

PURSUING COSTLY REFORM

The Case of Ecuadorian Natural Resource Management

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Abstract: Why do politicians pursue policy reforms to improve government performance when these are perceived to be costly, both materially and politically? Theories based on advanced democracies stress electoral accountability mechanisms rooted in programmatic parties with strong ties to society. Empirically, these are largely absent in less developed democracies, and this often leads to poor public goods provision. To better understand the incentives for local policy reform in developing democracies, we constructed a comprehensive data set of local natural resource management reforms in Ecuador's cantons during 1997–2008. We find that the presence of "organic" political parties, legitimate participatory decision-making institutions, and high levels of civic engagement increased the incidence of reform. Our findings suggest that even in environments marked by clientelist politics and weak, elite-based party systems, institutions linking politicians with a mobilized civil society (e.g., organic parties and participatory decision-making institutions) can incentivize elected officials to pursue performance-enhancing reforms.

What drives politicians in less developed democracies to expand public goods provision when such policy reforms are typically costly, both materially and politically? Costly reforms are especially unlikely in countries with high levels of corruption, clientelism, weak party systems, poverty, political inequality, and other conditions associated with "bad governance." According to conventional wisdom (based on Western democratic models), strong programmatic parties and political competition are what provide incentives for politicians to pursue socially "responsible" policy (Key 1964; Sartori 1976; Wilson 1885). Recent scholarship notes, however, that in less developed democracies—including those found throughout Latin America—the accountability mechanisms that are thought to derive from electoral competition and party systems often prove insufficient for preventing politicians from pursuing clientelist policies, engaging in rent seeking, and underproviding public goods (Keefer 2007; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006).

So why do politicians in developing democracies pursue costly policy reforms? We explore this question by conducting a subnational comparison of attempts to

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reform natural resource management (NRM) policy in Ecuador's 221 cantons.¹ Theoretically, we argue that costly reform attempts should take place when two conditions are met. First, there must be a mobilized demand for policy change (e.g., from the general voting public or a special interest group). This requires more than a latent dissatisfaction with the status quo. Converting latent demand into mobilized demand requires citizens and interest groups to overcome collective action problems (Olson 1965). The second necessary condition for costly reform is the presence of accountability mechanisms that translate local demand into action on the part of politicians.

In advanced democracies, accountability mechanisms are heavily influenced by electoral rules and party systems. Highly institutionalized, programmatic parties with strong roots in society provide stable linkages between voters and politicians. This incentivizes politicians to provide public goods to avoid electoral defeat. These accountability mechanisms are often absent in less developed democracies. As Mainwaring and Torcal (2006, 204) note, "Programmatic or ideological linkages between voters and parties are weaker," and "linkages between voters and candidates are more personalistic," resulting in the underprovision of public goods.

Thus a research question with strong normative implications in the developing world is, which institutions provide accountability mechanisms that incentivize politicians to pursue reforms that help society broadly speaking? In this article we explore the hypothesis that when strong party systems are absent, institutions linking politicians with a mobilized civil society (such as organic parties and participatory decision-making institutions) can still incentivize elected officials to pursue performance-enhancing reforms.

Ecuador provides an interesting context in which to study the issue of costly reform in developing democracies. Despite tremendous political and economic crisis and the collapse of the traditional party system, 42 percent of Ecuador's municipal governments (94 of 221) enacted new policies meant to improve natural resource management (NRM) between 1997 and 2008. We look at this period because national legal changes bracketing this era offered a unique window for studying the incidence of costly reform; events during these years created a context of policy uncertainty and led to varied responses among local politicians with respect to NRM reform. As we describe here, a series of laws beginning in 1997 created a voluntary decentralization regime that allowed local governments to request new responsibilities in a number of sectors, including NRM. While national politicians and bureaucrats ultimately obstructed the formal transfer of responsibilities in all but one case, many local governments nonetheless unilaterally adopted new policies to improve NRM in their territories. Yet many others did not. In 2008, a new constitution dismantled the voluntary decentralization regime and ushered in a period of recentralization, particularly regarding NRM (Montúfar and Bonilla 2008; Eaton 2014). Conflict and uncertainty regarding jurisdiction

1. A canton is a political territory roughly equivalent to a US county that is governed by a municipal government. The corresponding governing unit is a municipality.

and national NRM policy had a chilling effect on local reforms after 2008.² Thus the 1997–2008 period in Ecuador provides a unique opportunity for studying why some local governments voluntarily pursue costly reform while others do not.

