

The Malleability of Ethnic Identity: The Case of Bolivia

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The literature on the politicization of ethnicity has blossomed in recent years. Where once primordial theories of intrinsic and permanent cultural traditions dominated the conventional conception of the relationship between politics and identity, a new discussion of the nature of political identity has emerged that flatly rejects the primordialist claims of static ethnicity. Indeed, from both rationalist and constructivist positions, scholars now argue that identity is a mutable entity contingent upon the particular political context.¹

The rational or instrumentalist view argues that ethnic identity is an instrument used by political actors to achieve self interested goals. Indeed, the ability of opportunistic politicians to activate (or deactivate) ethnic cleavages and mobilize support based on ethnic identity is now a widely accepted and published view. In perhaps the earliest piece developing this line of thinking, Robert Bates establishes the premise that ethnicity is a tool that can be used for political gain. He is perhaps the first to describe ethnic mobilization in terms of rational analysis on the part of a political actor.² Subsequent work on the topic expounds upon Bates' seminal premise. In her 2005 piece, Kanchan Chandra tells the story of the Bahujan Samaj Party in India, which has gained regional electoral success by mobilizing the "untouchable" castes that formerly went unrepresented in the ranks of the Congress party. Chandra's view directly corroborates the notion of opportunistic politicians finding and co-opting the ethnic identity of a given

¹ See Robert Bates, "Ethnicity" in *The Elgar Companion to Development Studies*. Harvard University: 2005. Ashutosh Varshney, "Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict" in Carles Boix and Susan Stokes, eds, *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

² Robert Bates, "Modernization, Ethnic Competition and Politics." in *Governing in Black Africa* Marion Doro and Newell Stultz, eds. Africana Publishing Co. New York, 1986.

polity for electoral gain.³ In similar fashion, Daniel Posner observes the difference in the salience of the ethnic cleavage on either side of the boarder between Zambia and Malawi. He argues that the size of the ethnic group relative to the total population determines the relevance of the ethnic cleavage in that country. In his case study he finds that in Zambia, two ethnic groups whose populations do not comprise a significant portion of the overall population tend to view each other as allies while in Malawi the same two ethnic groups, who form a much more substantial percentage of the national polity, perceive each other as opponents in the quest for state resource acquisition. Size of ethnic polity with respect to the national population, it seems, determines the costs and benefits of collective action along ethnic lines, not an unwavering identity that has not changed through the ages. It follows in this work that politicians in either country tend to use ethnic identity in different manners. While Zambian leaders inclusively refer to these ethnicities in the broader sense of “easterners,” Malawian politicians directly pit one ethnic group against the other, again showing the pervasive acceptance of the current literature that the predominant utilization of ethnic identity in politics is a deliberate act on the part of the rational politician.⁴ David Laitin’s book-length account of the volatility of ethnic identity in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union comes again to a similar conclusion. In the cases of former Soviet satellite states, Laitin paints a picture of individuals making

³ Kanchan Chandra, “The Transformation of Ethnic Politics in India: The Decline of Congress and the Rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Hoshiarpur.” The Journal of Asian Studies Vol. 59 No. 1 Feb. 2000 pp. 26-61.

⁴ Daniel Posner, “The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas are Tumbukas are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi. American Political Science Review Vol 98 NO. 4 Nov. 2004.

calculated decisions with regards to the costs and benefits of assuming a particular identity in their rapidly changing political contexts.⁵

Perhaps the most recent development in the literature on ethnic identity comes from the constructivist view, what Ashutosh Varshney calls the “new conventional wisdom in the field of ethnicity and nationalism.” Briefly, constructivism posits that ethnic identities have been constructed through the developments of the modern age. Mechanisms such as technological advancements, the legacy of colonialism and changing societal ideas and norms have sculpted ethnic identities into viable and salient modes of political expression. While this view equally dismisses primordialism, it conflicts with the rationalist or instrumentalist view explained above on the issue of the intrinsic value of the particular identity itself.⁶ Ashutosh Varshney criticizes the rationalist approach’s inability to explain why individuals join ethnic groups that have “irrationally” high costs or risks, which he argues is solved through constructivism’s ascription of intrinsic value to ethnic identity. In making the case for constructivist mechanisms, he asks, “even if we accept that leaders gain by mobilizing ethnicity and that is why they deploy ethnic symbols and idioms in politics, why should the masses come along?... Why would ethnic mobilization begin at all?”⁷ However, while constructivist approaches may aid in describing the presence or salience of particular ethnic identities, as we will see, they fail to operationalize the timing and onset of ethnic mobilization, both in social movements and violent conflict.

