DESIGNING SUBNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS
Regional and Municipal Reforms in Postauthoritarian Chile

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This article conceptualizes decentralization as a change in the institutional rules that divide political authority and governing capacity between levels of government. By emphasizing the institutional dimension, the author argues that different approaches to the study of institutions, namely, rational and historical institutionalism, can generate analytical leverage on the contemporary trend of decentralization. In the Chilean case, rationalist perspectives illuminate the country’s continued status as one of Latin America’s most centralized polities. Comparatively weak subnational institutions directly reflect the strategic design considerations of national politicians. However, concepts central to historical institutionalism, including critical junctures and unanticipated consequences, explain how and why decentralization gained steam in the postauthoritarian period. Specifically, Chile’s shift to more decentralized institutions is the legacy of Pinochet-era reforms of subnational government, sequencing patterns that devolved governing capacity before political authority, and the emergence of new organizational actors who have struggled to decentralize Chile against the opposition of powerful national politicians.

Keywords: decentralization; democratization; Latin America; Chile; Pinochet

When Augusto Pinochet seized power on September 11, 1973, he captured the world’s attention with his willingness to use force in the pursuit of political objectives. But during the 17 years that followed, Pinochet also distinguished himself by the seriousness of his attempts to engineer institutions in the less bloody pursuit of these same objectives. A generation

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of Chilean experts has carefully documented the institutional changes imposed during the authoritarian period, which affected everything from electoral rules to the judiciary, from the National Security Council to the Central Bank (Arriagada, 1988; Boylan, 2001; Garretón, 1989; Haggard & Kaufman, 1995, Siavelis, 1997). In the more than a decade since Pinochet withdrew from power, questions of institutional engineering have continued to dominate the political agenda of Chile’s new democracy. Since 1990, the centrist and leftist parties that constitute the governing coalition have waged numerous attempts to modify the institutions bequeathed by Pinochet against the mostly successful resistance of opposition parties on the right and center-right. Taken together, the past three decades in Chile provide rich empirical support for theories that explain institutions as the product of strategic, purposive behavior by the individuals who call them into being. Few Chileans would dispute the argument that political actors try to create institutions to serve their interests and block institutions that might prove threatening.

Two overarching goals motivate this article. First, I seek to extend the debate on institutional engineering in Chile by looking at the design and redesign of subnational institutions. To date, the literature on Chile has offered many different examples of institutional engineering, but it has focused almost exclusively on the national level. Though some scholars have studied the decentralizing changes that occurred in the authoritarian period, when the national government transferred schools and hospitals to municipalities, this research has tended to focus on specific policy outputs and not on questions of institutional design (Gleisner, 1988; Yáñez & Letelier, 1995). Thus one of the purposes of this article is to integrate decentralization into the study of institutional creation and evolution. When politicians fight over decentralization, what they are fighting over are the institutional rules that distribute political authority and governing capacity between distinct levels of government (Eaton, in press-a).

Once decentralization is conceptualized as a change in subnational institutions, the theoretical literature on the origin and evolution of institutions becomes relevant. The second purpose of this article is to use different approaches to the study of institutions, namely, rationalist and historical institutionalism, to gain analytical leverage on the reform of Chile’s regional and municipal governments. In line with rationalist approaches, my reading of subnational institutions in postauthoritarian Chile suggests that their performance in many ways has served the interests of the national politicians who designed them. Simply put, national politicians from across the political spectrum preferred to limit the authority of subnational actors in the wake of the democratic transition and enjoyed sufficient power to act on this preference. Unlike in such countries as Argentina and Brazil, where powerful
subnational officials were able to compel decentralization from below, subnational officials in Chile enjoyed no such leverage, a reflection of the highly centralized nature of Chilean political parties (Scully, 1995). As a reflection of this balance of power, Chile has remained quite centralized in terms of the distribution of political authority and policy-making capacity, in marked contrast to the adoption of bold decentralizing measures elsewhere in the region. In this sense, the subnational evidence presented in this article concurs with those institutional studies at the national level that have emphasized the importance of strategic behavior in the design of Chile’s political institutions.

Despite Chile’s continued status as one of the most centralized countries in Latin America, important decentralizing changes undeniably took place in the 1990s. Although these changes may pale in comparison to the experiences of neighboring countries, when one shifts from a cross-national to a cross-temporal frame of reference, it is clear that Chile ended its first decade of redemocratization more decentralized than it had been at the beginning of that decade. What is particularly striking is that decentralization went against the core interests of dominant political actors in the country, including Santiago-based politicians and party leaders, national legislators, and powerful bureaucrats. The hostility of these actors to decentralization, combined with the weakness of subnational actors in Chile’s political system, lead us to expect no real movement toward decentralization. Yet important decentralizing changes nevertheless occurred.

I argue that these changes can best be understood by applying theoretical insights from historical institutionalism. In Chile, the legacy of earlier changes imposed by Pinochet on the subnational realm had the effect of pushing decentralization forward even after the end of the authoritarian period. Though national politicians from across the ideological spectrum still had common cause to fear decentralization in 1990, they were divided along partisan lines over the subnational changes that Pinochet had introduced. This conflict unexpectedly led to a historic opening for decentralization in the form of an important interparty agreement to redesign subnational institutions in 1991. Fearing its likely exclusion from the national government for the foreseeable future, the right sought to bolster regional governments as a political space it could use to regroup in Chile’s new democratic environment. Though the governing coalition showed little interest in the regions, it acquiesced to these changes in exchange for the right’s support for the reintroduction of municipal elections. Pinochet’s institutional engineering at the municipal level generated its own significant legacy. In the attempt to bolster his regime’s legitimacy, Pinochet channeled significant resources to the municipalities, increasing the salience of these units of government for
scores of ordinary Chileans in a way that made it politically risky for national political actors to attempt recentralizing changes after his departure. Furthermore, due to the transfer of critical responsibilities to municipalities in the 1980s, the simple reintroduction of municipal elections in 1992 meant that these offices immediately became much more important than they had ever been before the 1973 coup. Thus, as in so many other aspects of political life in Chile, Pinochet’s regime represented a critical juncture for the subsequent evolution of subnational institutions.

