills during the MNR's short-lived government of 2002-03, leaving the ADN to lead congressional opposition (Crabtree 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Entertainingly, this last was called the "United MNR" (MNRU), and polled 1.6 percent of the vote.

of the National Left (MIN) and the 9<sup>th</sup> of April Revolutionary Vanguard (VR-9), for example, are excisions of the MNR. I categorize using the name and origin of each group, and then track the political trajectory of leading figures in each. Where new parties are led by politicians who rose to national prominence through the ranks of an established party, and their votes mainly subtract from the established mother party, I class these as part of the establishment.

The programmatic alignment of establishment parties along a left-right, labor-capital axis is well-documented by students of Bolivian history and politics (see e.g. Mainwaring and Scully 1995, Malloy 1970, Roberts 2015, Seligson and Moreno 2006). Hence I limit myself here to some of the more important facts about each. The MNR was formed in the early 1940s by moderate-left, middle-class intellectuals who had served in military governments of the 1930s, and admired the fascist examples of Germany and Italy. But its formative experience was the 1952-53 National Revolution, which began with an urban workers' uprising, which the MNR managed to harness and lead, resulting in a sort of marriage of the young party to the workers' movement. This birth left indelible marks, and the MNR continued thereafter to straddle the political center, with some factions sticking to top-down, *dirigiste* economic nationalism and corporatism, and other factions adopting the discourse of class struggle and advocating extensive interventions on behalf of workers (Anria and Cyr 2016).

In 1971, radical segments of the MNR youth wing joined left militants from the Christian Democratic Party to form the MIR. Initially committed, as its name implies, to class struggle and revolution, over time it became more of a center-left, social democratic party. The MBL broke away from the MIR in 1985 due to ideological and

personal differences between their two leaders, Jaime Paz Zamora and Antonio Aranibar, and positioned itself further to the left.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the ADN was founded in 1979 by ex-dictator Gen. Hugo Banzer, absorbing parts of the Bolivian Socialist Falange (FSB) and the Revolutionary Left Party (PIR). With a pro-business, small-government, law-and-order message, the ADN attracted support from new economic elites, such as large-scale farmers in the eastern lowlands, private mining entrepreneurs, and educated technocrats who emerged after the Revolution (Klein 1992, Mesa et al. 1997).

“Others” are a collection of minor, non-splinter parties mostly of the left, originating usually in the workers’ movement or radical intelligenstia, and led typically by labor leaders or left-wing intellectuals. Examples include the Trotskyite *Vanguardia Obrera* (Workers’ Vanguard, VO), and the *Partido Socialista-1* (PS-1) of Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, a journalist, writer and academic. “Other” also includes the remains of the right-wing FSB, which never polled above 1.5 percent of the vote during this period. A last, ideologically influential component in this category is left-wing indigenous parties promoting the rights and culture of Bolivia’s indigenous majority. Examples include the *Movimiento Indio Túpac Katari* (Túpac Katari Indian Movement, MITKA) and the *Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Katari de Liberación* (Túpac Katari Revolutionary Liberation Movement, MRTKL). Although small, these parties were important crucibles of an emerging *indigenista* ideology.

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<sup>10</sup> I discuss the MBL as a distinct party on account of its level of support and endurance that greatly exceed any splinter. But treating it as a splinter would not alter my analysis.

In addition to Establishment and Other, a distinct category of Neopopulist parties gained importance during the late-1980s. These were built around the charismatic personalities of successful entrepreneurs – in the case of *Conciencia de Patria* (Conscience of the Fatherland, Condepa) a television and radio personality, and in the case of *Unión Cívica Solidaridad* (Solidarity Civic Union, UCS) Bolivia's biggest beer magnate. Both parties combined populist appeals to poor, peri-urban migrants often employed in precarious informal-sector jobs with a racially-tinged discourse that echoed their complaints and disorientation upon moving to the city. Both parties were organizationally weak. Neither survived the death of its founder, and neither has fielded a presidential candidate since 2002.

The final category is, of course, the MAS, which rises to prominence in 2002. In sharp opposition to all of the parties discussed thus far, the MAS is a bottom-up political party, formed initially in the rural Chapare region by militant coca growers and displaced miners. The MAS' origins – described with analytical insight by Anria (2013), Anria and Cyr (2016), and Van Cott (2009), and a huge wealth of empirical detail by Zuazo (2009) – lie in rural, highly local social movements of self-government and agricultural producer groups. Bolivia's 1994 Law of Popular Participation, a radical decentralization reform, created over three hundred spaces of local politics that had not previously existed in a highly centralized country where politics was by construction national (Faguet 2012, Faguet and Pöschl 2015). Such groups took advantage of these spaces to compete for, win and exercise local power. And the existence of local governments provided incentives for new groups to emerge.

But the electoral laws of the time prohibited social movements from competing directly in elections. So how did the MAS grow rapidly and achieve stunning electoral success? By agglomerating hundreds of independent local organizations under its political umbrella. Inspired by the ideology of the *indigenista* movement, the MAS adopted a “leading by following” approach in which incorporation was grass-roots upward, privileging indigenous people as actors and agents in their own right. More than a slogan, these principles were followed in practice, and made the MAS a highly distinctive organization in the Bolivian context. Its internal characteristics were organized around self-representation and the attainment of power (local and national) by the Bolivian majority (Van Cott 2009). This is very different from the top-down organization and clientelistic appeals of parties like the UCS and Condepa, or even the MNR (Zuazo 2009), whose *modus operandi* was to capture indigenous votes in order to propel elite politicians into power.

As the MAS moved from its rural base into urban areas, the electoral imperative led it away from organic movement-party linkages to more top-down, co-opting practices typical of populist parties. It conquered Bolivia’s cities by co-opting urban leaders, and hence the civic organizations, labor groups, and producer guilds they led; examples include the Federation of Neighborhood Councils (FEJUVE) and the Regional Labor Federation (COR). This dynamic left the MAS as a “hybrid organization” with distinct logics of operation in rural vs. urban settings. It straddles the line between party and movement, with a multiclass appeal to rural farmers, urban formal and informal workers, and middle class elements (Anria 2013). But its grass-roots origins live on.

Through all of these changes, Anria argues, the rural base has been able to hold the MAS leadership – including Evo Morales – to account.

### **Equilibrium and Collapse**

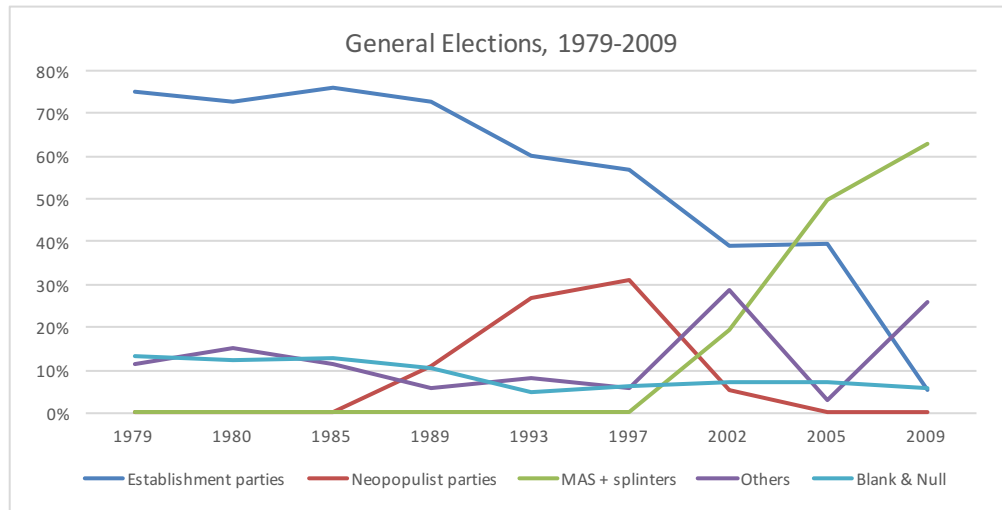
How did the system defined by these parties evolve during the period following Bolivia's return to democracy? Figure 2 shows general election voting trends between 1979-2009, with parties categorized as Establishment, Neopopulist, Others, and MAS (including splinters); blank and null votes round out the picture. Appendix 1 provides party-by-party detail, where we see as many as 18 parties competing in 1985.