What changes did these local NRM reforms bring, and why were they costly? The new policies were documented by Ecuadorian scholars studying the wave of local government innovation during this period (e.g., Ramón and Torres 2004; Barragán and Chamorro 2007; Asociación de Municipalidades Ecuatorianas 2008; Garzón 2009). Ramón and Torres (2004, 121) note a common change among municipal governments toward “a [new] focus on sustainable natural resource management, including the provision of environmental services in the territory, to improve public management of [the canton’s] natural heritage.” In some cases, this involved the assumption of new responsibilities. Cuenca’s municipal government, for example, became the country’s first to manage a national park. More often, the reforms involved providing new services to better meet existing responsibilities.

The reforms expanded not only the public services provided, but also the scope of municipal government activities. Ecuadorian municipal governments traditionally limited themselves to providing potable water and sanitation services in urban areas; most were rarely involved in rural environmental management. By contrast, the NRM reforms examined here crosscut the traditional urban-rural divide by “connecting urban processes with rural ones in the provision of basic services,” typically for the first time (Ramón and Torres 2004, 121). For example, many reforming governments took measures to combat deforestation in rural watershed catchment areas to improve their ability to provide access to clean water in urban areas. A third set of changes involved implementing new governance systems and/or new technologies to make agriculture more ecologically sustainable, irrigation more efficient, and/or waste management less polluting.

The specific reforms enacted varied, but all aimed to protect or restore local ecosystems without sacrificing agricultural development. Most involved reforestation projects, often supported by new, municipal-run tree nurseries. Most reforms also sought to make livestock and agriculture less environmentally destructive. Municipal governments began training citizens in environmental management and agro-ecological techniques, providing technical support, and financing farmers’ access to new technology in order to implement new land use policies. These policies typically included relocating livestock and agriculture away from ecologically sensitive areas, diversifying production to reduce problems associated with monoculture, and fencing off and restoring critical areas of watersheds to improve water flow and quality. Some governments created recycling and other waste management programs to reduce pollution. Others improved the infrastructure and administrative capacity of irrigation and potable water systems to reduce water loss. Each of these activities required governments to collect and distribute information on land use and ecosystem functioning, often for the first time.

2. Interviews suggest that local politicians stopped taking action to wait and see how these issues would be resolved at the national level.

Although no municipality enacted all of the above activities, most integrated several components into their new NRM policy. Quijos, a canton in Ecuador's Amazonian region, provides a typical example (Barragán and Chamorro 2007). Quijos's municipal government was concerned by the deforestation, water pollution, and soil degradation caused by unsustainable livestock and monoculture practices. In 2001, the government responded with a program to create "integrated farms" that manage natural resources more sustainably by balancing social, environmental, and economic needs. Local government experts worked with landowners to zone their land, allotting strategic areas for conservation and reforestation while simultaneously helping landowners improve their production in less fragile areas. The basic strategy was to keep livestock in semiconfinement and revegetate hillsides degraded by extensive grazing with productive perennial crops, which served as feedstock for animals. The system maximized recycling, which greatly increased the production of livestock products per unit area of land while also allowing the hillsides to regain ecological integrity. The municipality supplemented these efforts with programs to raise environmental awareness, train families in soil use, reforest degraded areas with native species, and promote ecotourism as an alternative economic activity.

Such reforms are costly in terms of financial and human resources because they involve investments in new infrastructure, practices, technology, expertise, and administrative systems. Often they are also perceived as politically costly. The experience in Pastaza (another Amazonian canton) is illustrative. Citizens there have long complained about poor access to clean water. This largely results from deforestation in the watershed's catchment area, which increases the amount of sediments flowing into the canton's deteriorated water distribution system. Heavy rains frequently overwhelm the system and shut it down. During interviews, several former mayors admitted that they resisted fixing the problem because they did not see it as politically advantageous. Fixing the infrastructure would be tremendously expensive. Even if the municipality could raise the money, it would then have to charge people more for the improved service, which would be politically unpopular. So would prohibiting farmers from deforesting to expand agricultural production.