The authoritarian experience not only altered the preferences of political elites, it also led to unexpected but significant organizational changes that worked to make Chile more decentralized in the 1990s. At the regional level, Pinochet’s imposition of the 13 new regions in 1974 led to the creation of the Subsecretariat for Regional and Administrative Development (Subsecretaría de Desarrollo Regional y Administrativo, SUBDERE) within the Interior Ministry. Over the course of the 1990s, the SUBDERE aggressively championed the cause of decentralization, partially compensating for the political weakness of regional officials within their parties. At the municipal level, the Association of Chilean Municipalities (Asociación Chilena de Municipalidades, ACHM) formed in response to the overwhelming administrative challenges created by the previous devolution of responsibilities under Pinochet. In addition to its central mandate of providing technical assistance to municipalities, the association has also emerged to play a critical role as a lobbyist for further changes in the institutional powers of municipal officials. Though subnational officials began the 1990s no more powerful within their parties than they were before 1973, these new organizations have helped subnational officials overcome the costs of collective action that would otherwise undercut their ability to project themselves into national decision-making arenas. As a critical, but largely unexpected, consequence of prior institutional changes, these two organizations help explain the adoption of further decentralizing measures in the 1990s.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section identifies decentralization as a reform of institutions and presents a simple typology of the decentralizing changes that I focus on in this research. The third section briefly summarizes the core theoretical insights from rationalist and historical institutionalism and the expectations of each in the area of decentralization. In the fourth section, I show how the rationalist perspective on institutions helps us understand continuities in the centralism that has long permeated Chile’s political system. As I show in the fifth section, however, concepts central to historical institutionalism, including critical junctures and unanticipated consequences, illuminate how and why decentralization gained steam over the course of the 1990s.
DECENTRALIZATION AND SUBNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Decentralization is a complex phenomenon that affects many distinct policy arenas and multiple actors. Yet for all their complexity, decentralizing measures can be grouped into two broad categories: Either they alter how subnational political authorities are constituted (e.g., the decentralization of political authority), or they alter what these authorities can actually do and with what resources (e.g., the decentralization of governing capacity). In using these two categories, I follow the practice of Willis, Garman, and Haggard (1999), who distinguish between political decentralization and functional decentralization. Where my two-part typology differs is in its emphasis on the institutional quality of decentralization. If, as North (1990, p. 3) argues, institutions are the rules of the game in a society, then decentralization is first and foremost an institutional change, because it alters the rules that regulate the selection of subnational officials and the rights and responsibilities of these officials.

The most salient example of the decentralization of political authority is the decision to select subnational officials through elections rather than appointment by national actors. During prior experiences with democracy that predate the third wave, in most Latin American countries democratically elected chief executives at the national level enjoyed the right to appoint subnational officials, who served at their pleasure. This prerogative lapsed in the course of the region’s most recent democratizing wave, however, in a departure that can be thought of as a significant expansion of the franchise at the subnational level. But the general shift to elections does not exhaust the category of political decentralization. The rules used to structure these subnational elections are critical for the simple reason that some rules allow for greater decentralization than others. For example, whereas indirect elections tend to weaken the ties that bind subnational elected officials and their constituents, direct elections bolster the legitimacy of subnational officials in their battles with national authorities for greater powers. In the Chilean case, a key decentralizing proposal has been the shift from indirect to direct elections for mayors and regional councilors.

By the decentralization of governing capacity, I refer to the rules that specify the rights and responsibilities of subnational officials, whatever the political procedures used to select these officials. Critical here is the nature of the authority granted to the subnational level over expenditures and resources. With respect to expenditures, institutional rules determine first the types of expenditure categories in which subnational governments can participate and second, with varying degrees of precision, the extent of their participation. Institutional rules also specify the fiscal resources at the
disposal of subnational officials. Fiscal resources include the tax revenues that subnational officials are empowered to raise in their own districts, as well as the tax revenues they receive from the national government in the form of unconditional transfers, matching grants, or earmarked funds. In each of these dimensions, incremental changes have expanded the governing capacity of Chile’s subnational governments in the postauthoritarian period.

RATIONAL VERSUS HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM IN THE STUDY OF DECENTRALIZATION

Rational and historical institutionalists do not define institutions in exactly the same way. Although both approaches are interested in institutions such as “the rules of electoral competition, the structure of party systems [and] the relations among various branches of government,” some historical institutionalists extend the definition of institutions to include norms and class structure (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992, p. 2). In my focus on the rules that distribute political authority and governing capacity between distinct levels of government, I am interested in the type of institutions that fit easily within the universe of institutions studied by advocates of both theoretic approaches.

In recent years, identifying the line that separates rational from historical institutionalism has become increasingly difficult. In part this is due to the reality of growing diversity within each of these research traditions. In part, as Thelen (1999) argues, it is due to the work of “border crossers,” scholars who “borrow liberally (and often fruitfully) where they can, in order to answer specific empirical questions” (p. 369). Despite the blurring of this line, one can still identify significant differences in these two approaches to institutions.

The view that institutions sustain equilibria in which “no actor would unilaterally choose to alter his or her behavior” (Bates, Greif, Weingast, Levi, & Rosenthal, 1998, p. 8) is at the heart of rational institutionalism. As Bates et al. argue, institutions “induce choices that are regularized because they are made in equilibrium” (p. 8). Institutions persist when, relative to other possible institutional arrangements, they do a better job delivering benefits to relevant actors (Shepsle, 1986). Most rationalist views explain institutions in terms of the functions they perform for the actors who created them. Thus the choice of institutions is not considered to be independent of their effects (Eggertsson, 1999; Geddes, 1990). Individuals strategically calculate how institutions will perform before they decide to create them, and this purpos-
ive, intentional behavior is the hallmark of institutional creation. Perhaps the most salient example is the committee structure of the U.S. Congress, which various scholars have explained as the result of attempts by legislators to prevent cycling (Shepsle, 1986), to respond to the constituents and issues most dear to them (Weingast & Marshall, 1988), and to accommodate the public good qualities of information (Krehbiel, 1991; Pierson, 2000). Though the focus on equilibria suggests that rationalist approaches do a better job explaining why institutions persist than why they change, recent work has adopted a more historical approach, including North’s (1990) work on the institutions that shape national economic performance. According to North, institutions change when organizations, which have come into existence “because of the incentives embodied in the institutional framework,” perceive “that they could do better by altering this framework at some margin” (p. 8).

