

# SOCIETAL PROTEST IN POST-STABILIZATION BOLIVIA\*

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*Abstract: Bolivia was the poster child for economic liberalization policies adopted throughout Latin America since the 1970s. The country is also currently viewed as a place where the neoliberal or market-oriented economic model has been exhausted, as indicated by high levels of societal protest and recent democratic instability. Using available subnational data from Bolivia, we examine the determinants of societal protest across the country's nine provinces for the 1995–2005 period. Consistent with recent literature, we find that provinces with higher levels of political competition have lower levels of societal protest. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, which suggests that neoliberal reforms depoliticize and mobilize collective actors, we find that economic liberalization increases the level of protest activity. Taken together, the article draws attention to the paradoxical effect of neoliberalism to simultaneously debilitate certain types of popular resistance and activate others.*

What has been the social impact of economic liberalization? The dominant perspectives about the societal reaction to economic liberalization dwell on the destructive sociopolitical consequences resulting from marketization (Kurtz 2004; Wolff 2005). Neoliberal or market reforms were executed in a top-down fashion with little input from legislative bodies or a broad cross-section of societal groups (Teichman 2001).<sup>1</sup> Societal actors, in turn, are presumed to be passive recipients of state initiatives, incapable of resisting, modifying, or reversing the implementation of these policy reforms. As Remmer (2002) aptly notes, the political science literature remains overwhelmingly state centric, treating societal actors as too dra-

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1. The terms *market reform* and *neoliberal reform* are used interchangeably, implying policies that seek to reduce state intervention in the economy. Examples include trade liberalization, privatization of state enterprises, and domestic and international financial liberalization.

matically weakened and fragmented to react against the economic policies that challenge their lives.

The existing literature emphasizes the disorganizing or weakening effects of economic crises and market-oriented reform policies on civil society. Economic crises and their neoliberal resolution, Wolff (2005, 58) writes, "hollow out democratic participation and representation by undermining the capacity for collective action on the part of broad sectors of society." By putting in jeopardy the organizational bases of representative institutions and large-scale secondary organizations, particularly political parties and labor unions, neoliberal reform policies are viewed as contributing to the low-intensity citizenship that O'Donnell (1994) and others have used to characterize many emerging democracies. Jointly, economic crises and market-oriented reforms demobilize and depoliticize collective actors, creating a situation that is currently considered detrimental to democracy. As Kurtz (2004, 263) writes, in more free-market contexts the "threat to democracy [is] the underarticulation of societal interests, pervasive social atomization, and political quiescence founded in collective action problems that, if they are severe enough, may undermine the efficacy of formal democratic institutions and ultimately regime legitimacy."

Contrary to the literature's dire predictions, which associate marketization with depoliticization, recent studies have shown an increase in the level of societal protest in the region and have sought to understand the effects of these mobilizations on important political processes. For instance, Hochstetler (2006) examines the role that collective protests play in forcing challenged presidents to leave office early. Specifically, societal protests in contemporary Latin America have removed presidents who were more likely to be personally implicated in scandals, to pursue neoliberal policies, and/or to lack a congressional majority. Other literature documents the changing basis of antigovernment mobilizations against economic liberalization, including the emergence of alternative forms of collective action, and the geographic segmentation of protest activity in peripheral provinces (Arce 2008; Garay 2007; Kohl 2002; Murillo and Ronconi 2004). Some examples include the antiprivatization revolt in Arequipa (Peru), the water war in Cochabamba (Bolivia), and the "glocal" riots (Auyero 2001) in Santiago del Estero and Corrientes (Argentina).

In this article, we draw attention to the paradoxical effect of neoliberalism to simultaneously debilitate certain types of popular resistance while activating others. We also seek to correct the analytical bias of the existing literature in favor of national-level processes of economic and political change. Widespread decentralizing reforms across Latin America have shifted important decision making downward in the political system; thus, the appropriate locus of protest activity is likely to have changed in recent decades. The existing literature continues to overlook these important changes at the subnational level.