By 1979, the initial dominance of the MNR had morphed into a systemic dominance of establishment parties. These parties reliably captured 73-76 percent of the popular vote in the four elections between 1979-1989. The rest of the vote was split between other smaller, mostly further-left parties, capturing 6-15 percent of the vote, with some 12 percent of ballots blank or null.

This system declined after 1989, capturing only 57-60 percent of the vote during the mid-1990s, and then falling further to 40 percent in 2002-2005. The proximate cause of the decline is clear in the graph: 1989 sees the emergence of neopopulist parties, which rose to capture one-third of the popular vote in 1997. This correlates nicely with the decline of the establishment. But neopopulists collapse to seven percent in 2002, and zero thereafter, while the establishment continues to decline. Why? The answer is not a blanket rejection of all political options, as blank + null votes fall from around 12 percent during the 1980s to six percent during the 1990s and early 2000s. The graph shows great churning in “other” parties, as right-wing voters search for an alternative to the now-defunct ADN. But the secular trend during this period is the rise

and rise of the MAS, from zero in 1997 to 63 percent in the 2009 election, a dominance of historic proportions in Bolivia – broadly comparable to that of the MNR immediately following the revolution. Viewing the graph in its entirety, the rise of the MAS nicely explains the collapse of the political establishment – to five percent of the vote in 2009.

**Figure 2: General Election Voting Patterns**



*Data source: Organo Electoral Plurinacional-Tribunal Supremo Electoral*

So goes the most commonly told story about Bolivia, in which traditional parties decline and Evo Morales and the MAS surge to dominance. The story is descriptively true, as the graph shows. But it obscures the deeper, more important fact that Establishment + Other parties collectively defined a primary left-right axis for Bolivian politics, ranging from worker-based parties advocating class struggle for revolution, such as the Revolutionary Worker's Party (POR in Spanish) and the Workers' Vanguard (VO), at one end; through the more moderate MBL and MIR; on to the MNR straddling the center; on to the pro-business, small-state ADN; and from there to the fascist-inspired, pro-Church FSB on the far right. This primary axis completely dominated Bolivian politics during the first decade following re-democratization.

While neopopulists did challenge the establishment, they did so in the limited sense of taking their votes at election time. Both the UCS and Condepa were programmatically weak, highly personalized parties that relied on charismatic leaders and extensive clientelistic appeals for their success (Mainwaring and Scully 1995, Bonifaz 2016, Van Cott 2005). They did not threaten the underlying axis of left-right political and ideological competition. They frightened elites by capturing their votes, not by espousing any cogent ideas for change (Romero 2003).

The only anti-system votes, by which I mean parties and candidates advocating for an issue space orthogonal to the dominant left-right axis of competition, were those of small indigenist parties like the MITKA and MRTKL. Beginning in the 1960s and typically spearheaded by indigenous intellectuals<sup>11</sup>, these parties and ideologies, transcended the worker-capital debate, viewing Bolivia instead through an explicitly ethnic lens (Choque 2014). They rejected both the dominant elite and their class-based analysis. Their programmatic appeals were a blend of radical *Indianismo* with the more moderate, socialist-inspired *Katarismo* (Van Cott 2005).

*Indianismo* stresses the ethnic character of the oppression of the indigenous majority, and calls for the expulsion of European descendants, restitution of the land to ethnic leaders, and the reconstitution of traditional *altiplano* communities. Rejecting capitalism and the “capitalist model of society”, they propose a return to the collective ownership of property and pre-Columbian forms of authority and community self-government. *Katarismo*, by contrast, blends ethnic rights claims with class consciousness. It seeks to reform Bolivia’s democratic institutions to incorporate

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Victor Hugo Cardenas (MRTK and MRTKL) and Fernando Untoja Choque (MKN and KND), university professors of linguistics and economics, respectively.

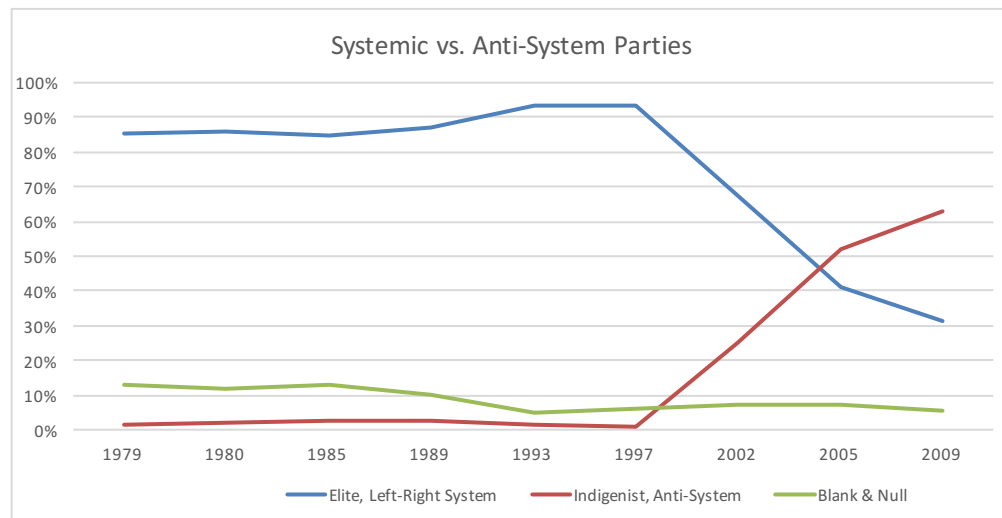


indigenous forms of representation and decision-making, in order to forge a society more tolerant of its own diversity (Choque 2014, Madrid 2012, Van Cott 2005). Of the two, *Kataristas* achieved greater political success by allying with non-indigenous, leftist parties and social movements, and so gaining many non-indigenous adherents.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *indigenista* movement consisted of a number of small, constantly bickering and splitting parties that collectively never reaped more than three percent of the national vote. They operated as a sort of steam valve, or perhaps – with the benefit of hindsight – a warning. But in practical terms they represented no more than a colorful appendage to a system that reliably captured no less than 84 percent of the overall vote, and 97 percent or more of the valid votes, through 1997.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 3 shows the dominance of left-right politics in Bolivia, followed by its collapse around 2002 as a new kind of politics emerged.

**Figure 3: Elite, Left-Right System vs. Indigenist, Anti-System Parties, 1979-2009**



Data source: Organo Electoral Plurinacional-Tribunal Supremo Electoral

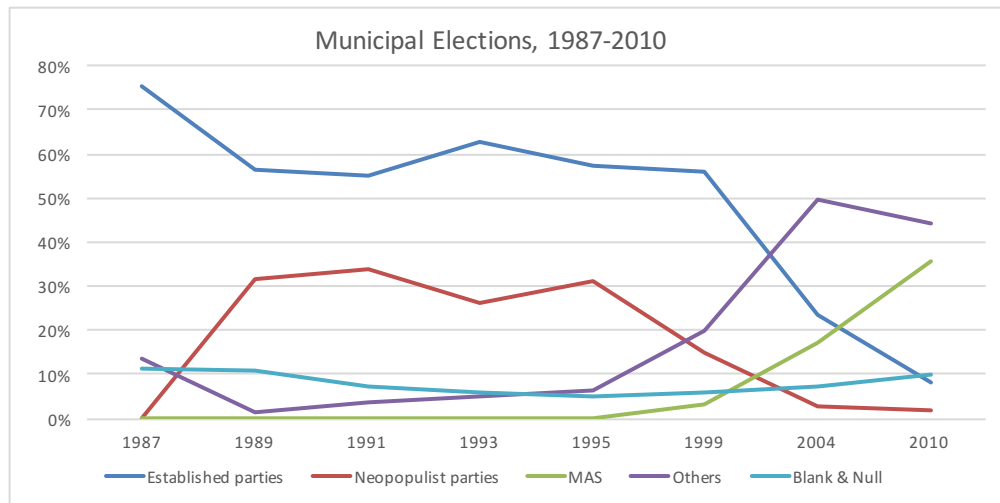
<sup>12</sup> This understates the system's dominance. I count the indigenist MRTKL and EJE as "anti-systemic" parties, even though both evolved towards allying with the MNR in the 1993 election. The MRTKL's leader, Victor Hugo Cardenas, served as Bolivia's first indigenous Vice-President during Sánchez de Lozada's government of 1993-97.