⁵ David Laitin, “Identity in Formation: The Russian Speaking Peoples in the Near Abroad” Cornell University Press, Ithaca: 1998.

⁶ Ashutosh Varshney, “Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict” in Carles Boix and Susan Stokes, eds, Oxford *Handbook of Comparative Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁷ Ibid. 282.

The present paper builds on this existing theoretical foundation. It directly responds to Varshney's critique of instrumentalism and provides a case that flies in the face of the constructivist view posited in his 2007 work. While it acknowledges as valid the dominant trend in the instrumentalist literature that examines the actions of rational politicians, the central argument of this work investigates the possibility that second dimension of the political-ethnic relationship may also exist. This work argues that individuals discretely mold their identities to maximize their ability to extract goods from the government. Whereas the literature tends to revolve around the idea that politicians actively pursue ethnic identity to increase their vote shares, this work proposes that individuals change their ethnic orientation to fit that of the elected official to draw resources from the government. This notion upholds the existing tendency in the literature to consider ethnic identity a mutable political tool, but emphasizes the discrete role of the individual citizen in the use of the political tool of ethnicity, not the political actor. The present findings will help expand the frame of reference for the broader literature on the politicization of ethnic identity because it conceives of the "ethnicity tool" in a way previously marginalized by the relevant scholarship, and to some extent revives the instrumentalist approach from the jaws of constructivism.

To substantiate this argument I use the case of Bolivia. Not only is Bolivia one of the few Latin American countries to have a significant indigenous population, but the indigenous population is divided in itself, primarily between the Aymara and Quechua groups. This indigenous presence engenders the possibility of having the very change in ethnic identification that would confirm my argument. Thus, using a regression-discontinuity design, I test the claim that the presence of a successful indigenous

politician will trigger a greater propensity for constituents to self-identify as indigenous. As will be described in greater detail below, the research design employs two rounds of survey data in which subjects were asked on an intensity scale from 1-8 how much they felt they identified as indigenous. Between the two rounds (2004 and 2006) municipal elections were held in which several MAS (indigenous) candidates won office. The design measures the percent change in reported indigenous identity as evidence of the increase in an individual's propensity to identify as indigenous once signaled that such identification would warrant greater ability to obtain government benefits.

The history of Bolivian indigenous mobilization flies in the face of primordialist theories of immutable ethnic cleavages. A primordialist theorist would propose that an individual's conception of his specific ethnicity would not vary under changing socio-political conditions. The Bolivian case directly refutes this. While indigenous groups have persisted in some capacity for several decades with relatively modest success, only in the last five years has ethnic identity become a matter of imperative national relevance. There is nothing permanent or unchanging about ethnic identity in Bolivia. Evo Morales' swift and sudden rise to the national arena has galvanized the ethnic population into a national force, evidencing both the nascent salience of the ethnic cleavage and a drastic change from the rather static account of indigenous participation throughout the 20th century.

A brief history of the case reinforces the magnitude of the comments above. Bolivia's indigenous mobilizations in the last half century best described by a deep division between Andean indigenous groups and those in the Amazon. Within the Andean contingent, the two prominent ethnic groups, Aymara and Quechua, have a long

history of discord amongst them, which further fragmented the indigenous majority. The manner in which Bolivian indigenous groups formed made the possibility of surmounting such differences to form a national social movement impossible, even though the underlying principles of both regional groups remained roughly the same. In a nation in which the majority of the population is indigenous, (and all indigenous peoples share the common denominator of extreme poverty and disenfranchisement) the historical animosity between indigenous groups is, to an outsider, quite unanticipated.