Using subnational data from Bolivia, we examine the determinants of societal protest across the country's nine departments—hereafter, provinces—for the 1995–2005 period.<sup>2</sup> The time frame under investigation captures important political developments in post-stabilization Bolivia. Specifically, it follows the implementation of the decentralizing reforms of the 1994 Law of Popular Participation (LPP) and the country's first-ever nationwide direct municipal elections starting in 1995 and concludes after the round of protests of mid-2005 that prompted the resignation of interim president Carlos Mesa. Our empirical results demonstrate that political competition and economic liberalization shape the levels of subnational protest activity. After providing background information on Bolivia's most recent round of protests, we summarize the data and methods used in the article. We then present our empirical findings. We conclude by suggesting new areas of research into the ways economic liberalization repoliticizes collective political activity.

#### SOCIETAL PROTEST IN CONTEMPORARY BOLIVIA

Societal protests in Bolivia have increased in frequency and intensity in recent years. The newest wave of protests to rock the country is widely believed to mark the exhaustion of the neoliberal economic model that had been in force in Bolivia since 1985 (Bonifaz 2004; Crabtree 2005; Kohl and Farthing 2006; Postero 2007; Suárez 2003). Although strikes, roadblocks, and street demonstrations have long been a part of Bolivian politics, popular resistance efforts have been increasingly characterized by the formation of a new cross-class, cross-ethnic, cross-regional, cross-generational, and cross-sectoral collective identity defined in opposition to neoliberalism (Suárez 2003). Given Bolivia's lengthy experience as a social laboratory for economic reformers, the country serves as an excellent case study in the politics of protest. The high level of societal protest found in Bolivia is significant in light of the body of literature that casts the nation as a neoliberal success case (Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Morales and Sachs 1990; Pastor 1992).

Bolivia's latest protest cycle, which began with the water war of Cochabamba in 2000 and culminated in the gas war of La Paz in 2003, specifically targeted the country's economic development model and its exclusionary governing practices. Although it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between economic policies and societal outcomes, a number of recent empirical studies have suggested an association between neoliberalism and higher levels of poverty and inequality in the region (Huber

2. The Bolivian state is divided into nine departments. Throughout this manuscript, we use the term *province* instead of *department* for the sake of consistency with the existing literature on the subnational consequences of economic liberalization.

and Solt 2004; Portes and Hoffman 2003; United Nations 2005; Wade 2004). Scholars working within the relative deprivation school of thought (Gurr 1970; Muller and Seligson 1987) would argue that the situation in Bolivia is ripe for mass-based political uprisings. There is a growing perception on the ground in Bolivia that it is the economically and politically powerful who are benefiting from the policies of economic liberalization while it is the poor who are shouldering the costs (Crabtree 2005, 9).

The sense of marginalization and discrimination alongside a political system that produces strong barriers to genuine participation has contributed to the resurgence of protest politics in the country. In fact, since its transition to democracy in the mid-1980s, the political landscape in Bolivia has been dominated by a system of coalition governments, principally the National Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario, MNR), the Left Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Izquierdista Revolucionario, MIR), and the National Democratic Action (Acción Democrática Nacional, ADN) party (Ballivián 2003; Mayorga 2005). Although the ability to form coalitions had given the Bolivian party system a measure of stability, these same coalitions served to effectively shut out the opposition from access to the decision-making process. As a result, frustrated groups have had to resort to extrasystemic means to effect change. At the same time, the government's increasing reliance on force to maintain control and push through its agenda has widely discredited its economic programs and radicalized its opponents (Kohl and Farthing 2006, 15). Lazar (2006) has suggested that government-mandated violence has served to disrupt the well-established pattern of political behavior in the country based on protest followed by direct negotiation with the government. This has led to a crisis in state-society relations and caused corporate groupings to turn against their government.