What can rational institutionalism tell us about the adoption of decentralizing changes in subnational institutions? At first glance, because rationalist approaches focus on equilibria, they would appear to have limited leverage on the historic and often chaotic transition from centralized to decentralized institutions that is currently underway in many countries. However, the purposive and strategic view of institutional creation that is central to rational choice theory can be readily extended to the case of decentralization. Articulating a variety of causal arguments, many scholars have explained the adoption of more decentralized institutions as the result of intentional behavior by rational actors. For example, Willis et al. (1999) argue that where subnational officials exert partisan control over the national legislators who are elected in their districts, these officials have been able to demand decentralization from below. Others focus on the puzzling support for decentralization by national politicians. For example, O’Neill (2003) argues that national parties decentralize when their electoral futures are more promising at the subnational level, and Eaton (2001) explores the impact of term limits on decisions by national legislators to strengthen the subnational offices they expect to hold in the future. In the Chilean case that I discuss in greater detail below, the rationalist approach would not lead us to expect a shift to more decentralized institutions in the 1990s. Given the political weakness of subnational actors in Chile and the hostility of national politicians to decentralization, continued centralization is the equilibrium we would expect.

As its name implies, historical institutionalism emphasizes historical process over equilibrium order to explain institutions. As a result, the historical approach advocates a less abstracted and more contextualized study of institutions, with a great deal of attention paid to “the timing, sequencing, and
interaction of specific political-economic processes” (Thelen, 1999, p. 374). For the historical school, interests and objectives are created in institutional contexts and are not separable from them (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Thies, 2001), in contrast to rationalist approaches that consider preferences to be exogenous to institutions. Historical approaches emphasize the frequency with which institutions produce unintended consequences, in contrast to the rationalist view that institutions persist when they serve the functions they were created to perform (Pierson, 2000; Steinmo, Thelen, & Longstreth, 1992). To explain institutional change, advocates of historical institutionalism emphasize the importance of critical junctures that set new institutions into place (Collier & Collier, 1991). Once a particular institutional path is taken, actors adapt themselves in ways that reinforce these institutions and block other possible institutional paths. Policy feedback plays a similar role in reproducing institutions, rendering them quite “sticky.” Thus a central concept for historical approaches is path dependence, which Mahoney (2000; Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, in press) defines as “those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties” (Mahoney, 2000, p. 507).

Historical institutionalists would approach the study of decentralization quite differently from the rationalist school. For example, rather than make universalizing assumptions about the preferences of national politicians (e.g., they want less decentralization) and subnational politicians (e.g., they want more decentralization), the historical camp would recommend a contextualized understanding of the specific, concrete situations that have given rise to decentralization. In Colombia, for example, in order to explain why national politicians adopted more decentralized institutions in 1991 it would be necessary to understand the history of the country’s long civil war, including the serial failure of attempts to pacify rebels through other means (Grindle, 2000). Attention to timing, sequencing, and the interaction of political processes would focus attention on the relationship between decentralization and democratization. Scholars have shown, for example, how the transition to democracy in Brazil, which held subnational elections well before national elections, facilitated the creation of highly decentralized institutions (Abrucio & Samuels, 2000; Hagopian, 1996). The importance of critical junctures suggests that scholars should focus on such phenomena as economic crises and regime change for clues as to why more decentralized institutions are set into place. Finally, historical institutionalism would also encourage research into the unintended consequences that are being generated by strategic decisions to decentralize.
RATIONALIST PERSPECTIVES ON CHILEAN DECENTRALIZATION

One of the most compelling aspects of Chile’s experience with decentralization in the 1990s is that it had any such experience. In the next section, I devote considerable attention to the incremental design of more decentralized institutions over the course of that decade, precisely because this is the more puzzling part of Chile’s story. It is important, however, not to overstate the extent to which Chile has decentralized in the contemporary democratic period. In other words, one can find in the Chilean case evidence of both continuity and change in the performance of subnational institutions. In this section, I present evidence of continuity, which I attribute to the intentional actions of national politicians who have sought to limit the authority of their subnational counterparts. Like their predecessors in the pre-1973 period, the national political actors who have dominated key decision-making arenas in Chile’s new democracy have demonstrated a clear preference for the continued centralization of governing capacity.

In Chile, the universalizing assumption that power-maximizing national politicians resist decentralization appears to be quite safe. Whether they are motivated chiefly by the desire to further their careers or by more substantive policy goals, decentralization reduces the policy tools that national politicians can use to pursue these goals. The preference for more centralized patterns of policy making is one that is shared by presidents, legislators, and most bureaucrats. The democratically elected presidents who have governed Chile since Pinochet’s exit in 1990, all of whom have belonged to the center-left Concertación (henceforth, Concertation), have had strong reasons to prefer centralization. Each of the presidents has had to contend with institutional arrangements such as appointed senators that privilege the right and that limit the Concertation’s ability to use its control of the presidency to change the policy status quo (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Siavelis, 1997). In the context of these existing constraints, the negative impact of decentralization on executive branch authority is particularly significant. Most Santiago-based bureaucrats have had similar cause to resist the loss of power inherent in decentralization, in part because Pinochet dramatically reduced the size of the state and bureaucratic influence along with it. Furthermore, Chile’s admirable record of macroeconomic balance has reinforced the authority of those parts of the bureaucracy (e.g., finance ministry, central bank) that have traditionally supported only tepid decentralizing measures.