Moreover, even if they implemented costly reforms to address the water problem, politicians feared they would not get credit at election time. Local politics in Ecuador tends to be highly clientelistic. At election time, mayors feel the need to point to highly visible construction projects, like paved roads or recreation centers, which advertise them as having "done something." Pastaza's mayors lamented that restored rural ecosystems and improved underground water systems are "invisible" to most voters. They feared voters would not credit them for undertaking projects to improve conditions, yet they would certainly be blamed for higher costs. The political incentive was therefore to not do anything.

Given the depth and complexity of the challenges and the fact that powerful social interests often favor the status quo, it is surprising that so many local governments undertook NRM reforms. Why did nearly half of Ecuador's municipal governments do so between 1997 and 2008? To address this puzzle, we quantify various factors that should theoretically affect the likelihood of reform attempts.

We note that our dependent variable is the incidence of policy reform, not the degree to which reforms were successful. The reason for this is that reform success is highly subjective and therefore difficult to code.³ Because our purpose is to explore the incentives for politicians to enact such changes, we argue that subjective measures of success are unnecessary. Our study uses an original data set of canton-level NRM reform attempts constructed from primary documents and nearly 230 expert interviews conducted during twenty-five months of fieldwork in Ecuador. This subnational research design allows us to control for heterogeneity that could bias estimates in a cross-national context.

Across logistical regressions and event count models, we consistently find that organic parties tying local politicians to social movements is the strongest positive predictor of reform. The presence of legitimate participatory decision-making institutions similarly increased the incidence of reform. In contrast, we find that variables from the literature on developed democracies—including the intensity of electoral competition and common party affiliations among mayors and local council members—did not increase the likelihood of reform. Our findings provide support for the idea that in less developed democracies, formal political accountability mechanisms do not function as theorized for developed democracies. Nevertheless, institutions tying politicians to a mobilized civil society can still spur politicians to pursue costly policy reforms to improve government performance.

ECUADOR'S NRM REFORMS IN CONTEXT

To contextualize Ecuador's local NRM reform attempts, we describe in this section how three conditions coalesced in the 1980s and 1990s to set the stage for innovative local government reforms during the period 1997–2008. First, indigenous social movements mobilized historically marginalized social groups and led national “uprisings” to demand governance changes, including greater local control over natural resources. Second, extreme political and economic instability weakened Ecuador's national government and contributed to the collapse of traditional political parties. Third, Ecuador's national government received domestic and international pressure to ease political and economic tensions through decentralization. Thus, at the advent of our sample period, decentralization legislation (including for natural resource management) was crafted but never implemented because of political instability and obstruction by national politicians and bureaucrats. Amid these conditions, some local governments sought to create their own new systems for managing natural resources in their cantons.

Like many Latin American countries, Ecuador experienced economic and debt crises during the 1980s. This weakened the Ecuadorian state and political elites just as the country returned to democracy, which affected NRM reforms in several important ways. First, it allowed historically marginalized groups—women's, peasant, ecological, and particularly indigenous groups—to gain political strength

3. Evaluating the success of reform attempts using common metrics would require fieldwork in all ninety-four reforming cantons, a prohibitively costly endeavor.

and legitimacy (Bebbington et al. 1992). During the 1990s, indigenous groups strengthened their organizational capacity and mobilized the largest indigenous uprising in the country's history. Organized under the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), indigenous peoples took direct action to demand greater participation in decision making, legal recognition of indigenous identity and practices, recuperation of land and water rights, and a new development approach rooted in indigenous culture, among other issues.

As social demands for sociopolitical change advanced in the 1990s, a handful of municipal governments in rural, indigenous-majority cantons enacted innovative policy reforms to create participatory governance systems rooted in indigenous culture (Ospina et al. 2006; Ramón and Torres 2004). Many of these reforms sought to change the way natural resources were managed to rectify exploitative economic systems. These became symbols for indigenous activists demanding governance changes nationally.⁴ Over time, Ecuador's indigenous uprising grew to include other social groups demanding expanded rights, economic justice, and participation in the political process. In 1997, these forces helped topple the government of Abdalá Bucaram and initiate a process of constitutional reform.