Traditionally, affected sectors of society such as miners, teachers, or retired workers seeking to remedy a specific situation, rather than a broad swath of civil society groups, have led societal protests in Bolivia. In contrast, the most recent round of protests joined together a diverse array of actors, including indigenous peoples, students, workers, artists, intellectuals, neighborhood associations, religious groups, and sectors of the middle class out of a common frustration with the promises and failures of neoliberalism (Laserna 2002; Suárez 2003). García Linera (2004b) has termed this new form of collective action *the multitude*. This new pattern of organizing began with the victorious water war. In 1999, the government of Hugo Bánzer sold Cochabamba's water system to Aguas del Tunari, a multinational consortium led by the London firm International Water Limited, a subsidiary of the American Bechtel Corporation (Kohl and Farthing 2006; Olivera and Lewis 2004). Public outrage against the blatantly unreasonable terms of the privatization deal, which granted the consortium control over all of Cochabamba's surface and subterranean water

sources, quickly spread to other parts of the country. Civil society groups throughout Bolivia began to protest not only the issue of water rights but also the general direction of the government's economic policies. Faced with a massive civic uprising, the Bánzer government terminated the contract with Aguas del Tunari in April 2000.

Spurred on by the victory in Cochabamba, indigenous and peasant groups in the highland region of Achacachi, led by Felipe Quispe, and in the Chapare region, led by Evo Morales—the current president of Bolivia, began to mobilize in September 2000 around several different conflicts in what is popularly known as Black September. The September 2000 mobilizations introduced a new dimension to the traditional road block. In previous cycles of protest, participants would build blockades of rocks and tree trunks at strategic intervals along the highway to impede the flow of traffic and goods in and out of the major cities. As a result of the greater number of participants involved in the contemporary protests, roadblocks now consist of protesters' physical occupation of various miles of roadway, which makes it much more difficult to remove blockades by military personnel (Laserna 2002). The Black September protests concluded with the signing of a lengthy accord between the government and the protest organizers covering more than fifty points, varying from the modification of specific laws to the implementation of infrastructural projects. According to Laserna (2002), the direct result of these civil society victories has been increased street protests, more direct action, and massive mobilizations as a result of the strong perception that those who do not take to the streets will miss out on the opportunity to have their interests taken into account.

The period of social mobilization reached its peak with the gas war of La Paz in October 2003. The immediate cause of the October crisis was the government's decision to sell gas to the United States via Chile. Although the theme of gas may have been the rallying cry for the October uprising, the underlying factors included the social costs of the application of orthodox neoliberal economic policies, the control of strategic sectors of the economy by transnational capital, and the loss of legitimacy of the nation's democratic political institutions (Bonifaz 2004; Suárez 2003). In total, the nearly six-week-long social convulsion that gripped the entire nation saw the deaths of more than seventy civilians at the hands of military forces and the resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (Kohl and Farthing 2006, 175; Lazar 2006, 184–185). The October 2003 civic uprising was an open expression of the failure of the state's democratic institutions to adequately represent the people's interests and of the neoliberal economic model to resolve the nation's pressing needs. It reflected a questioning of the effectiveness of political parties as the only mediator between the state and society, of liberal democracy and free market economics in general, of pacted governments, and of the legitimacy of a



monocultural state in the face of a multicultural society (García Linera 2004a; Postero 2007). For many Bolivians, the ousting of Sánchez de Lozada brought to a close the lengthy period of structural adjustment that began in the mid-1980s.

The implementation of market reforms has had devastating consequences for the nation's previously most powerful social actor—organized labor. The Bolivian Workers' Central (Confederación Obrera Boliviana, COB), in particular, had long held a position of national political prominence as the organizational expression of the country's labor union movement. Economic restructuring has served to break the strategic position that organized labor once held over the national economy through the privatization of state-owned enterprises that resulted in massive job losses. The demise of organized labor in Bolivia, however, has created a space for the emergence of new social actors, including indigenous groups, the rural landless, and neighborhood associations (Rice 2003). These new social actors, who lack institutionalized channels of social representation, have come to the forefront of anti-neoliberal protests in Bolivia. In contrast to the discipline, structure, and organization that characterized the labor movement, the new coalitions bring together numerous civil society groups at a moment's notice, without instruction or a general coordinating body and with each pursuing their own agendas. Although these popular coalitions have proved susceptible to the government's strategy of divide and conquer, the ability of the movement organizers to link the claims of disparate groups into a coherent critique with the power to convoke the masses has proved a highly effective tool in the struggle against neoliberalism (Kohl and Farthing 2006, 186).