The literature on Chile suggests that legislators also have cause to worry about changes that would give subnational actors greater control over the allocation of governmental goods and services (Scully, 1995; Valenzuela,
1977, 1978). Valenzuela’s (1977, 1978) work, for example, demonstrates the great extent to which legislators’ careers in the 20th century depended on the brokering of particularistic goods from the center. Decentralizing changes such as automatic revenue sharing are threatening both because they enable subnational actors to use revenues in the service of their own support networks, but also because they reduce the pool of revenues that remain at the center where legislators exercise influence. This dependence on particularism is not new in Chile, but because the 1980 constitution dramatically shifted national policy-making authority to the executive branch (Baldez & Carey, 2001; Siavelis, 2000), legislators in the contemporary democratic period are even more dependent on brokering activities than they were before 1973.1 Legislators’ dependence on particularism has generated deep institutional jealousies toward regional and municipal officials alike.

If national politicians in Chile prefer centralization, they also appear to enjoy sufficient political authority to prevent subnational officials from forcing them to decentralize against their wishes. Following Willis et al.’s (1999) cross-national work in Latin America, we know that subnational officials can bring about decentralization when they control candidate selection for national legislative offices. In Chile, subnational officials have no such leverage. In fact, not only do national party leaders control the careers of national legislators, they also exert significant influence over candidate selection for subnational races.2 Despite the regional origins of such important parties as the Radicals and Socialists, internal party structures that privilege national party leaders and constrain subnational actors have a long history in Chile (Valenzuela, 1999). Although the Pinochet interregnum changed many aspects of political life in Chile, including party cleavages and the degree of ideological polarization, it did not alter the hierarchical and centralized nature of political parties.

Given the strength of decentralization’s opponents and the weakness of its advocates, it is perhaps not surprising that the distribution of political authority and governing capacity continues to favor the national level. Examples of continued centralization abound in Chile. In the aftermath of the transition, for instance, voters elected municipal councilors on party lists shaped by national party leaders, and these councilors in turn indirectly selected one of their own to serve as mayor. At the level of the regions, regional councilors are also indirectly elected by these municipal councils, and regional executives (intendentes) are directly appointed by the president. These intendentes thus play a double role as the heads of regional governments and as the representatives of the national government in the regions; when these two roles come into conflict, it is the latter that tends to prevail (Martelli & Valenzuela, 1999). With respect to governing authority, indicators of continued central-
ization are equally telling. For example, regional governments have no independent taxing authority and instead must depend entirely on the funds that are budgeted for them in the annual budgeting process. Though municipal governments do have their own tax bases, the national government reserves the right to grant municipal tax exemptions without compensating the municipalities for lost tax revenue.

Chile’s centralized institutions are particularly striking compared to neighboring countries in the region. At the intermediate level of government, the fact that neither regional councilors nor executives are directly elected underscores the limited scope for democratic choice below the national level in Chile. Although opponents of direct election argue that such a change would be incompatible with Chile’s identity as a unitary country, in the 1980s and 1990s unitary countries like Colombia and Peru adopted direct elections at the intermediate level (though these elections were suspended by the Fujimori regime). On the economic side, Chile also looks like an outlier in the limited revenue authority assigned to intermediate levels of government (López Murphy, 1995). The Chilean experience differs starkly from the federal cases of Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, where governors have made aggressive use of newly acquired fiscal powers. But the limited economic powers of regional officials in Chile also differ from the unitary case of Colombia, where governors were endowed in the 1990s with independent stakes in centrally collected tax revenue. At the municipal level, mayors are denied the types of authority their counterparts routinely enjoy in much of Latin America, including the right to make independent personnel decisions (Nickson, 1995). Along with the Bahamas, Chile is the only country that allows no form of borrowing by subnational governments (Inter-American Development Bank, 1997, p. 173). Well over 80% of revenue transfers in Chile are earmarked by the central government to be spent on specific sectors or activities; in most other South American countries this figure hovers around the 20% mark (Inter-American Development Bank, 1997, p. 171). Table 1 compares subnational spending levels as a percentage of total spending in South America. Just 13.6% of spending occurs at the subnational level in Chile, and this figure overstates subnational authority because so many expenditures are earmarked by the national government (Siavelis, 2001).

**HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM AND CHILEAN DECENTRALIZATION: PAST LEGACIES, NEW ACTORS**

To an important degree, national politicians from across the political spectrum in Chile oppose decentralization and have sought consistently to isolate
their country from the decentralizing trend that has swept the region. Comparative data suggest that they have succeeded in their efforts. And yet the story does not end here; Chile became more decentralized in the 1990s through a series of incremental changes that had the cumulative effect of expanding the political authority and governing capacity of subnational actors. Though this expansion may not show up in cross-national comparisons of subnational spending, it has nevertheless altered the behavior of subnational officials, and in so doing, it has triggered additional changes at the national level in such phenomena as legislative behavior, career paths, and the terms of interparty competition. One cannot understand how decentralization unfolded after the return to democracy without referring to the various reforms of subnational institutions that took place in the authoritarian period. The purpose of the following paragraphs is to contextualize decision making in the post-1990 period by referring back to these prior institutional reforms. The crux of my argument is that institutional engineering by Pinochet led to partisan conflict among national politicians, otherwise quite united in their resistance to decentralization, and that this conflict led to a historic revision of subnational institutions in 1991.

SUBNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE PINOCHET ERA

That subnational institutions in Chile underwent important changes under authoritarian rule is perhaps surprising. After all, Pinochet’s rule was inherently and intensely centralizing. Given the cohesion demonstrated by the Chilean armed forces and the strength of Pinochet’s personal control over the armed forces and the government (Haggard & Kauffman, 1995, pp. 78-83; Remmer, 1991), Chile’s military rule was perhaps the most centralist in Latin America in the second half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, Pinochet introduced a number of changes that subsequent to democratization would set into motion a significant process of decentralization to both the municipal and regional levels (Abalos, 1994). In the language of historical

Table 1

Percentages Subnational of Total Government Spending, 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
<th>Colombia</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>49.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>45.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>39.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>26.7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>19.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>14.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>13.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>10.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>7.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>6.2</td>
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institutionalism, Pinochet’s unilateral redesign of subnational institutions can be understood as a “contingent event” that would later close off certain paths and open up others (Mahoney, 2000).