The majority of Bolivia's indigenous population hails from the highland region, and is divided between Aymara (1.6 million) and Quechua (2.4 million). Such dense communities of indigenous peoples have contributed to a strong ethnic imaginary in Bolivia's sierra. Early in the 20th century, leftist peasant organizations and workers unions included highland indigenous communities in their ranks. Most prominent among these initial organizations is the Aymara-based Katarista organization that emphasized respect for traditional indigenous culture and indigenous rights to land and participation. Katarista discourse promotes the institutional recognition of indigenous communities through a multiethnic, plurinational, reconstructed government. The Katarista stance, which is not hostile to other non-indigenous social groups, helped advance the indigenous rights through alliances with leftist political parties and worker's unions. In 1979, the primary Bolivian labor organization, Bolivian Workers Central (COB), and the Kataristas formed what became one of the foremost organizations to promote *campesino* rights in the country, the Unitary Syndical Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB).⁸ The relative success of CSUTCB to garner indigenous support for leftist

⁸ Van Cott 53, 55.

political candidates made the organization attractive not only to numerous political campaigns, but also the Quechua coca growers, who eventually took control of the CSUTCB from their Aymara Katarist counterparts in the late 1980s. Although a rivalry exists between the two dominant Andean indigenous groups, CSUTCB defends of indigenous coca growing practices, a theme central to the highland Bolivian indigenous identity, and therefore earned the respect of both Aymara and Quechua individuals. Because it generally had the support of both the Aymara and Quechua communities, the two largest Indian nations in Bolivia, CSUTCB became the most prominent indigenous organization in the country, although notably had little effect on the course of national politics throughout even its most prominent period.⁹

The indigenous communities of the lowland or Amazonian region organized later than those in the Andes. Through the urging of the Guarani peoples, the Indigenous Confederation of the East and Amazon of Bolivia (CIDOB) launched its first protest in 1990, in which CIDOB members marched to La Paz to negotiate land ownership in the province of Beni. The peaceful protest was well received by non-indigenous white and *mestizo* populations, who were frequently turned off by the radical, and sometimes violent, tactics of the CSUTCB *cocaleros*.¹⁰

Indian rights gained some momentum under the first Sanchez de Lozada administration, (1993-97). Reforms including government decentralization measures increased indigenous communities' ability to participate in government and Victor Hugo

⁹ Van Cott, 59.

¹⁰ Van Cott, 68.

Cardenas, an Aymara intellectual, became the nation's first indigenous Vice President.¹¹ In an act that was perhaps their closest attempt at a unified front, both CIDOB and CSUTCB constituents mobilized to support land reform measures. The subsequent law passed in 1996 by the *Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria* (INRA) sought to mediate conflict between neoliberal reform measures and indigenous and peasant communities. The law stipulated the creation of *Tierras Comunitarias de Origen* (TCO, or Original Communal Lands) and that lands that exceed a given acreage and do not have particular economic or social value were eligible for government expropriation for the use of Indian communities and TCOs. However, the "*Ley INRA*" primarily benefited the lowland CIDOB communities, leaving the Andean CSUTCB groups in static poverty. The one-sided outcome of this legislation further exacerbated antipathy between the highland and lowland groups.¹²

By 2000, divisions in both the highland and lowland organizations and within the highland organization itself (between the ethnocentric Aymara and *cocalero* Quechua groups) had worsened. Felipe Quispe, an Aymara militant and the leader of CSUTCB, capitalized on this turmoil to create his own Katarist political party the *Movimiento Indigena Pachacuti* (MIP). The party focused on Aymara ethno-nationalism and thus undermined the cohesiveness of the highland movement. Quispe's confrontational, anti-western stance was not popular and although he remains a prominent figure individually, his political party has very little support.

¹¹ Deborah Yashar, *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge*. (New York: Cambridge, 2005) 215.