To understand what sort of new politics, we must analyze local electoral dynamics. Figure 4 shows local voting trends across all municipalities in Bolivia, aggregated to national totals, with parties again categorized as Establishment, Neopopulist, Others, MAS, and blank + null votes. We do not count MAS splinters this time because of the bottom-up nature of the MAS phenomenon. As described above, the MAS was born out of highly local groups and movements, especially in rural areas. A 2004 change in election law allowed such organizations to contest local elections for the first time. As a result, many registered as local parties for municipal elections, but federated to support the MAS in general elections. This is a very different phenomenon from the sort of splintering that occurs when rival leaders in a top-down party clash, and one breaks away to form a new party. Understanding the difference is key to understanding the dimensional shift that transformed Bolivian politics. I return to this below.

The key fact during this period is that Bolivian politics fractures from 2004 onwards into a huge number of tiny organizations. From a low of seven parties in 1991, and then 18 in 1999, the number of parties competing in local elections explodes to 388 in 2004. Many of these parties are highly specific to a particular region or locality, such as APG-Charagua and CaCha, which compete only in the lowland municipality of Charagua, the Villa Poopo party, which only competes in highland Villa Poopo municipality, and the Calacoto party, which only competes in one eponymous suburb of La Paz. Most of these hundreds of political parties were tiny. In the 2004 election, 361 parties received less than 0.5 percent of vote nationwide; many, such as *Litoral*, reaped votes in only one municipality. And many had extremely low vote totals, such as *Trabajo*

y *Protección Para Todos*, which received 14 votes nationwide, and *Falange 19 de Abril*, *Maya Copacabana*, and *Pos Blanco*, which received none. Appendix 2 provides more party-level detail.

**Figure 4: Municipal Election Voting Patterns**



Data source: Organo Electoral Plurinacional-Tribunal Supremo Electoral

Figure 4 shows that the national collapse of establishment parties is mirrored in local politics. Although their initial dominance of three-quarters of the vote falls earlier, to around 60 percent in 1989, this level is then sustained consistently through 1999, when it drops – again more steeply than at the national level – to 23 percent in 2004, and then below ten percent in 2010. Neopopulists rise faster at the local level, to around one-third of the vote in 1989, as we might expect from parties centered on migrant, peri-urban voters in highland cities, and foreshadowing the bottom-up earthquake still to come. They retain their third of the electorate through 1995, before beginning a secular descent to just three percent in 2004.

The biggest difference compared to general election trends is the sustained rise of Other parties, from one percent in 1989, and still only seven percent in 1995, to 50

percent in 2004. This both precedes and exceeds the rise of the MAS, which reaches 36 percent of the local vote in 2010. To understand this trend, we must understand that these are no longer the “Other” parties of the 1980s and 1990s – mainly left and right-wing projections of Bolivia’s dominant political axis. These are, rather, new – and in their immense majority highly local – parties that did not exist as parties before 2004. They are part and parcel of the political turmoil that overthrew the previous system around 2003, and accompanied the rapid rise of the MAS to national dominance. Hyper-local parties are not only the ideological and organizational cradle of the MAS, but active components of its federal structure to this day. This local effervescence is obscured if we look only at national trends, but is fully visible in local returns.

How does local politics look in terms of the Systemic vs. Anti-System tendencies of figure 3? The sheer number and ill-definition of tiny local parties, many of which quickly disappear, make it impossible to reliably characterize their ideologies.<sup>13</sup> As a good second-best, I categorize local parties as the old Elite, Left-Right axis – still easy to spot using the criteria outlined above – vs. New Local Politics. This distinguishes the top-down, elite-led parties that dominated Bolivian public life after the 1952 revolution, from the bottom-up, highly local parties, often based in social or civic organizations, that blossomed after 2002.

The latter group contains a variety of ideological and programmatic tendencies, (along with many parties lacking any distinct ideology). But they do share the following broad characteristics: roots in rural and small-town society, or peri-urban

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<sup>13</sup> Many of these are indeed anti-systemic, and after 2002 ally with the MAS. But many others are narrowly localist. And for scores of local parties, the evidence is simply too weak to form any reasonable judgement.

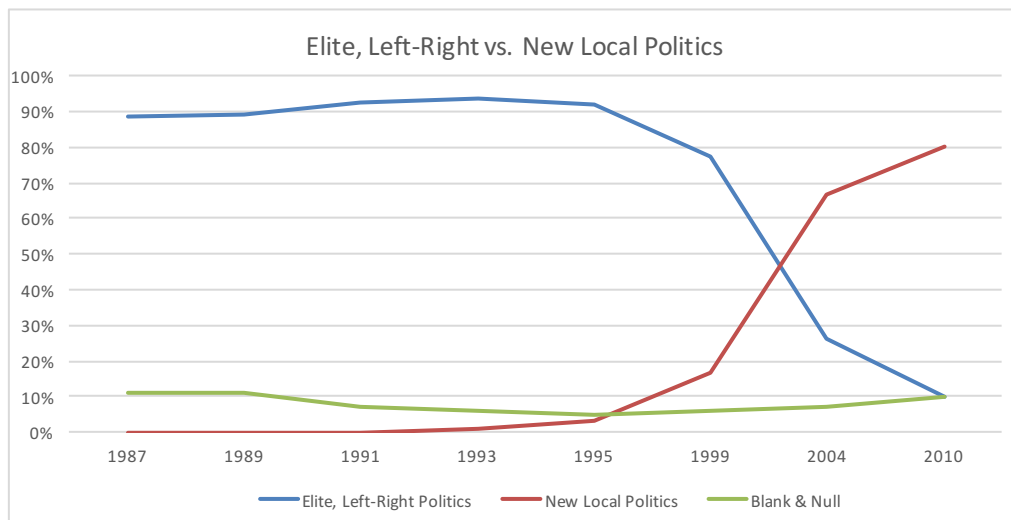
neighborhoods; leadership drawn from “brown Bolivians”, as distinct from the “white” elite; a rejection of “neoliberalism” defined in various ways; localism, meaning a political identification with subnational place – localities or regions; and the rejection of a single, centrally-defined concept of “Bolivianness” in ideological, economic, and cultural terms, in favor of an implicit or explicit acceptance of Bolivia as a collection of different identities. I include pre-2004 indigenist parties in this category because they are clearly opposed to the “Elite”, because scores of the new local parties adopted their programmatic *indigenismo*, and because many of their leaders and most of their voters were absorbed post-2002 into the new localism. In this sense, they proved harbingers of a new politics that rejected the old. And I include the MAS in this category because it similarly rejects the elite and its politics, and because it is organizationally and ideologically based on an agglomeration of large numbers of local parties under a national umbrella.

Some of these new local parties, like the *Nueva Fuerza Republicana* (New Republican Force, NFR) or the *Movimiento Sin Miedo* (Without Fear Movement, MSM), are fragments of the old elite trying to reconstitute themselves in new vehicles and with new discourses better suited to the new politics of Bolivia. Although less avowedly local than other new parties, they are in practice conservative localisms firmly rooted in particular regions: Cochabamba in the case of the NFR, or the *altiplano* in the case of the MSM. Although some have national pretensions, for now they fumble for a more general identity or structure that appeals beyond their strongholds.

Figure 5 compares the old elite politics with the new local politics between 1987-2010. As in national elections, elite parties were completely dominant at the local level

until 1995, reliably capturing 89-93 percent of the vote. They were significantly dominant in 1999 election as well, winning 77 percent of the vote. But their support collapsed in the 2004 and 2010 elections to 26 percent and then ten percent of the vote. In parallel to surging anti-system parties nationally, we see here the rise and rise of the new localism, from three percent of the vote in 1995 to 80 percent in 2010.

**Figure 5: Old Elite vs. New Local Politics, 1987-2010**



*Data source: Organo Electoral Plurinacional-Tribunal Supremo Electoral*

By 2010 the overturning of Bolivia's political party system, at both national and local levels, is complete. It is not just an important party or alliance that has died, but an enduring system of politics defined by a left-right axis of competition, arrayed between pro-worker and pro-capital opposing poles. In its place has risen a new system centered on one big, umbrella party, with hundreds of mostly tiny parties revolving around it, defined by the politics of racial and cultural identity, organizationally and ideologically strongly rooted in the localities that gave them birth. This new system is still forming, but it is strikingly, palpably different to the politics that came before.