At the municipal level, 8 days after taking power in 1973 Pinochet dismissed Chile’s democratically elected mayors and replaced them with military officials (Valenzuela, 1977). Thus in a single stroke the coup ended nearly eight decades of subnational elections at the municipal level. In addition to replacing the mayors, Pinochet also dismissed municipal councilors (conejales) and later substituted the municipal council with a new consultative body that he then staffed with regime supporters. After asserting tight political control over the mayors, Pinochet then shifted important expenditure responsibilities to the municipalities over the course of the late 1970s and 1980s (Marcel, 1994). Whereas municipal responsibilities before 1973 were essentially limited to street cleaning and garbage collection (aseo e ornato), under Pinochet the municipalities acquired critical responsibilities, most importantly in the areas of education and health care (Yáñez & Letelier, 1995). Transferring responsibility for schools and hospitals to the municipalities, without simultaneously transferring adequate resources to pay for these services, was part and parcel of Pinochet’s attempt to shrink the size and relevance of the central state and encourage the privatization of social services. According to Martelli (1998), whereas Pinochet repressed most political institutions, he used neighborhood councils (juntas de vecinos) within the municipalities as a critical link between civil society and the regime, through which he channeled important social compensation funds. In 1983, for example, the worst year of the debt crisis, 12.3% of the workforce was employed in public sector employment programs run through the municipalities. 4

Though sometimes referred to erroneously as decentralization in the literature on Chile (Gleisner, 1988, p. 176), these changes do not count as genuine decentralization, because municipal officials served as the direct agents of the center and at Pinochet’s pleasure. Still, when municipal elections were restored in 1992, municipal offices immediately became much more politically salient and powerful than they had been in the previous democratic period. Some recentralization did occur with democratization, most famously with the move of then education minister (now president) Ricardo Lagos to revoke municipal control over personnel decisions as part of the left’s attempt to reinforce labor protections that Pinochet had weakened. 5 In the main, however, recentralizing the provision of education and health care was not subject to serious discussion in the course of the transition. 6 Thus elected mayors who took office in the 1990s found they had far greater pow-
ers than their predecessors in the pre-1973 period, even in the absence of explicit changes during the transition to increase municipal powers.

The Pinochet period also introduced important reforms at the intermediate level of government. Traditionally in Chile, provinces had formed this intermediate level of government between the municipalities and the national government. Though provincial assemblies were held during the country’s early and brief experiment with federalism in the 1820s and 1830s, the provinces came under the tight control of the central government in the 1840s and thereafter ceased to function as a politically significant sphere of government (Cleaves, 1969). The political irrelevance of the provinces, combined with the functional irrelevance of the municipalities, resulted in a heavily centralized decision-making process in Chile. In reaction to this centralism, the period between 1938 and 1966 witnessed seven unsuccessful proposals to introduce a regional level of government between the provincial and national governments (Illanes, 2000, p. 18). Though the creation of a national planning body (ODEPLAN) in the 1960s gave added voice to technocrats who wanted to introduce planning at the regional level, national politicians consistently vetoed the creation of regional governments (Boisier, 1994, p. 28).

Against the backdrop of failed prior attempts to create regions, the breakdown of democracy in 1973 proved to be a critical juncture in that it enabled the establishment of regional governments. Military leaders believed that regions would be more efficient than the more numerous provincial bodies, and untainted by the traditional political practices that the regime was trying to eliminate. Although “municipalization” appealed to neoliberals within the authoritarian government, strengthening far-flung regional governments and giving them more of a role in the spending of national revenues played to the geopolitical and national security objectives of the regime. As in the case of the municipalities, Pinochet controlled the selection of regional executives (intendentes) and regional councilors (consejeros). According to Lira and Marinovic (2001, p. 134), the authoritarian government hoped that these regional councils would replace political parties as key intermediaries between civil society and the state. In addition to creating the 13 regions, Pinochet also established the National Fund for Regional Development (Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo Regional, or FNDR), a compensatory mechanism to finance regional development and infrastructure projects. Although to this day Chile does not have the type of guaranteed revenue-sharing systems with subnational governments that are now the norm in Latin America, the establishment of the FNDR was an important beginning that advocates of decentralization could build on in the post-1990 period.
TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE: THE 1991 INTERPARTY AGREEMENT ON SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Expanding the governing capacity of subnational officials who are politically independent of the national government was never Pinochet’s intent, but his reforms have nevertheless led to this outcome in Chile. The sequencing of changes in governing capacity before the devolution of political authority, combined with the differential impact that Pinochet’s reforms had on parties of the left and right, are key to understanding this surprising outcome. At no one point did national political actors, either in the authoritarian or democratic period, contemplate the simultaneous transfer of both governing capacity and political authority to subnational officials. Although Pinochet expanded the policy roles and responsibilities of subnational governments and retained tight political control, national politicians after 1990 found that they could not inject democracy at the municipal and regional levels and at the same time recentralize the governing responsibilities that Pinochet had devolved. This sequence of events is critical to understanding why Chile became more decentralized in the 1990s than most national politicians preferred.

When Chile returned to democracy in 1990, it only returned to democracy at the national level and not at the municipal or regional level. This is because the transition to democracy in Chile was governed by a constitution written by Pinochet appointees and approved in a 1980 vote. Although this 1980 constitution made possible the eventual transition to democracy by binding Pinochet to a plebiscite in 1988 on his continued rule, which he lost, it also established nondemocratic procedures for the selection of municipal and regional authorities. These selection mechanisms would have to be redesigned in order to democratize politics at the subnational level, which triggered sharp political conflict among the parties of the left and right in the immediate aftermath of the national democratic transition. The desire to secure partisan advantages in the redesigning of subnational institutions would weaken the antidecentralization resolve of national politicians as a class.