¹² Yashar, 216-17

In contrast, highland indigenous support for Evo Morales, the half Aymara and half Quecha *cocalero* leader and his political party, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) was quite strong by the turn of the millennium. In the 2002 elections, Morales posed such a significant threat to Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada that they were forced into a coalition with three other parties. Ultimately, de Lozada won the election by a mere one percent of the vote, but the true success belonged to MAS. Morales' near victory marked a milestone in the evolution of Bolivian indigenous political activity.¹³ Morales' candidacy electrified the indigenous base as a collectivity on ethnic grounds. His ability to capitalize on the shared respect for coca as both a staple of highland indigenous tradition and a national symbol universalized his message. Morales' unique personal background, (half Aymara and half Quechua, and as a highland indigenous migrant to the coca-growing region of Chapare) appealed to all factions of the indigenous majority and thus enabled Morales to politicize a unified ethnic cleavage at the national level. Whatever the case, however, only since Morales' rise to prominence has Indian political mobilization experienced any real success at retaining national political power.

Perhaps the most significant event in the history of Bolivian indigenous movements is Evo Morales' successful presidential campaign in 2005. His leftist platform that appealed to other non-indigenous groups, combined with the support of the *cocalero* movement proved sufficient to finish 25 points ahead of his nearest opponent. His presidency has been hailed as a decisive victory for the indigenous cause and his actions as president, such as nationalizing the natural gas reserves, land reform initiatives, redistribution of wealth to Bolivia's poor and attempting to rewrite the constitution, have

¹³ Ibid.

all heavily favored indigenous communities. Morales' win shows the capability of MAS to win effectively the support of the indigenous community in a way unprecedented by the earlier participation of indigenous peoples in politics.¹⁴ Most recently, the ratification of a new constitution aimed specifically at the demands of the indigenous population is a signal of the overwhelming political presence of ethnicity in politics. Among other provisions, the new constitution extends rights to indigenous communities to sentence accused criminals according to tribal customs, communal land ownership, and state ownership of the nation's natural resources.¹⁵

It is with this history in mind that the present work rejects the primordial theory of static ethnic identity, and accepts the more recent theories concerning rational politicians. Both Morales and the earlier leftist politicians have used the latent indigenous base of support for their own political gain. This work however, seeks to answer a seldom-explored question in the literature, specifically, do individuals use their ethnic identity as a tool to extract goods from the government, particularly once it is established that a particular ethnicity controls the provision of resources?

To test the Bolivian case, this paper employs a regression-discontinuity (RD) design.¹⁶ The RD design belongs in the family of pre-test- post-test quasi-experimental research plans but is distinguished by its method of assigning the treatment condition. Whereas most quasi-experimental and experimental designs are concerned with the random assignment of the treatment condition to control for confounding variables and

¹⁴ Dan Keane, "Bolivia Divided over Morales' Push for Further Reforms" *Associated Press* (25 November, 2006) <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.ezproxy.umw.edu:2048/> (accessed 25 November, 2006).

¹⁵ Simon Romero, "Bolivia Ratifies New Constitution" *The New York Times* 25 January 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/26/world/americas/26bolivia.html?scp=2&sq=evo%20morales&st=cse>

¹⁶ For a thorough description of the regression-discontinuity design, see Morgan and Winship (2007) and William M.K. Trochim (2006).

hence increase internal validity, the RD plan directly assumes that the two groups are dissimilar. The RD design differentiates between treatment and control groups solely on the basis of some “cut off point,” that is, a measure that discriminates the treatment and control based on a pre-treatment measure proxying the primary variable of interest and that there is no spurious variable that creates a change at the cut-off point. Essentially, the RD design assumes that without application of the treatment, the relationship between the pre-test and post-test in each group would be the same, regardless of the potential differences between the groups. If a clearly defined, precise cut-off metric is employed, we can effectively control for several of the typical biases that threaten internal validity.