Also during the 1990s, international organizations pressured Ecuador's national government to modernize state institutions as well as privatize and decentralize many responsibilities to improve government efficiency and shrink state expenditures to address the country's debt crisis. By 1997, decentralization dominated the national political agenda. Proponents advocated it as a way to ease the state's burdens while increasing democracy through expanded social participation in public policy. In response, Ecuador's national government created a framework for decentralization through a series of laws—notably the 1997 Decentralization and Social Participation Law, the 1997 Law of 15 Percent, and the 1998 constitution. Ecuador's decentralization regime had the unusual condition of making decentralization obligatory for the state and voluntary for local governments.⁵ This meant that local governments chose whether to request decentralization in one or more of ten areas.⁶ The central government was legally obliged to transfer related responsibilities and resources following a period of negotiation.

Of the ten sectors eligible for decentralization, the environment (including natural resource management) received the greatest number of requests from municipal governments—77 requests for the environment compared to 107 requests for the other nine sectors combined (López 2005). This indicates many local governments' desire to improve natural resource management (one reason we focus on this sector). Yet in only one case were responsibilities for environmental management actually transferred (López 2005, 86).⁷ In fifty-seven cases contracts

4. Reforms in Cotacachi and Guamote in particular received widespread attention as “innovative municipalities” and came to be considered models.

5. See Carrión (2007) for discussions of Ecuador's unique decentralization regime.

6. These included agriculture, environment, social welfare, economy, education, health, tourism, transportation, housing, and roads and airports (López 2005).

7. Responsibility for managing Cajas National Park was transferred to the municipal government of Cuenca, Ecuador's third-largest city. As of late 2011, this remained the only instance of environmental decentralization.

were signed but never fulfilled; national politicians and bureaucrats obstructed the transfer of responsibilities and resources. In the remaining cases, negotiations failed to produce agreement for decentralization.

Ecuador's political and economic instability greatly contributed to the failure of the decentralization process. In the late 1990s, Ecuador experienced its worst economic crisis in history. The collapse of the banking system produced a financial crisis that cost an estimated 20 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1999 (Hoelscher and Quintyn 2003). On the brink of hyperinflation, the government froze bank accounts and dollarized the economy, resulting in massive losses of wealth and jobs (Jacome 2004). The handling of the crisis produced accusations of government corruption, which triggered increasing social unrest and led to the ouster of President Jamil Mahuad in 2000. This kind of political instability was a constant feature of the decade between 1996 and 2006. Before Rafael Correa was elected president in 2006, none of the preceding presidents finished their terms. Three were removed by military coup or mass uprising.

The political and economic crises also contributed to the virtual collapse of traditional political parties between 1995 and 2006 (Pachano 2007; Payne et al. 2002). Popular outrage was directed at all parties, which were viewed as undermining the country's interests to serve those of an elite few. Social movements such as Alianza País called for an end to the country's "particracy," the term used to describe a corrupt, undemocratic political system governed by unrepresentative political parties. Parties' legitimacy was undermined to such an extent that in 2006 institutionalized political parties held less than 25 percent of the country's legislative seats (Mejía Acosta 2007, 3).

Ecuador's traditional parties have largely been replaced with less institutionalized "movements" that are often short lived, have shifting memberships, and are based around clientelistic ties to populist leaders. In some cases, however, broader social movements created "organic parties"—electoral vehicles formed by civil society organizations to contest elections and advance their interests from inside the political system (Van Cott 2008, 7). Foremost among these was the Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement—New Country. This organic party was created in 1996 by indigenous activists to represent indigenous social movements, led by CONAIE, and to provide an alternative to Ecuador's traditional, elite-based, political parties.

Ecuador's political upheaval also resulted in frequent ministry-level changes that further weakened state institutions; each government implemented its own approach rather than embrace a long-term national strategy. The weakness of state institutions greatly contributed to the lack of decentralization. For example, Ecuador's Environment Ministry was created in 1996 without the political support, financial resources, and clear institutional mission to function effectively.⁸ The ministry had to simultaneously create its own institutional framework and capacity as it was attempting to decentralize responsibilities. The extreme economic and political instability of the period undermined these efforts. Although the decentralization process outlined in the 1998 constitution had stalled years

8. Yolanda Kakabadze, former minister of environment, interviewed by author, Quito, April 18, 2011.

earlier, it effectively ended in 2005 with the overthrow of President Lucio Gutiérrez and subsequent efforts to draft a new constitution.