#### 4. Explaining Party System Collapse

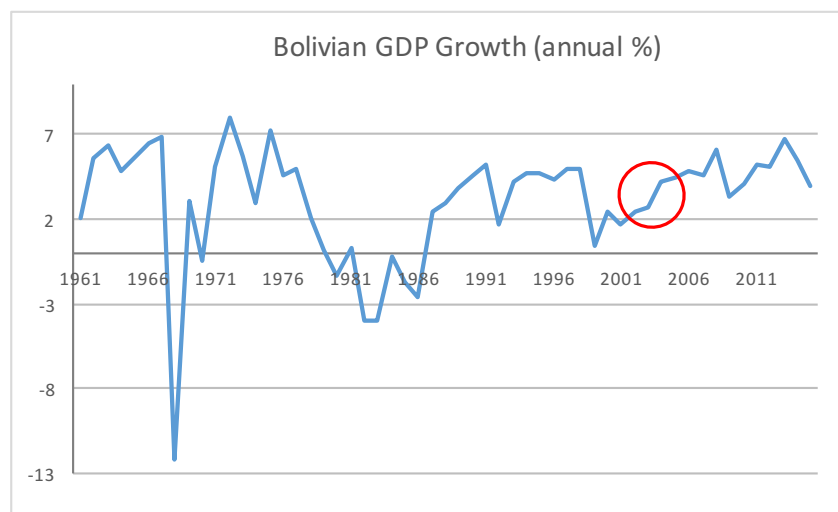
What caused this revolution? Why did Bolivian voters abandon previously stable loyalties – not just to parties, but to candidates and personalities – that had withstood political and economic shocks of an extremity unknown in most countries not at war? Why did the appeal of well-established parties with stable cadres and significant experience of wielding power and managing the state suddenly pale in comparison to new parties – and especially one big new party – with none of those advantages?

Standard answers are widespread but unconvincing. The 2003 “gas war” disturbances, which led to a massacre of protestors by security forces, clearly led to the resignation of MNR President Sánchez de Lozada. But did they, or the early-2000 “water war” protests in Cochabamba, cause Bolivia’s political party system to collapse? Timing is an attractive element of these explanations, but the causality is not convincing. Bolivia has been a mobilized society for decades, where workers are highly organized and protest is common (Dunkerley 1984, Mesa et al. 1997). Although both sets of protests were impressive in scope, they were neither the largest nor the most disruptive in Bolivia’s history. Other public disturbances were large, occasionally involved massacres, and caused governments and dictatorial regimes to fall. But those did not undermine Bolivia’s political system. While we might expect such demonstrations to weaken the political party in power, we would also expect a countervailing *strengthening* of opposition parties, which would strengthen the established party system by validating its dominant axis of contestation. Instead both were undermined.

## Economic Crisis?

Other explanations appealing to economic or fiscal “crises” are also unconvincing. The supposed economic crisis of the late 1990s and early 2000s simply did not exist. For evidence consider figure 6, which plots economic growth in Bolivia between 1961-2015. The red circle denotes the dates of political system collapse. Bolivia’s politics had withstood economic shocks that reduced GDP by 12 percent in the late 1960s, and eight percent cumulatively in 1982-1983, without falling apart. It is not credible that a period of increasing growth<sup>14</sup> of between 2-5 percent caused political implosion.

**Figure 6: GDP growth (% , annual)**



*Data sources: World Bank, OECD*

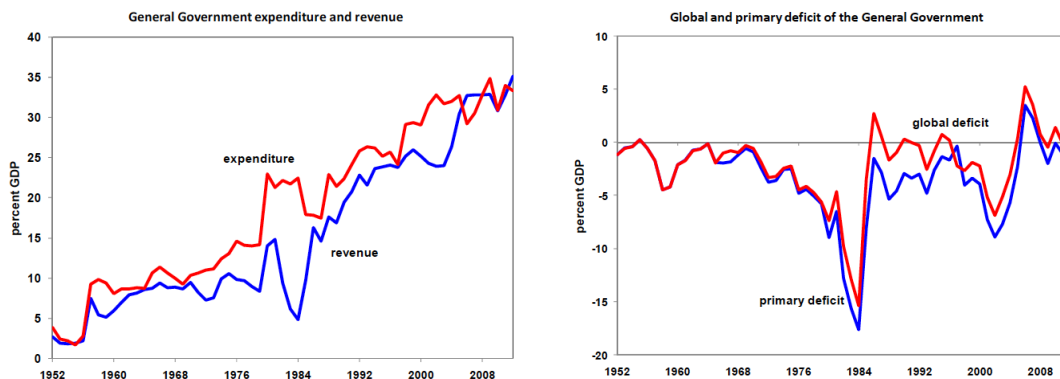
Arguments about a fiscal crisis are on firmer ground, as the fiscal account during the early 2000s was at least in deficit. But the magnitude of the supposed “crisis” is suspect. The real crisis of the post-revolutionary period was during the mid-1980s, when Bolivia’s economy melted down, its fiscal accounts collapsed, and the government

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Herranz and Peres (2011) estimate that in 2003 Bolivia’s GDP/capita was about to surpass a previous all-time high, first achieved in 1977. That previous record was far exceeded after 2005.



attempted – but ultimately failed – to survive by printing heroic amounts of money, leading to hyperinflation. Figure 7 shows the 1984 deficit in excess of 15 percent of GDP. A deficit of 6.7 percent of GDP in 2002, while not healthy, is comparatively unimpressive, and similar to other periods in Bolivia’s recent history when its politics did not collapse. More to the point, expenditure was actually increasing through 2003-04, contracting only around 2005-06 as a result of political turmoil, before increasing again in 2007-08. So fiscal contraction cannot have been the cause.

**Figure 7: Global and Primary Fiscal Deficits, 1952-2012**



Source: Kehoe and Machicado (2014). Reproduced with permission.

### Politics-Society Mismatch

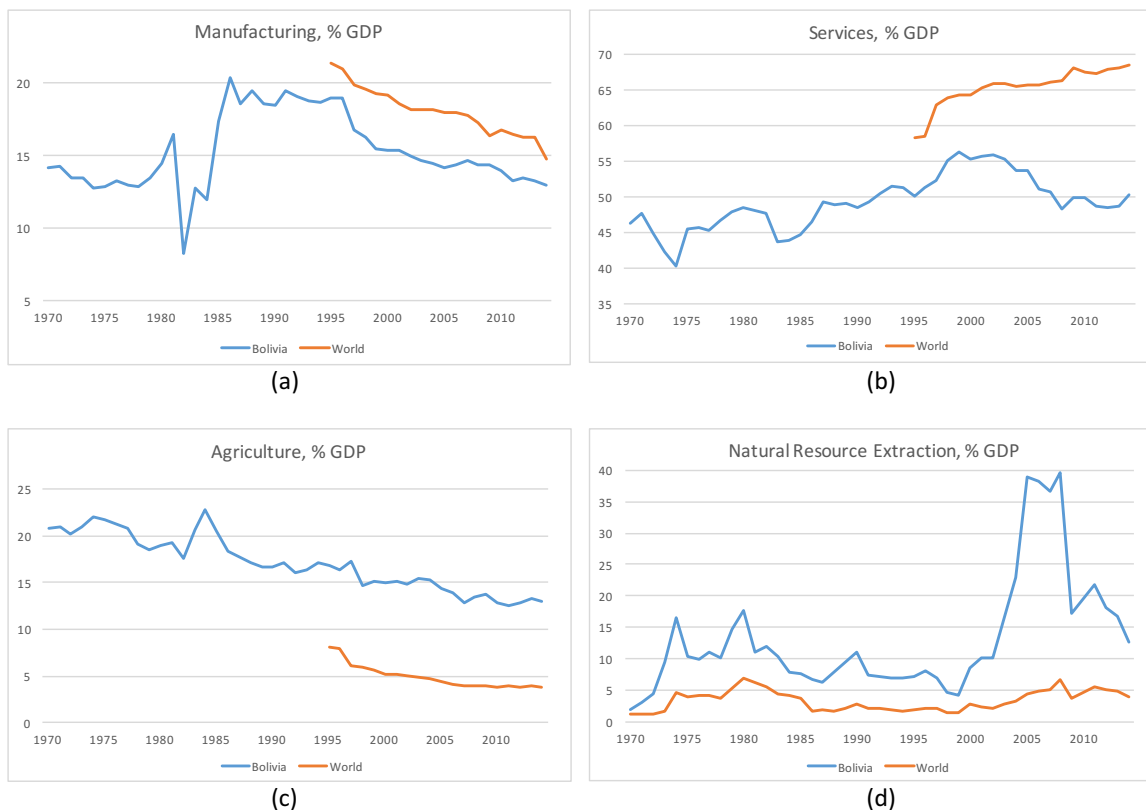
What, then, was responsible? I argue that a political system organized around a left/worker vs. right/capital dominant axis of competition was wrong for a country like Bolivia. Such a political system was fundamentally disconnected from the society that it sought to represent and govern for the simple reason that Bolivia has never really had industrial workers or capital in the required concentrations. The system that arose from the 1952 revolution presided over an economy that was overwhelmingly agricultural, and a society that was overwhelming rural. A politics predicated on the opposition of labor to capital was deeply unsuited to both. Attempts to industrialize, which might