Shortly after taking office as president in March 1990, President Patricio Aylwin proposed amending the constitution to allow the election of municipal authorities. Aylwin belonged to the Concertation, a coalition of parties including the Christian Democrats, the Socialists, and the Party for Democracy, that offered strong support for the redemocratization of municipal government. On one hand, national party leaders had cause to fear the challenges posed by democratically elected municipal officials given that Pinochet had endowed them with much more important roles. On the other hand, not
democratizing municipal offices would mean that Pinochet appointees would continue to run the municipalities, which was unacceptable to the Concertation (Bland, in press). Furthermore, the Concertation anticipated that it would do better in these elections than the parties of the right, including the center-right Renovación Nacional (National Renewal) and the right Unión Demócrata Independiente (Independent Democratic Union, UDI), which are grouped in an alliance that is currently called the Alianza por Chile (henceforth, Alliance). Considering the extent to which most of the institutions inherited from the Pinochet period overrepresented the right, including the binomial electoral system and the use of appointed senators, altering subnational institutions to expand the power of the left was an important priority for the Concertation in the early 1990s.

When the Concertation proposed municipal democratization in 1990, however, the very same institutional features that made it so urgent for the left to democratize this level of government (i.e., the overrepresentation of the right in congress) enabled the right to veto the return to municipal elections. In January 1991, the rightist bloc in the senate prevented the passage of Aylwin’s proposed changes to municipal government. Though many senators on the right believed in the necessity of democratizing municipal elections, they used their veto power to demand the simultaneous introduction of changes to the regional level of government introduced by Pinochet. For the right, expanding the regional sphere was an attractive option for several reasons. First, there is much scholarly agreement that the parties of the right feared they would be unable to capture the presidency in post-Pinochet Chile, at least in the medium term (Boisier & Zurita, 1993; Siavelis, 1997, 2000). A logical response to this perception was to seek to create institutional spaces elsewhere in which they could expand their power. Second, the regions were intimately associated with Pinochet, the man who brought them into existence. Third, as Bland (in press) and others note (Boisier & Zurita, 1993), several changes experienced during the authoritarian period led the right to believe that it could perform particularly well in the regions. For example, the shift toward a natural resource-based economic development model under Pinochet led to the strengthening of export-oriented entrepreneurs in the regions who could be expected to support the right at the regional level (Valenzuela, 1999).

A year after Pinochet’s departure from office, then, national politicians were stalemated over the design of subnational institutions. In effect, the right was able to veto the left’s preferred strategy of democratizing the municipal sphere alone, but the right could not move forward with its attempt to strengthen regional governments without support from the Concertation, which tended to see the regions as the illegitimate creation of Pinochet. This
particular configuration of preferences led the way to the so-called Negotiating Table, a series of negotiations among top party leaders in 1991 in the course of which the right agreed to support municipal democratization in exchange for the left’s support for the institutionalization of regional governments. Missing from these negotiations was a serious discussion of how to strengthen the governing capacity of municipal and regional governments. Instead, the participants at the Negotiating Table demonstrated a great deal of resistance to deeper changes that would shift too much power to subnational actors (Bland, in press). For instance, though the left proposed reintroducing municipal elections, it did not advocate for greater municipal revenue authority. Although the right wanted to defend the regions to cultivate regionally based constituents, it did not propose that regions should be given such basic attributes as independent revenue authority. In the political sphere, the parties to the Negotiating Table revealed a strong preference for the indirect rather than direct election of subnational officials. National politicians clearly viewed the 1991 agreement through the prism of interparty conflict, not as a reform that would begin a new era of more decentralized governance.

The salience of individual party leaders at the Negotiating Table, their highly strategic interaction, and the attention paid by these actors to the likely future performance of a variety of institutional options all evoke the rationalist view of institutions. At the same time, what is striking is the degree to which subsequent events would confound the expectations of institutional designers on both the left and the right. There is an intriguing irony here: The Concertation pushed for municipalization in the early 1990s, thinking that it would have a strong base of support there, and feared that the right would benefit from regionalization. The Alliance feared municipalization and sought to strengthen the regions as a natural space in which it could expand its base in the new democracy. By 2000, however, the right experienced growing successes in municipal elections, which has turned out to be more important as a proving ground for the pursuit of national power than the regions. Subsequent to the 2000 municipal elections, the right governed more cities in metropolitan Santiago than did the Concertation and held just 10 fewer mayoralities in the country as a whole. With respect to the regions, the direct election of regional executives, rather than their appointment by the president, emerged as a much more attractive option for the Concertation once it began to contemplate the likelihood that it might lose the presidency in the near future.

But the unanticipated consequences of the 1991 agreement have been important in a deeper sense. Though the goals of the Negotiating Table were limited to reinstating elections for municipal officials and introducing indirect elections for regional councilors, these limited changes have neverthe-
less had far-reaching consequences. At the municipal level, the combined effect of expenditure decentralization in the 1980s and the simple return to elections in 1992 has been to expand the political salience of mayors. Mayors are now widely seen as being as important as representatives to the national legislature, to the great chagrin of legislators who hoped to sharply delimit the municipal sphere in political life. Unlike legislators, mayors have their own, albeit constrained, access to tax revenues. Mayoral office is now perceived as a desirable stepping-stone to high national office, equal to the legislative careers that traditionally served in this capacity. In the 1999 presidential election, former mayor of Santiago (and current mayor of Las Condes) Joaquín Lavín (UDI) nearly ended the long control of the executive branch by the Concertation. He and another former mayor of Santiago, Jaime Ravinet (Christian Democrat, DC), are now two of the front-runners in the 2005 presidential race. In addition to altering career paths, municipal democratization in the 1990s challenged national party leaders by weakening the parties’ ideological differences and making it easier for politicians to develop personalities independent of their parties. In the 1999 race, for example, Lavín ran on his record as local chief executive, eschewing the ideological debates of the past and presenting himself as a results-oriented problem fixer. Such profiles would have been difficult for mayors to establish had Pinochet not decided to devolve important responsibilities in the predemocratic period.