The national political context changed dramatically with the 2006 election of President Correa, who launched a campaign to fundamentally restructure Ecuador's political system. The biggest change was the reassertion of state control in virtually all areas, from the economy to mass media to natural resources. The 2008 constitution and related legislation greatly expanded presidential power, included central planning and a strong economic role for the state, and promoted a resource-export economic model. It also created new territorial arrangements that "run counter to the decentralization and autonomy efforts of the [previous] 15 years," producing "weaker local and autonomous governments" (Montúfar and Bonilla 2008, 6). These changes altered the national context in which the country's local NRM reforms were evolving as well as freedom for local governments to maneuver.

Before 2008, however, some local governments that were frustrated with central government inaction took matters into their own hands and initiated policy reforms to improve natural resource management. Figure 1 shows a map of the cantons where NRM reforms were pursued between 1997 and 2008. By 2000, the number of documented reforming municipal governments had doubled from

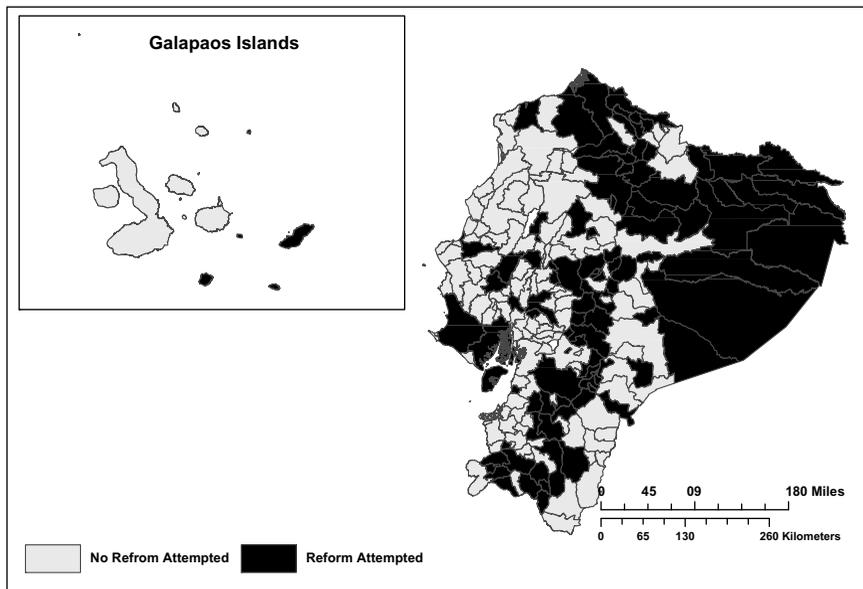


Figure 1 The incidence of canton-level natural resource management reform attempts in Ecuador, 1997–2008. This figure indicates the presence of attempted policy reform in the areas of water, sanitation, land, and forest management as coded by the authors and described in the text. Of the 221 cantons that existed during our sample years, 94 were deemed to have undertaken reform of their natural resource management policies during the period 1997–2008.

six original innovators to twelve (Ramón and Torres 2004, 124). After 2000, the rate of reforms exploded, likely because of the 2001 issuing of regulations enabling the transfer of powers under the 1997 Decentralization Law. By 2008, the number of documented reform attempts reached 94 (described later). A possible reason for the dramatic increase was the expectations created among local politicians by the regulatory frameworks for transferring powers that were created but never implemented. There was also a diffusion of “best practices” facilitated by the Association of Ecuadorian Municipalities and international donor agencies (Barragán and Chamorro 2007; Asociación de Municipalidades Ecuatorianas 2004). Nevertheless, more than half of Ecuador’s cantons did not pursue reforms. This variation in reform attempts presents an interesting puzzle.

WHY DO LOCAL POLITICIANS PURSUE COSTLY POLICY REFORMS?