Defying all odds, the limitations of neoliberal policies to spur economic growth in Bolivia has taken place in the context of open and democratic politics. Recent literature has noted that democratization influences societal responses to economic liberalization and other material hardships by relaxing repression, encouraging associational life, and opening channels of popular participation (Arce and Bellinger 2007). In addition, Bolivia is one of the few countries in Latin America that has seen the emergence of parties organized around indigenous identity (Rice and Van Cott 2006), thus increasing the number of new entrants to the electoral arena. Some research associates multiparty systems with political instability and difficulties in maintaining order because of breakdowns in governing coalitions (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Payne, Zovatto G., and Díaz 2002), while other research expects parties to function as effective channels of social representation (Powell 1982; Sani and Sartori 1983), increasing the levels of political competition (Wilkinson 2004) and thus inhibiting societal conflict. Ultimately, these conjectures are subject to empirical testing.

Bolivia also adopted a number of important decentralizing reforms. These reforms suggest that the loci at which significant protests take place

have also changed in recent years. Nonetheless, the shift to local politics as part of the decentralizing reforms under the first administration of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993–1997) proved contradictory to the goal of securing popular support for the neoliberal agenda. Although they initially dampened resistance to neoliberalism through the creation of new institutional channels of social representation, decentralization and municipal reforms aided in the development of new local leaders and movements. When the state-led reforms failed to bring about the promised benefits for Bolivia's popular sectors, it signaled a return to the politics of protest in the country (Postero 2007). In the words of Kohl (2002, 449), decentralization in Bolivia "served to territorialize opposition to privatization and neoliberal economic policies and, in some areas, reinforce regional social movements." Some of these movements have managed to project themselves onto the national political stage in the country's most recent round of protests by moving the focus of contestation beyond the local level to a national critique of the neoliberal economic model.

#### DATA AND MEASUREMENT

The central task of our study is to examine the factors which gave rise to the current round of societal protest in Bolivia. We seek to correct for the analytical bias of the existing literature in favor of national-level processes of economic and political change by examining the determinants of protest across Bolivia's nine provinces for the 1995–2005 period. These nine provinces are Chuquisaca, La Paz, Cochabamba, Oruro, Potosí, Tarija, Santa Cruz, Beni, and Pando. The dependent variable, societal protest, is the number of civil disturbances recorded by Bolivia's National Police. These disturbances include demonstrations, road blockades, and strikes. We aggregate these three similar protest indicators in an effort to capture the overall trend of societal mobilization in the country. To our knowledge, these are the only data currently available that measure the variation of protest activity across Bolivia's nine provinces and across time in each province.<sup>3</sup> The societal protest dependent variable and the other explanatory and control variables were taken from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE 2000, 2004, and <http://www.ine.gov.bo/>). All of these figures are at the provincial level for the time period in question.

3. The Cochabamba-based research center Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Económica y Social (CERES) also maintains a database of protest events as reported by local newspapers. Unfortunately, the CERES data only provides disaggregated figures for three provinces (La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz). Because this article is interested in explaining the variation of protest across all provinces, the figures recorded by Bolivia's National Police are more adequate for our purposes.

Because a subnational index of economic liberalization is not available, we use two different proxies that have been used in previous research examining the subnational effects of globalization (Hecock 2006, 957): foreign direct investment and exports. As noted earlier, there is widespread frustration with the promises and failure of marketization policies. Thus, we expect a positive relationship between our measures of economic liberalization and the level of societal protest. Both measures are expressed per capita to control for province size.