have caught the country up to this politics, unambiguously failed. Even today, more than six decades later, Bolivia's economy is still dominated by agriculture and natural resources. And its working class, though militant and highly organized during the 1950s-1980s, is – and has always been – comparatively small.

As evidence, consider figure 8, which breaks down Bolivian economic activity by sector. All four panels compare Bolivia to world averages over the period 1970-2014. Although the world average includes the 30 industrialized countries of the OECD, it is dominated by 160+ non-OECD countries, including economies like Bangladesh, Honduras, Malawi, and Zambia. “The world” is thus not a very demanding comparison.

Panel (a) shows the proportion of GDP from manufacturing, a common measure of industrialization. We see that Bolivia lies consistently and non-trivially below the world average, and so has a level of industrialization that is low compared to the world economy. But a country with low population density and difficult topography is perhaps better suited to service sector-led development, where transport costs are arguably less important? Panel (b) shows that Bolivia significantly – and increasingly – lags the worldwide average there too. If neither manufacturing nor services is relatively important, what is? Panels (c) and (d) provide the answer. Agriculture's contribution to the Bolivian economy is more than three times the world average. And the contribution of natural resource extraction ranges between two and nine times the world average (varying with world price swings).

**Figure 8: Bolivian GDP by Sector**



*Data sources:* World Bank, OECD

So an economy where industrial and service workers, and capital, were comparatively scarce was instead abundant in agriculture and natural resource extraction. Could the mining sector – both its capital and its workers – have been large enough to constitute on its own a social cleavage that organized the nation's politics? Alternatively, is it possible that non-manufacturing, non-service workers unionized in sufficient numbers to sustain a left-right political axis? The MNR and the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (COB – the country's chief trades union federation) sought to engineer such an outcome, compensating for Bolivia's lack of industrial workers by attempting to unionize the largest share of its workforce – agricultural laborers – alongside its militant, dominant miners (Dunkerley 1984, Malloy 1970).

Historical unionization rates for Bolivia are surprisingly hard to find, but three of the most credible estimates suggest the answer to both questions is: No. Mitchell (1977) estimates that in 1960, at the height of its power, the COB's total membership was some 147,500 members in a national population of 3.7 million, or about four percent of the population. This is consistent with Dunkerley's (1984) estimates of a total manufacturing labor force (including non-unionized workers) of four percent of the population, and a total mining labor force of 3.2 percent of the population, in 1952. By 1989 unionized workers had risen slightly to an estimated 150,000+, but the population was now 6.7 million, yielding a unionization rate of 2.3 percent. Bolivia boasted the second most agricultural economy in South America after Paraguay, and the second least industrialized after Peru (US Library of Congress 1989). We can safely conclude that neither industrial workers, nor the labor movement more broadly construed, represents a fundamental cleavage of Bolivian society.

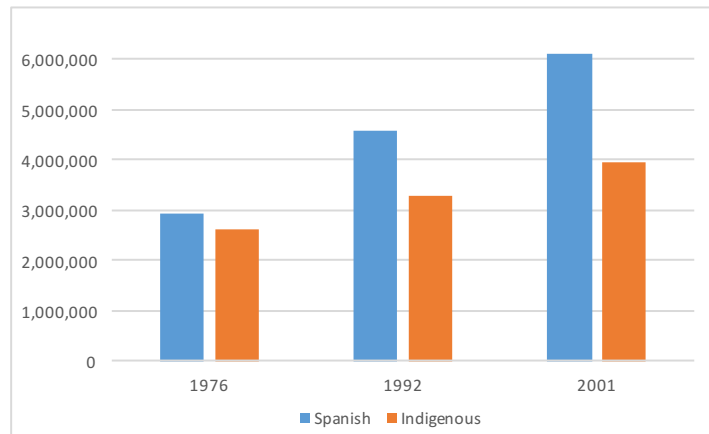
### **True Cleavages**

What, then, are Bolivia's true cleavages? Answering this requires looking beyond a narrow, urban and mining conception of its labor force, and considering the main characteristics of the broader society. Let us begin with ethnicity and culture. Figure 9 shows population by primary language spoken. In 1976, almost half the population spoke an indigenous language (mainly Quechua and Aymara) as their primary language. Although Spanish has grown in importance over time, indigenous languages are still primary for 40 percent of the population.

But this likely overstates the importance of Spanish, which many Bolivians speak in the market and their interactions with the state, while retaining indigenous primary

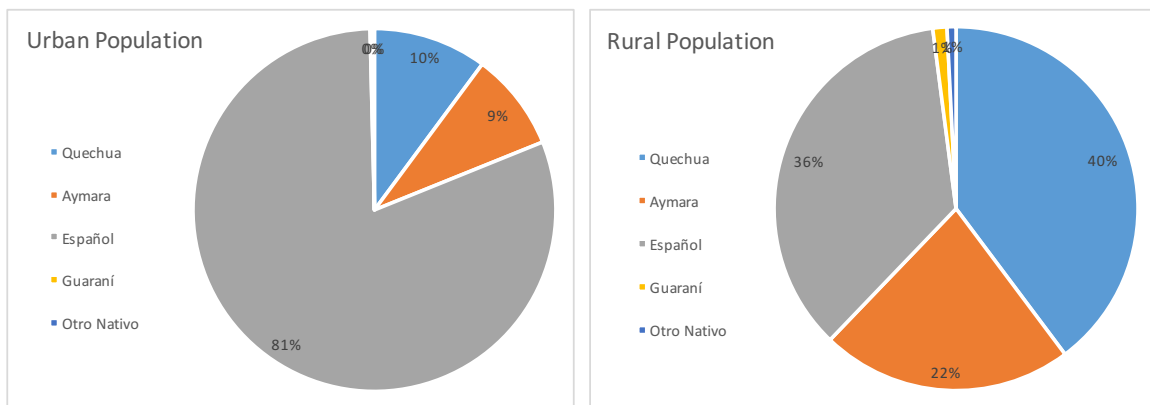
languages at home. A better sense is provided by figure 10: while 81 percent of urban Bolivians first learn to speak in Spanish, in rural areas only 36 percent do, with two-thirds speaking an indigenous language first. Lastly, figure 11 shows Bolivians' self-identification by indigenous group. Fifty-three percent of urban Bolivians identify with an indigenous group; but in rural areas fully 78 percent do.