THEORY AND DATA

A Theory of Costly Reform Attempts

Our theory is simply that the pursuit of costly reform requires two components: (1) mobilized political demand and (2) an accountability mechanism that makes local politicians responsive to that demand. If we imagine the possible states of the world as a two-by-two matrix with cells varying according to whether there exists a mobilized demand for reform and whether an accountability mechanism exists, we can make the following predictions about the likelihood of reform attempts in a given policy sector (see table 1).

Demand for policy reform is obviously a function of the perceived desirability of the current status quo; if the status quo is universally well liked, for example, or if the policy area is not of substantial interest to political actors, there would presumably be little demand for reform. Yet it is not enough to have general dissatisfaction with the status quo. Scholars have long recognized that collective action problems affect the extent to which latent demand translates into policy (Olson 1965). Costly policy reform typically involves overcoming a variety of collective action problems. It also requires policy entrepreneurs willing to seize on latent demand and propose an alternative policy agenda to convert latent local demand into political action.

Political parties are generally thought to serve an important function in both respects because they help private individuals overcome collective action problems, and because they are often the most significant institution for recruiting

Table 1 Theoretical predictions regarding the incidence of reform attempts

| | Mobilized demand | No mobilized demand |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Accountability mechanism | Reform likely | Reform unlikely (reform possible on different issue where demand exists) |
| No accountability mechanism | Reform unlikely (lack of government responsiveness) | Reform unlikely |

and developing political candidates willing to change the status quo (or not). In Brazil, for example, scholars have shown how the Workers' Party served as a "transmission belt" for diffusing local government reforms meant to increase citizen participation (e.g., Avritzer 2009; Wampler 2007). Foreign and domestic activists may also serve as policy entrepreneurs and offer resources to support mobilization efforts (True and Mintrom 2001; Goldman 2009).

Theoretically, collective action is easier among homogeneous groups and among those who stand to realize significant benefits from reform (propositions we test in the Ecuadorian context). Moreover, the literature suggests that social trust, fostered by dense networks of civic engagement, also increases the political salience of local demand because it facilitates collective action (Foley and Edwards 1996; Dietz and Stern 2009; Putnam 1993). In Ecuador, where elected officials are all too often thrown out of office through citizen uprisings, threats from mass mobilizations are particularly salient for politicians. Hence, levels of social trust and engagement among citizens provide strong theoretical inducements to produce socially beneficial policies (see Weingast 1997).

With respect to the accountability component of our theory, electoral institutions are generally credited with providing incentives for politicians in democracies to change policy (or not). The kinds of short- or long-term policy trade-offs officials are willing to make with respect to public goods provision depends significantly on the party system (Key 1964; Sartori 1976). In strong party systems, the party's good name is a valuable asset, and its preservation forces politicians to take the long view.⁹ When parties have strong roots in society and programmatic platforms, the party system provides a broad-based accountability mechanism. In less developed democracies, where parties tend not to be institutionalized around programmatic platforms or to have deep roots in society, politicians cannot make credible promises to voters. Politicians tend to mobilize support through clientelist policies based on personalistic ties, which leads them to underprovide public goods that would improve long-term economic development (Keefer 2007; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006).

Another common accountability hypothesis is that increased political competition spurs local politicians to identify and implement new policies in order to gain an electoral advantage over their competitors (Key 1964; Sartori 1976). In theory, the desire for reelection, mediated by the structure of the political system, provides politicians with incentives to align their preferences with the voting public's, refrain from rent-seeking behavior, and provide better services (Moreno-Jaimes 2007; Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999). As noted already, however, recent scholarship shows that in less developed democracies, the accountability mechanisms derived from electoral competition often fail to prevent politicians from pursuing clientelist policies, engaging in rent seeking, and underproviding public goods. This is because parties tend to be elite centered and personalistic, with weak ties to society.

9. This is a long-standing argument dating back at least to Woodrow Wilson's (1885) thesis of responsible party government.

One exception, increasingly common in the Andean context, is “organic” parties—electoral vehicles created by social movements to pursue their agenda from within the political system. Here, social movements provide the impetus and transmission belt for diffusing policy reforms and holding local politicians accountable (Panebianco 1988; Roberts 1998). Van Cott (2008, 215) argues that organic parties promote innovative policy reforms because they “channel the energy, enthusiasm, and ideas of diverse civil society groups,” and are “less susceptible to professional incentives and bureaucratic rigidity than professional parties and thus are more likely to favor institutional change.” Organic parties provide formal ties between local politicians and social movements; because elected officials rely on social movements to mobilize electoral support, they are theoretically more accountable to mobilized civil society.