In accordance with other designs in the pre-test post-test family, the RD design is implemented through measuring the difference between measurements taken before and after treatment for both the treatment and control groups and comparing the difference between the outcomes for the two groups. If there is a positive treatment effect, there will be a distinct gap at the cut-off point in the regression lines. Table one graphically depicts the theoretically expected positive treatment effect:

[insert table one about here].

In 2004, a change in the Bolivian Constitution instituted popular elections at the municipal level. This adaptation to the electoral system allows for an exceptional opportunity to measure ethnic politicization, since it provides a previously untested treatment variable, the popular election of an indigenous candidate. Survey questions eliciting individual ethnic identification on an intensity scale from 1-8 exist for the years

surrounding this election (2004 and 2006).¹⁷ Using the regression discontinuity design, I measure the change in the population that identifies as indigenous before and after the treatment, the election of a candidate that self-identifies as indigenous. A significant change in reported ethnic identification and the contemporaneous presence of a newly elected indigenous politician would suggest that my hypothesis of voter-instituted change in professed identity is valid. Such validity would perhaps imply a new dimension in the conception in the current literature towards the mutability of ethnic identity.

The particular case under examination here is at great risk for endogeneity biases. How, in areas with large, pre-existing ethnic populations, can we distinguish between the effect of rational politicians taking on indigenous traits to garner support and the decision of rational individuals to change their outward self-identification to increase their ability to extract goods from the government? The matching strategy implicit in the regression continuity design alleviates this potentially crippling problem. When we compare two municipalities of nearly exact demographic, political and socio-economic traits, one in which the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) candidate won election in the 2004 municipal contest, and the other in which the MAS candidate lost by a very small margin, we counteract the potential endogeneity bias caused by controlling for all possible confounding variables, including a previously existing indigenous population. By assigning a MAS victory as the “treatment” and a MAS loss as the “control” in (at least) two nearly identical provinces, we can control for confounding variables and isolate the

¹⁷ While it may seem as though there is a timing issue between the 2004 elections and the conduction of the 2004 round of surveys, it happens that the surveys were completed by October, and the elections did not take place until December, 2004. Through the nature of the design implemented in this work, I correct for any possible effect of campaigning.

one variable that matters—the effect of an indigenous politician on constituents’ indigenous self-identification.

The available survey research also presents a secondary level of the ethnic identity question, that of the conflicting Aymara and Quechua cultures. The wording of the ethnic identity question in the survey, “to what extent do you feel part of the (Quechua/Aymara) culture” allows us to stratify the results according to particular ethnic group, not only by categorical indigenous identity. While the conventional perception of Evo Morales is that because of his mixed heritage he has been able to galvanize the two historically disparate groups, the findings of this paper may suggest that this view is not entirely correct, and that the highland ethnic groups continue to identify by tribal connection more than “indigenous” as a whole. Furthermore, a more positive effect of treatment on one group than the other would have implications for the susceptibility of the ethnicities to politicization and would inspire new questions for further research.

Data analysis that supports the theory presented here would include a significant percent change in reported ethnic identity between the 2004 round of surveys and that conducted in 2006, for the municipalities that elected an indigenous candidate in 2004. The control case, the municipalities that did not elect an indigenous candidate in 2004, should show no change in the frequency or intensity of indigenous identification in 2006. The secondary construct tested here concerning a difference in treatment effect due to Aymara or Quechua heritage is not particularly predictable, and any positive findings would be novel and provocative.

Finally, with positive findings, this paper will enhance the position of instrumentalism against the constructivist critique. The work responds to Ashutosh Varshney's criticism of instrumentalism, succinctly, that it does not explain why the "masses come along" when leaders "deploy ethnic symbols and idioms." The crux of the present work is that the rational constituent does utilize ethnic identity in precisely the manner that Varshney questions. It can be extrapolated from the theory herein that mobilization occurs when individuals are signaled that utilization of their ethnic identity will earn benefits from the government that outweigh the costs potentially associated with such identification. This theory, along with others in the instrumentalist camp, fortifies the instrumentalist position and does a better job operationalizing ethnic identity than does constructivism, whose major contribution to the discussion is the inherent value of identity as more than a tool in the political game.

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