Important changes have even followed from the 1991 decision to inject a minimal amount of democratic space into the regions through the indirect election of regional councilors by municipal councils. Though these councilors are not directly elected and must share decision-making authority with the regional executives appointed by the president, over the course of the 1990s they nevertheless emerged to pose significant threats to national politicians, chiefly legislators. Although regional governments do not have the right to impose taxes, they do have the right to assign centrally collected revenue to specific projects within centrally determined priority areas. Though highly conditioned, this attribute alone is a very valuable one. For example, when applicants submit spending proposals to regional councilors within the priority areas set by the national government, these councilors are in the position of picking and choosing specific projects to be funded. The power to secure national funding for local projects is precisely the type of activity that national legislators have traditionally performed, which explains their hostility to proposals for the direct election of councilors at the regional level. According to some observers, whereas parties formerly nominated as regional councilors individuals who were unlikely to succeed as legislators, the growing realization that regional councils influence the spending of
increasingly large shares of national government revenue has led to the professionalization of these councilors.\textsuperscript{12}

NEW ORGANIZATIONS AS THE BY-PRODUCTS OF PREVIOUS INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

In the preceding section I argued that the Pinochet regime represents a critical juncture, first because it set in place stronger subnational institutions, and second because it set in motion further decentralizing changes even after he withdrew from power. Yet as Thelen (1999) argues, it is not enough to identify critical junctures; scholars also need to identify the mechanisms of reproduction that reinforce these institutions over time. In the Chilean case, two particular organizations have worked to reinforce the path of decentralization: at the regional level, the SUBDERE and at the municipal level, the ACHM. Each of these organizational actors emerged as the by-product of earlier institutional changes. The creation of SUBDERE followed the decision by Pinochet to create the 13 regions in 1974, whereas ACHM arose in 1994 in response to the significant municipal changes that Pinochet had introduced. Following North (1990), I argue that SUBDERE and ACHM are organizations in which entrepreneurs perceive that they could do better by altering the very institutions that led to their creation, in this case by lobbying for further decentralizing changes in subnational institutions. By using their resources to push for decentralization, these two organizations have served as important instruments of institutional change.

The SUBDERE would not have survived the democratic transition had the right not insisted on the preservation of Pinochet’s regional reforms at the 1991 Negotiating Table. The decision in 1991 to keep the regions legitimated the place of SUBDERE within the national bureaucracy, and from this privileged position it has advanced the cause of decentralization in a variety of ways. The presence of an agency with a vested interest in strengthening subnational governments represents a significant departure from the pre-1973 period in which antidecentralization forces monopolized the bureaucracy. Like all bureaucrats, career goals motivate the bureaucrats who run SUBDERE to push the interests of their organization, in this case decentralization. Although decentralization is the issue that justifies SUBDERE’s budget in the intrabureaucratic conflict over resources, ideological motivations have also been critical. In the wake of the democratic transition, SUBDERE served as the home in the public sector to Chile’s most committed and articulate decentralizers.\textsuperscript{13} The enthusiasm of decentralization’s advocates within SUBDERE has been a significant asset considering the uphill struggle they face in convincing other actors within the bureaucracy to acqui-
esce to more robust decentralizing measures. The SUBDERE is not the only organization to lobby for decentralization to the regions—the National Association of Regional Councilors and the National Council for Regionalization and Development are also new actors in this area—but neither organization has been as responsible for institutional change as SUBDERE.\textsuperscript{14}

In the postauthoritarian period, SUBDERE has pushed decentralization forward through a number of incremental changes. Two activities deserve special attention. First, SUBDERE in the 1990s was a major advocate for the policy of increasing the participation of regional governments in the investment decisions of the national government.\textsuperscript{15} Under the government of Eduardo Frei (1994-2000), the regions’ share in total public investment increased from 21\% in 1994 to 43\% by 2000 (SUBDERE, 2000a, 2000b), with President Ricardo Lagos promising to increase this to 50\% by the end of his term.\textsuperscript{16} Though many strings are attached to these transfers, this change has nevertheless expanded both the governing capacity and patronage opportunities of regional officials. Second, not only has SUBDERE articulated the case for increasing the powers of regional governments, it has also advocated for decentralizing changes in the rules used to elect regional councilors. In the first year of the Lagos administration, SUBDERE took charge of a far-reaching consultation process with civil society and governmental actors at the national and subnational levels. During this process, SUBDERE solicited input on the redesign of subnational institutions and synthesized this input in a single reform proposal: The Decentralized Chile We Want (\textit{El Chile descentralizado que queremos}) (SUBDERE, 2001). The SUBDERE’s proposal, which has served as the basis for interbranch and interparty discussions, not only argues that regional councilors should be directly elected (rather than indirectly elected by municipal councils), but that they should in turn elect the regional executive (rather than allow the president to appoint the executive). Though there is tremendous political resistance to these decentralizing changes, it would be impossible to understand how far the debate has proceeded in Chile without reference to the work of SUBDERE.

At the municipal level, the key organizational development in the democratic period has been the creation of the ACHM. The ACHM was established in 1993 at a national conference of over 1,200 mayors and municipal councilors and charged with two tasks: providing technical assistance to the municipalities and lobbying the national government for the devolution of additional powers and resources (Martelli, 1998). Given the greater number of municipalities than regions in Chile, the collective action costs facing municipal officials are considerable. ACHM has played a critical role in enabling municipal governments dispersed throughout Chile to organize in the attempt to influence national debates over the design of subnational insti-
tutions. Municipalities pay membership dues, which finance a permanent staff and increase the independence of the organization from the national government. Equally important in explaining the success of ACHM is its decision not to elect leadership positions, which would favor the Concertation, and to use instead interparty agreements to select officers so that all parties are represented in the organization (Martelli, 1998). In the early 1970s, partisan conflict weakened the functioning of an earlier municipal organization, the National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM) (Nickson, 1995, p. 140). Although the ACHM’s nonpartisan strategy in the last decade has strengthened its hand relative to its predecessor in the pre-1973 period, the transfer of real responsibilities to the municipalities that occurred in the interim is equally critical in explaining its increased prominence.