**Figure 9: Bolivian Population by Primary Language Spoken**



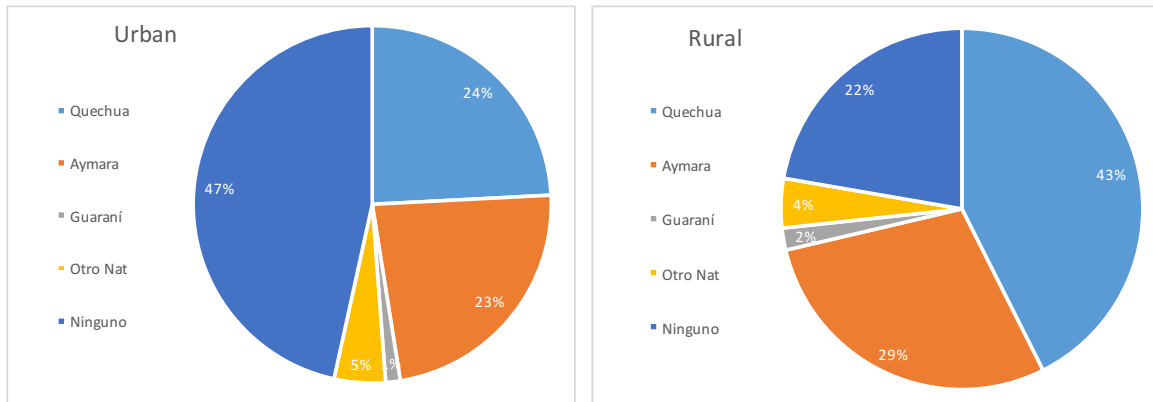
*Data source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE)*

**Figure 10: Bolivian Population by Language First Spoken (4 Years+)**



*Source: INE, 2001 Census*

**Figure 11: Population Shares by Self-Identified Indigenous Group (15 Years+)**

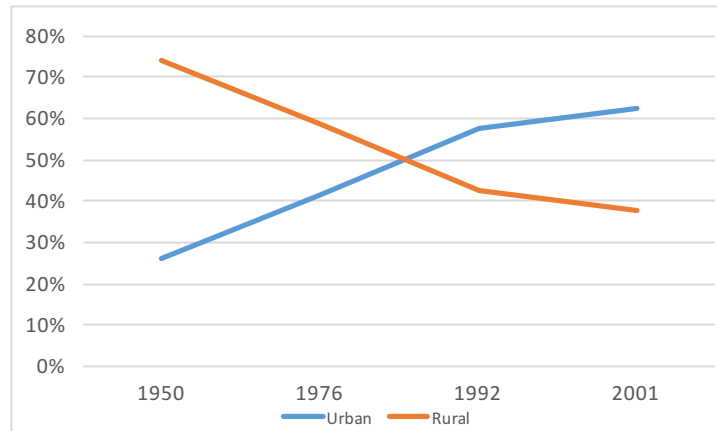


Source: INE, 2001 Census

Ethnicity and culture are thus major factors that divide Bolivian society much more deeply than class.<sup>15</sup> We should expect them to inform political demands and shape political contestation. But figures 9-11 hint at a rural-urban divide that also cleaves society in important ways. Figure 12 shows Bolivia's urban transition between 1950-2001, the period during which society transformed from three-quarters rural to two-thirds urban.

<sup>15</sup> Inspired by the Mexican PRI, the MNR promoted a 'Bolivian mestizo race', a melting-pot identity that the revolution would construct. But in practice society remained racially segmented, with the white minority on top, making race and ethnicity a primary social cleavage. Perhaps as a result, the ascendant MAS promotes the idea of Bolivia as a racial 'salad', composed of distinct elements.

**Figure 12: Evolution of Rural and Urban Populations**



Source: INE, 1950, 1976, 1992 and 2001 Censuses

The rural-urban dimension is important in its own right, but even more so because of how it interacts with cultural identities. In a country where urban, official society has traditionally been Spanish-speaking and (to a lesser extent) white, and the countryside is dominated by brown skin and indigenous languages, the rural-urban divide becomes one of culture, identity, and world-view. And the process of migration essential to urbanization is one of cultural clash, in which indigenous people come into direct, everyday contact with the dominant, Spanish-speaking *minority* often for the first time.<sup>16</sup> In so doing, their ethnic identities – present but latent in the countryside, where they are dominant – are activated via the discrimination they experience; and activated also by the felt poverty of an urban life largely defined by consumer goods that the countryside lacks.

This suggests a “folk theorem” of identitarian cleavage: Ethnic and cultural identities become politically relevant when countries reach intermediate thresholds of income and urbanization. Before then, traditional identities are latent politically

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<sup>16</sup> Some areas of Bolivia have seen extreme rates of migration, and hence cultural collision, in excess of 30 percent of the population base (INE 2001).

precisely because they are majoritarian in rural settings, and allied to poverty in urban areas, and hence anti-aspirational. Income growth is required to break the link between identity and poverty; and social mixing is required to activate ethnicity and culture politically, via the inequality and discrimination that urban migrants face.

My evidence shows that a left-right axis of politics was wrong from the start for a society in which most people lived and worked beyond the industrial economy, and to whom the tension between workers and capital was irrelevant. How, then, did it persist for so long? Much of Bolivian society – in particular rural, agrarian Bolivia – lived largely in ignorance of a politics that was urban and elite-dominated, because the latter appeared to impinge so little on the former (Klein 1992, Zuazo 2009). From the perspective of a rural villager, politics was a foreign pursuit undertaken in a foreign language by foreign people who chanted slogans – ‘Revolution of the proletariat!’ ‘The sanctity of property!’ – unconnected to one’s real and pressing concerns. The sheer poverty of rural life, and the high cost of reaching the urban core, helped ensure that the two – axis and cleavage – remained largely insulated from each other for decades.

But increasing urbanization gradually brought rural, indigenous Bolivia into intimate contact with the nation’s politics and the state. Different elements of society saw each other fully; essential differences were revealed. These dimensions of difference were real, deep, and embraced the bulk of society. But they were strangely unreflected in parties’ ideologies, in the terms of political contestation, or in the promises politicians made. And so an elite party system, so dominant until then, found



itself first discredited, and then abandoned wholesale by millions of voters to whom they suddenly did not matter.

### **Decentralization as Trigger**

Why did party system collapse occur in the way, and at the time, that it did? If dimensional shift provides the macro logic of Bolivia's party system collapse, decentralization provides the micro mechanism. Bolivia decentralized in 1994 via the "Law of Popular Participation", which sought to improve public sector performance and increase the legitimacy of the state by creating hundreds of municipalities throughout especially rural Bolivia, so taking government "closer to the people". The reform was strikingly simple and straightforward. Its five main points (Faguet 2012) were:

1. Responsibility for the provision of primary services: education, health, transport, etc., and related infrastructure, were transferred from central government to municipalities.
2. Twenty percent of national tax revenues were transferred to municipalities.
3. Transfers were allocated amongst municipalities on a strict per capita basis.
4. New municipalities were created, and existing ones expanded, to incorporate all Bolivian citizens and territory into the system.
5. Oversight Committees incorporating natural civic organizations (e.g. peasant unions, neighborhood committees, *ayllus*, *mallkus*) were designed into municipal government, thus building grass-roots accountability into the law.

From the start, the instruments of local government were embraced by especially rural Bolivians. Voter turnout increased 127 percent nationwide, and there was massive grass-roots participation in local planning and accountability

mechanisms in Bolivia's towns and villages (Faguet and Pöschl 2015).

Decentralization's effects on public sector investment patterns were similarly immediate, dramatic, and nationwide. Resources shifted from a small number of rich districts to Bolivia's smaller, poorer, more rural, traditionally abandoned municipalities. The Bolivian state became more responsive to local needs because of the actions of its municipalities (Faguet 2012 and 2014). Decentralization quickly became a defining national characteristic. Not even the political earthquake of 2002 could undo this reform.

A secondary, unplanned (Sánchez de Lozada and Faguet 2015) but ultimately fateful, consequence was that decentralization extended a ladder from the nation's public and political life down into its rural, indigenous society. In so doing, it allowed large numbers of rural Bolivians to become political actors in their own right for the first time. This happened when candidates for hundreds of new municipal council and oversight committee positions throughout the land were not the usual political elites – who of course did not live in these places – but rather bricklayers, truck drivers, and, above all, peasants with surnames like Callisaya, Choquehuanca, and Mamani.