Our second explanatory variable of interest is the level of political competition. Following Wilkinson (2004), we measure the level of political competition in terms of the effective number of political parties. We use Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) formula for the "effective number of parties."<sup>4</sup> The early literature associates the effective number of parties involved in electoral competition with party fractionalization (Powell 1982), whereby the greater the number of effective parties, the more channels participate in the formal political process, and therefore the less need to participate in extra-systemic protest activity. Recent literature suggests that higher levels of political competition pushes parties to engage in "vote-pooling" (Horowitz 1991) to win elections, and winning elections is what forces politicians to be more responsive to constituents' needs. Thus, when politicians face significant electoral challenges, they are more likely to enact policies that can potentially reduce protest activity (Wilkinson 2004). Therefore, we hypothesize that high levels of political competition will be associated with lower levels of protest activity.

Our control variables are per capita gross domestic product (GDP), population, and the percentage of indigenous population living in each province. Higher levels of per capita GDP ought to serve as a stabilizing force by reducing poverty-related grievances and thus decreasing the level of societal conflicts. The variable population seeks to control for the possibility that larger provinces would experience higher levels of mobilization compared to smaller provinces. Finally, the variable share of indigenous population seeks to capture the relationship between a province's indigenous percentage and its level of societal protest. As noted earlier, the indigenous population of Bolivia has played a major role during the latest protest cycle and should be positively correlated with the level of societal protest.

To examine the subnational determinants of societal protest, we estimated a negative binomial event-count model. Event-count models use maximum likelihood estimation to predict the probability of event occur-

4. This formula weighs parties with a higher vote share more heavily than those parties with a low vote share, thus providing a better indicator of the real level of political party competition than if we were to simply add the total number of parties competing in each province.



rences. As event counts always take on nonnegative integer values, and in our case, are rare relative to the population, the distribution of events is skewed and discrete, producing errors that are not normally distributed or homoscedastic (Long 1997). In addition, overdispersion and goodness-of-fit tests indicated that a negative binomial model is the best method of estimation for our data. Likelihood ratio tests of the alpha parameter were significant at the 0.000 level, which also indicates that the negative binomial model is the best choice for our purposes.

#### EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Table 1 presents our empirical findings. Models 1 and 3 test the effects of economic liberalization on the level of societal protest. Models 2 and 4 add the explanatory variable political competition to these previous models. Only one of our two measures of economic liberalization—per capita foreign direct investment—covaries statistically with the level of subnational provincial protest (models 1 and 2). Specifically, the level of foreign direct investment has a positive effect on societal protests. As noted earlier, foreign ownership and control of natural resources has proven to be a highly contentious issue in Bolivia, one that has radicalized broad sectors of society. At the heart of the water and gas wars was a deep-seated rejection of neoliberalism as a form of neocolonialism and the special place that these resources hold in the history of Bolivia.

Although the effects of per capita foreign direct investment are in the expected direction and statistically significant, the coefficient defies direct substantive interpretation. Setting the other variables to their mean values, the level of foreign direct investment suggests strong substantive effects. The predicted annual number of provincial protests rises from 1.22 at minimum levels of foreign direct investment to 3.54 at maximum levels of foreign direct investment.<sup>5</sup>

Our second explanatory variable of interest—level of political competition—is also statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction (models 2 and 4). As expected, high levels of political competition (measured in terms of the effective number of parties) are associated with lower levels of societal protest. Setting the other variables to their mean values, the predicted annual number of provincial protests increases from 0.81 at maximum levels of political competition (when the effective number of political parties is 6.25) to 1.91 at minimum levels of party competition (when the number of salient political parties is 2.27). In Bolivia, at least until recently, political parties, in general, have served more as

5. The predicted counts reported in this section are based on model 2, which incorporates our two main and statistically significant explanatory variables: economic liberalization and political competition.