That ACHM has served as an instrument of institutional change in the postauthoritarian period is reflected in the regularity with which it is now consulted by national politicians on legislative matters that affect the municipalities. One should not overstate the influence the ACHM has acquired; indeed, it has encountered sometimes overwhelming resistance to municipal decentralization on the part of national politicians who fear the loss of power to mayors. But because the organization speaks for so many municipalities, its positions cannot be easily dismissed by national politicians. For example, in response to heavy lobbying by ACHM, congress passed important changes in late 2000 to expand the Common Fund for the Municipalities. These changes increased the taxes that businesses have to pay into the fund and made the distribution criteria more redistributive to favor poorer municipalities, long a central demand of ACHM. Pressure exerted by ACHM on this issue helped to fragment the rightist opposition Alliance, with the result that the National Renewal (RN) party supported the changes against the continued opposition of the UDI. The ACHM played a similar role in the historic decision by national legislators in May 2001 to let Chilean voters elect their mayors separately from municipal councilors (Law 19,737, 2001). The direct election of mayors is perhaps the most important decentralizing change of the contemporary democratic period, and it is one that the ACHM aggressively pushed from its very beginning (El Proyecto de Elecciones Separadas, 2000).

CONCLUSION

In contrast to the more radical approaches to decentralization elsewhere in Latin America, Chile experienced a gradual and subtle process of decentral-
ization in the 1990s. Though Chile remains more centralized than most countries in the region, the cumulative effect of incremental changes in subnational institutions has been significant. Decentralization *a la Chilena* is reflected in such disparate phenomena as the new-found importance of municipal experience as a stepping-stone to higher office and the emergence of political conflict between national politicians and the regional councilors whose new attributes threaten the brokering roles that legislators have traditionally played. As this article has attempted to demonstrate, cross-temporal rather than cross-national analysis is the key to capturing the significance of these changes. Chile’s shift to more decentralized institutions is the legacy of Pinochet-era reforms of subnational government, sequencing patterns that devolved governing capacity before political authority, and the emergence of new organizational actors who have struggled to decentralize Chile against significant opposition.

Chile’s experience in the first decade of redemocratization raises a number of broader theoretical points about decentralization and the creation and evolution of institutions. In attempting to understand the wave of decentralization that swept the region in the 1990s, many scholars have understandably looked to the prior wave of democratization for answers (Manor, 1999; Montero & Samuels, 2003). Democratization may have caused decentralization in a variety of ways. Democratically elected politicians, for example, may decentralize as a means of bolstering their electoral support among groups who favor decentralization or as a means of incorporating new actors into the political system (Willis et al., 1999). Though democratization is undoubtedly an important causal force, the Chilean case suggests that in order to understand the contemporary shift toward decentralization, one cannot start with the democratic transition but instead must consider military-led reforms of subnational governments. Others have made similar arguments for Brazil (Abrucio & Samuels, 2000; Hagopian, 1996) and Mexico (Rodríguez, 1997). A promising line of research would investigate how subnational reforms under authoritarian auspices might account for cross-national variation in the decentralizing paths that democracies subsequently adopt.

The Chilean case can also be mined for insights into the thorny question of why institutions stick in some contexts but not in others. The contrast with Peru here is instructive, where regional decentralization occurred in 1988 only to be easily reversed 4 years later as part of President Alberto Fujimori’s successful attempt to centralize power. In contrast to the Peruvian case, regional institutions have proven to be very sticky in Chile, surviving the transition to democracy despite the lack of a precedent for regional governments in the earlier democratic period. Why did regional reforms survive in
Chile but not in Peru? Part of the answer can be found in the degree to which the outgoing military government controlled the democratic transition in Chile, empowering politicians on the right to veto changes in the institutions Pinochet introduced (Haggard & Kaufman, 1995). If the military government was able to extract support for its institutional changes as the price of its withdrawal, then one would expect institutions to be stickier in Chile than in other emerging democracies in the region. More generally, by highlighting the work of organizations like SUBDERE and ACHM, this article supports Thelen’s (1999) contention that prior institutional legacies must be actively reproduced and reinforced in order to stick.

Finally, the Chilean case illustrates many of the difficulties facing individuals who would use the institutional design process as a means of defending and promoting their own political interests (Weyland, 2001). Given the exclusion of subnational officials from the arena in which subnational institutions were redesigned in 1991, one would expect that national politicians in Chile could design institutions to their liking. Strategic institutional design is tough work, however. Given the high discount rates of politicians who must necessarily be more concerned with the present than the future, short-term pressures encourage politicians to discount the possibly negative effects of institutional creation down the line. In the wake of Chile’s national democratic transition, for example, politicians on the left felt the pressing need to replace Pinochet-era mayors, whereas politicians on the right felt the equally pressing need to preserve their support bases in the newly created regions. Though short-term considerations fueled their negotiations, over a decade later what is most noteworthy is the extent to which their decisions have had long-term and mostly unanticipated consequences.

NOTES

1. This point was supported in my interviews with national deputy Exequiel Silva Ortiz, Valparaíso, Chile, August 21, 2001; and Mario Tapia, secretary of the Senate’s Committee of the Interior, Valparaíso, August 20, 2001.

2. Mayors and municipal councilors are frequently prevented from voting for their preferred candidates for the regional council by the national legislators that represent their districts. Interviews with Esteban Valenzuela, former mayor of Rancagua, and Edison Ortiz, municipal councilor, Rancagua, August 24, 2001.

3. In Peru, the García administration’s basic law of regionalization established direct suffrage for regional officials in 1988, which Fujimori suspended in 1992 and Toledo reintroduced in 2002.

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