For the first time in 500 years, members of Bolivia's ethnic and cultural majority ran for public office in large numbers, were elected, and proceeded to wield (local) power. As Faguet (2012) comprehensively shows, these new political agents not only did not do badly, they performed better than the elite-run central government at basic tasks of first-order importance, like building primary schools, running health clinics, and clearing and paving local roads. This demonstrated in

the most obvious way that politics and the exercise of power should not be considered foreign to, or beyond the abilities of, the majority. Ordinary Bolivians were perfectly capable of assuming political leadership, ruling themselves, and doing it well.<sup>17</sup>

They did so initially under the banners of established, elite political parties. This was partly from habit, but more importantly because of onerous restrictions on political competition. Pre-1994 there were few local and no regional elections, and hence politics was by construction national. New parties were registered at the national level only, and were required, *inter alia*, to raise a petition signed by two percent of the national electorate before they could register. This was the case even if they intended to run in only a few localities (Romero 2005). The effect of these restrictions was to sustain an oligopoly on political competition run by a rich, white, urban elite.

The new *modus operandi* quickly became apparent: party representatives arrived in distant municipalities shortly before a local election, distributed gifts and propaganda, organized rallies, and then returned to their urban enclaves to await the next iteration. Local party leaders were selected by the national structure. The top-down conduct of national politics continued, albeit in somewhat more distributed form.

But at the local level something very different was happening. New political actors competed for votes and exercised power in terms of the major problems and

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<sup>17</sup> Hence the MAS' concept of "internal colonization": colonialism did not end when the Spanish surrendered, but continued for centuries in a transmogrified republican form.

demands that actually affected voters' lives. As the MAS began to gel at the end of the century, its structure sped this process along. An umbrella federation of hundreds of hyper-local parties and movements, the MAS was easily able to sense the problems and demands that animate voters at the grass roots of Bolivia. These are born of poverty and inequality, discrimination, social and economic exclusion, exploitation, corruption, and oppression – phenomena natural to the deep ethnic and cultural divides that characterize society. Acting on them, as new actors did, de-aligned politics from the left-right chimaera and re-aligned it with an axis that mirrors how most Bolivians experience their lives.

It is not inconceivable that Bolivia's elite parties might have been able to survive the new politics. Significant adaptation would have been required – not just ideological and programmatic, but to parties' internal structures and incentives. At a minimum parties would have had to decentralize themselves if they hoped to harness some part of the grass-roots energy and innovation that reform unleashed. But they did not (Bonifaz 2016, CIDES-PNUD 1997, Sánchez de Lozada and Faguet 2015). Bolivia's institutions and political actors changed, but its political structures tried not to.<sup>18</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this late-1990s dispensation proved not an equilibrium. During the decade following reform, it became clear to local leaders and their electorates that party programs were unconnected to local issues (Mainwaring 2006), and toeing the line was detrimental to getting elected. During the 1980s and

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<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, this mirrors the recent experience of mainstream European parties, which also resisted change even as political conflict was transformed by a consolidating cultural/community dimension of politics, which cuts across the established left-right axis (Hooghe and Marks 2016).

1990s, complementary reforms to facilitate citizen documentation and voter registration, and extend voting places deeper into the countryside, had greatly facilitated electoral participation. Then in 2004, the final element sustaining elite oligopoly fell, and a tidal wave was unleashed. The 2004 *Ley de Agrupaciones Ciudadanas y Pueblos Indígenas* (Law of Citizen Associations and Indigenous Peoples) liberalized election law significantly, permitting civic associations to participate in elections, and allowing groups to register in only those municipalities in which they wished to compete. The two percent bar now applied to local, not national, electorates. A people that had discovered it could represent itself, could now form its own political organizations. During the months that followed, 388 new parties registered for local elections. Elite politics was no more.

To understand the magnitude of the change, consider how decentralization changed the composition of Congress. Before reform, congressmen were overwhelmingly white, male, urban-based businessmen, professionals, and landowners. They penetrated politics laterally at the national level. By 2009, half of congressmen were new political actors from rural and peri-urban Bolivia (Bonifaz 2016, Dargatz and Zuazo 2012, Romero 2012, Zuazo 2009). They first entered politics at the local level, and had very different educations, work experiences, and surnames than the politicians they replaced. The change in the political class was even sharper in the constitutional assembly of 2006-07, where a large majority were new politicians who got their start in local politics and social organizations (Ayo and Bonifaz 2008, Choque 2014, Zuazo and Quiroga 2011).

Or consider the political trajectories of two politicians of the new breed. Wilber Flores Torres entered politics as a peasant member of the local chapter of the peasants' union. He was elected a peasant leader, and then rose through positions in the provincial and departmental peasants' union to join the national executive of the Federation of Peasants' Unions. In the old Bolivia his story would probably have ended there. But in the new Bolivia he was elected councilman in the municipality of Zudáñez (Chuquisaca), and then mayor of Zudáñez, and finally national congressman from Chuquisaca for the MAS (Zuazo 2009). Or Hilario Callisaya Quispe, who also entered politics as a peasant union leader, and was then elected to various leadership roles in that union and his community organization. At this point his story might also have ended. Instead, he became an officer in his municipality's oversight committee. He was elected municipal councilman, and then president of the council, before rising to become a congressman from La Paz for the MAS (Zuazo 2009). Neither of these stories is special in the new Bolivia, and yet each is remarkable.

## **5. Conclusion**

Why did the revolutionaries of 1952 design a party system around a dominant axis unconnected to Bolivia's economy and society? The first answer is that they did not. Party systems and dominant axes are not 'designed' in that way. But it is nonetheless true that a result of revolutionaries' actions – both discursive and organizational – was to plant the seeds of such a system. Were they misguided? Craven? Ignorant?

The assertion of a non-racial, non-cultural axis of competition obviously suited the educated sons of Bolivia's then-tiny middle class. But it was also strategically astute. Amongst the revolutionary forces that Paz Estenssoro and Siles Zuazo led to victory, the workers' unions – especially the miners – were the best organized, most militant, and most threatening to any government. Declaring a social cleavage centered on workers cemented their alliance with the MNR, and ensured that the MNR was in some sense baked into not just the nation's politics, but its identity. Such an idea was easy to sell mid-twentieth century, when the conflict between workers and capital was the dominant ideology of advanced countries, and the dominant form of contestation worldwide. It was also a sort of investment in the future; if the state-led industrialization process revolutionaries hoped to catalyze succeeded, an expanding worker class would richly benefit the MNR.

The new system was extraordinarily successful. The main establishment parties completely dominated the post-revolutionary period, reliably capturing three-quarters of the vote as late as 1989. More importantly and impressively, the broader left-right system of elite-led parties won 84-93 percent of the vote in national elections, and 89-93 percent in local elections, as late as 1997. This dominance was paired with great resilience. The system was subjected to extraordinary shocks – military coups, hyperinflation and economic collapse, civil disturbances, guerrilla insurgency, and sweeping social change – only to see the same parties, leaders, and the same axis of competition return time and again to contest another election.

How did it all fall apart? Why did not just leading parties, but the entire elite system, collapse? Common explanations for Bolivia's political revolution are unconvincing. The gas and water "wars" were of insufficient consequence to suddenly implode a system that had withstood far worse. The fiscal retrenchment of the early 2000s was an unremarkable test. And there was no economic crisis to speak of.

Explaining political change of this magnitude requires a cause that is consequential, as distinct from a current event. A far better candidate is the replacement of Bolivia's primary axis of political competition – which described a society it patently was not – with a new axis better matched to its major social cleavage. Political competition over workers vs. capitalists never made sense in a country that lacked both. Competing over ethnicity and cultural identity made much more sense in a society riven by both.

In an incompletely institutionalized democracy with partial incorporation and great urban-rural divides, the wrong cleavage could remain "frozen" in place for decades. What catalyzed change? Increasing urbanization activated the dormant cultural cleavage, as more and more Bolivians felt the primacy of identity over class. But it was decentralization that provided the trigger – not the cause – by which this cleavage could become political. By creating hundreds of municipalities, decentralization generated hundreds of new political spaces in which the indigenous and mestizo majority could become political actors in their own right. Over time new politicians generated their own proposals, found their own political lexicon, and exercised local power successfully. The irrelevance of the dominant



system revealed itself to them not analytically, but in the practical sense of what was required to win elections and respond to constituents' demands. Over the course of a decade, these new political actors abandoned first the ideological discourse of the elite party system, and then the parties themselves.