Table 1 Determinants of Subnational Protest in Bolivia, 1995–2005

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Population	1.20e-06** (1.45e-07)	1.19e-06** (1.47e-07)	1.20e-06** (1.09e-07)	1.20e-06** (1.06e-07)
Indigenous population	0.018* (0.008)	0.030** (0.008)	0.017** (0.006)	0.026** (0.006)
Per capita GDP	-0.034 (0.260)	-0.088 (0.252)	0.160 (0.176)	0.131 (0.171)
Per capita FDI	1.662* (0.820)	1.931* (0.975)		
Per capita exports			4.64e-04 (3.95e-04)	3.37e-04 (3.83e-04)
Political competition		-0.372** (0.123)		-0.290** (0.092)
Constant	3.281** (1.037)	4.286** (1.064)	2.970** (0.709)	3.764** (0.742)
Observations	72	72	99	99
$\alpha$	.874	.808	.844	.804
$\chi^2$	110.71**	192.51**	166.66**	215.61**
Log-likelihood	-446.02	-442.53	-629.58	-626.64

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01.

vehicles for the capture and circulation of state patronage among political elites than as organizations expressing the interests of society (Gamarra and Malloy 1995). The strong showing of the Movement Toward Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS), led by Evo Morales since its emergence in 1999, has provided indigenous and labor groups in the country with a measure of improved social representation.

Two of our control variables—population and the share of indigenous population—also have a positive and statistically significant effect on the level of subnational protest. Larger provinces and those provinces with a higher share of indigenous population experience higher levels of societal protest. These findings are consistent with our expectations and the evidence that associates indigenous population with the high level of mobilizations that has taken place in Bolivia since the 1990s. Setting the other variables to their mean values, the predicted annual number of provincial protests rises from 0.76 at the lowest share of indigenous population (11 percent) to 2.47 at the highest share of indigenous population (80 percent).

Although case studies such as the one presented in this article do not fare well in capturing the overall trend of societal responses to market policies across the Latin American region, the results of this cross-provincial statistical analysis are consistent with recent cross-national empirical studies (Arce and Bellinger 2007) insofar as economic liberaliza-

tion repoliticizes collective political activity in more democratic contexts. Therefore, we have some confidence that these empirical findings are not necessarily the result of an unusual case or time frame. These results also help to confirm the circumstantial evidence from several well-researched case studies that have tied the most recent wave of protest to neoliberal policies in Bolivia.

## CONCLUSION

Existing research associates free-market democracy with low-intensity democracy, whereby societal actors are presumed to be passive, atomized recipients of painful economic reforms. Consistent with recent cross-national empirical studies (Arce and Bellinger 2007), our empirical findings challenge these assumptions. Economic liberalization in the context of democracy leads to greater levels of societal protest. Our results also show that higher levels of political competition reduce the levels of protest activity. Even in Bolivia, a country characterized by weak political institutions, political parties shape the levels of protest activity.

Several additional observations can be drawn from our study. First, contrary to the atomization literature, which views economic liberalization as the cause and consequence of widespread social demobilization (Kurtz 2004), neoliberalism has repoliticized collective political activity. Neoliberalism has become an organizing symbol around which social movements gather support for their mobilizing efforts. Not only are the various social actors within Bolivian society organized at the local level, but also there appears to be an element of coordination among social movements at the national level. Economic restructuring has altered the traditional pattern of class-based organizing in Bolivia. In its place, diverse new social actors have emerged to take the lead in popular resistance efforts. Although these new cross-ethnic, cross-regional, and cross-sectoral coalitions have proved effective in halting unpopular economic reforms, their reactive and episodic nature suggests problems of movement sustainability and impact. As several observers of Bolivian politics have pointed out, the victorious water war of Cochabamba did not, in the end, bring about a substantial improvement in the water supply for poor households (Kohl and Farthing 2006, 187; Postero 2007, 196). Future research will need to explore the implications of this new pattern of mobilization in addressing the pressing needs of the region's poor.

Second, and contrary to the state-centric literature on the politics of economic reform (Haggard and Kaufman 1995), the central lesson of the current round of societal mobilization in Bolivia is that the legislative and executive branches of government can no longer exclusively make national policy decisions, which must be made in consultation with civil society. The societal protests explicitly expressed a strong rejection of cer-

tain institutional actors in the democratic process as well as the desire to reconstruct the relationship between state and society on the part not only of the popular sectors but of the middle-class as well. All together, these protests represent societies' "protective countermovement" (Polanyi 1944) in response to the risks associated with market forces.

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