When electoral law was liberalized to reduce barriers to entry, the dam broke, unleashing a flood of new parties that drowned the old system. Politics didn't so much fracture as disintegrate. A handful of parties tightly controlled from the top by privileged urban elites gave way to hundreds of tiny parties with ultra-local concerns, constituted and run by unprivileged, ordinary Bolivians. And in the middle of them all the MAS, a federal party born of social movements that agglomerates local micro-parties at election time, and – to a surprising degree – reports downward to them in-between. These structural attributes have aligned a still-forming system far more readily with the real social cleavages that define Bolivia.

My analysis underlines the deep insight of Lipset and Rokkan's model. Consider a few of their big ideas: Party systems should be linked to underlying social cleavages, and weak linkages are a source of instability. Change in party systems should come from rising new parties, and not established party adaptation, as parties' organizational characteristics induce high degrees of stickiness. Stickiness also implies that adjustment is not continuous but happens suddenly, in jumps and lurches. The Bolivian experience confirms this all.

Lipset and Rokkan also stress the importance of social identity, where politically relevant organizations form around self-conscious groups and a solidarity

born of lived experience. This was important to the formation of European parties, and is, as we have seen, a defining factor of the new Bolivian politics. They further argue that the conflict between workers and capitalists is the least important of the four cleavages they describe. This claim, it is worth mentioning, concerns countries that had already felt the full effects of the industrial revolution. If their claim is correct, it must hold doubly for the majority of the world's countries which have not. In Bolivia, it clearly does.

Which leads to a final question: How many other non-industrial countries feature party systems arrayed along the wrong axis? Whether hangovers of European colonialism, relics of the Cold War, or products of ideological mimicry or contagion, left/worker vs. right/capital systems are in principle ill-matched to the dominant cleavages of developing societies actually shaped by ethnic, cultural or regional factors. At a parochial level, the academy acknowledges this too infrequently, jumping instead to data on unionization and class as soon as a country's political cleavage must be measured. More importantly, such a politics is likely to reduce public sector efficiency, degrade democratic legitimacy, and undermine citizens' happiness. The implication is a swathe of countries, infected with a simulacrum of 20th century European politics, that are ripe for revolution from below *a la Boliviana*.

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## Appendix 1: National Election Results, 1979-2009

1979		1980		1985		1989		1993		1997		2002		2005		2009	
Valid	1,469,477	Valid	1,309,034	Valid	1,521,174	Valid	1,421,355	Valid	1,642,965	Valid	2,177,171	Valid	2,778,808	Valid	2,873,801	Valid	4,462,411
TOTAL	1,693,333	TOTAL	1,489,484	TOTAL	1,745,929	TOTAL	1,587,135	TOTAL	1,726,168	TOTAL	2,321,117	TOTAL	2,994,065	TOTAL	3,102,416	TOTAL	4,734,339
UDP	31%	UDP	34%	ADN	29%	MNR	23%	MNR-MRTKL	34%	ADN	21%	MNR	21%	MNR	6%	UN-CP	5%
MNR	31%	MNR	18%	MNR	26%	ADN	22%	AP	20%	MNR	17%	MIR	15%	PODEMOS	26%	PPB-APB	25%
ADN	13%	MNRU	2%	MIR	9%	MIR	20%	MBL	5%	MIR	16%	ADN	3%	UN	7%	MUSPA	0%
PS-1	4%	ADN	15%	MNRI	5%	IU	7%	VR-9	1%	MBL	3%	UCS	5%	NFR	1%	Pulso	0%
APIN	4%	PRA	2%	MNRV	4%	MIN	1%	CONDEPA	14%	PDB	0%	CONDEPA	0%	USTB	0%	MAS-IPSP	60%
PUB	1%	AFIN	1%	MNRI-1	1%	CONDEPA	11%	UCS	13%	CONDEPA	16%	NFR	19%	FREPAB	0%	AS	2%
VO	1%	PRIN	1%	FPU	2%	PS-1	3%	ARBOL	2%	UCS	15%	LJ	3%	MAS	50%	BSD	0%
MITKA	2%	PS-1	8%	PS-1	2%	FSB	1%	ASD	2%	IU	3%	PS	1%	MIP	2%	GENTE	0%
Blank	3%	FDR	3%	PDC	1%	MRTKL	1%	FSB	1%	VSB	1%	MCC	1%	Blank	4%	Blank	3%
Null	10%	FSB	1%	FSB	1%	FULKA	1%	IU	1%	EJE	1%	MAS	19%	Null	3%	Null	2%
		PUB	1%	POR	1%	Null	6%	IND	0%	Blank	3%	MIP	6%				
		MITKA-1	1%	ACP	1%	Blank	4%	MFD	0%	Null	3%	Blank	4%				
		MITKA	1%	IU	1%			EJE	1%			Null	3%				
		Blank	7%	FNP	1%			MKN	1%								
		Null	6%	AUR	1%			Blank	2%								
				ARENA	1%			Null	3%								
				MRTKL	2%												
				MRTK	1%												
				Blank	7%												
				Null	6%												

Establishment parties  
Neopopulist parties  
Other  
Indigenist



## Appendix 2: Municipal Election Results, 1987-2010

	1987		1989		1991		1993		1995		1999		2004		2010
Valid	1,139,883	Valid	895,131	Valid	1,245,467	Valid	1,119,785	Valid	1,712,097	Valid	2,001,801	Valid	2,674,838	Valid	3,973,737
TOTAL	1,284,317	TOTAL	1,004,267	TOTAL	1,344,629	TOTAL	1,189,817	TOTAL	1,801,271	TOTAL	2,124,509	TOTAL	2,879,389	TOTAL	4,408,002
ADN	25%	AP	30%	AP	25%	MNR	33%	MNR	20%	MNR	19%	MIR__NM	7%	MNR_PUEBLO	1%
MIR	23%	MNR	17%	MNR	24%	MBL	11%	MBL	13%	MIR	15%	MNR	6%	UN	4%
MNR	11%	IU	7%	MBL	5%	MIR_NM	9%	ADN_PDC	11%	ADN	14%	UN	5%	UN_CP	3%
MBL	7%	FRI	1%	FRI	2%	ADN	7%	MIR	9%	MBL	4%	ADN	2%	MNR	0%
VR_9	6%	VR_9	1%	UCS	22%	FRI	2%	FRI	3%	VR9	2%	MBL	2%	ADN	0%
FRI	2%	CONDEPA	17%	CONDEPA	12%	VR_9	0%	MRTKL	1%	FRI	2%	FRI	0%	UCS	2%
MIN	1%	UCS	15%	IU	4%	MRTKL	0%	VR_9	0%	UCS	11%	MNR_MIR_NM	0%	MAS_IPSP	31%
AP_	5%	MST	1%	Blank	3%	CONDEPA	18%	UCS	17%	CONDEPA	4%	PODEMOS	0%	MAS_IPSP_A	4%
PS_1	4%	VS_B	0%	Null	4%	UCS	8%	CONDEPA	15%	MAS-U	3%	UCS	3%	MSM	12%
FSB	2%	MFD	0%			FSB	2%	IU	3%	NFR	8%	UCS_MBL	0%	SPT	8%
MFD	1%	Blank	3%			ASD	2%	MPP	2%	MSM	5%	MAS	17%	PAIS	2%
ID	1%	Null	8%			IU	1%	EJE	2%	PS	3%	MSM	8%	M_P_S_	2%
PDC	1%					EJE	1%	MKN	0%	FSB	2%	PP	6%	AS_	1%
Blank	6%					Blank	2%	Blank	2%	PCB	1%	AS_XXI	3%	FA	1%
Null	6%					Null	4%	Null	3%	KND	0%	NFR	3%	PRIMERO	1%
										PDC	0%	FRENTE_AMP	3%	UNIR	1%
										MPP	0%	MUP	2%	ASP	1%
										MRTKL	0%	CIU	2%	VERDES	1%
										Blank	2%	MIP	2%	FPV	1%
										Null	4%	MOVIBOL	1%	TODOS	1%
												AS_	1%	UNE	1%
												MCSFA	1%	PAN	1%
												M_17	1%	VOCES	1%
												BUS_3R	1%	155 additional parties, each with	
Establishment parties												MPC	1%	<0.5% of the vote	
Neopopulist parties												SPT	1%	Blank	4%
MAS												MPSC	1%	Null	6%
												361 additional parties, each with			
												<0.5% of the vote			
												Blank	2%		
												Null	5%		