Another relevant factor affecting accountability mechanisms in the Ecuadorian context is the presence of formal participatory institutions that involve citizens directly in decision-making processes. Since the 1990s, many scholars and practitioners have argued that formal participatory decision-making institutions strengthen accountability, particularly between elections. By empowering civil society organizations to participate in political decision-making processes, participatory institutions structure government-citizen relations in ways that increase accountability, transparency, and social trust (Fung and Wright 2003). Such findings are found across a large literature that ranges from participatory budgeting and public policy management councils in Brazil (e.g., Avritzer 2009; Wampler 2007) to the use of *panchayats* (participatory village councils) in India to improve public service delivery (e.g., Besley, Pande, and Rao 2007; Goetz and Jenkins 2001). Indeed, scholars have linked participatory mechanisms to improved governance in fields as wide-ranging as public school and police performance in Chicago (Fung 2001) and oversight of federal elections in Mexico (Schedler 1999).

Finally, strong patronage ties with powerful national political actors could insulate local politicians from social demands for policy change. For example, to the extent that clientelist ties with the central government provide mayors with the political and economic resources needed to stay in power, they need not respond to local social demands. Nor will they perceive incentives to improve public goods provision to stay in office. In this way, strong clientelist ties between mayors and the central government might undercut broad-based accountability mechanisms.

Data

To examine these theoretical issues we constructed a data set of local NRM reforms in Ecuador. The unit of analysis in our study is the canton, of which Ecuador had 221 during our sample years (1997–2008).¹⁰ We collected sufficient data on

10. The number of Ecuadorian cantons has grown over the years; our sample is restricted to those that existed in August 2008. We use the terms *canton* and *municipality* interchangeably because a canton is the territory under municipal jurisdiction.

both independent and dependent variables to include 203 cantons in our regression sample. Our canton-level variables, along with summary statistics, are listed in table 2. We note that our regression analysis of canton-level reform attempts has only lately been made possible by improvements in Ecuador's data collection since 2000.

Table 2 Summary statistics of main variables collected

| | Description | N | Min. | Max. | Mean | SD |
|---|--|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| NRM reform | Whether NRM reforms were enacted in canton | 221 | 0 | 1 | 0.425 | 0.495 |
| Organic party | Whether mayor represents an "organic party" | 215 | 0 | 1 | 0.241 | 0.429 |
| Participatory mechanism | Whether canton has a participatory mechanism that is deemed legitimate | 221 | 0 | 1 | 0.153 | 0.361 |
| Citizen participation (LAPOP) | Scored from 1 (low participation) to 4 (high participation) | 62 | 1.38 | 3.44 | 2.05 | 0.357 |
| Social trust (LAPOP) | Scored from 1 (low trust) to 4 (high trust) | 62 | 1.85 | 3.57 | 2.61 | 0.288 |
| Political competition 1996 | The vote margin (%) of the victorious mayoral candidate in 1996 | 205 | 0 | 0.623 | 0.112 | 0.990 |
| Political competition 2000 | The vote margin (%) of the victorious mayoral candidate in 2000 | 205 | 0.001 | 1 | 0.127 | 0.127 |
| Central government transfers (per 100k persons) | Percentage of total transfers from the national government sent to focal canton (0 to 100); proxy for ties with central government | 219 | 0.06 | 16.5 | 0.484 | 1.36 |
| Turnover 2000 | Whether the previous mayor was reelected (0) or there was turnover (1) in the 2000 election | 205 | 0 | 1 | 0.673 | 0.470 |
| Turnover 2004 | Whether the previous mayor was reelected (0) or there was turnover (1) in the 2004 election | 213 | 0 | 1 | 0.554 | 0.498 |
| Political fragmentation 2000 | Percentage of municipal council seats controlled by mayor's party in 2000 | 215 | 0 | 0.718 | 0.372 | 0.121 |
| Political fragmentation 2004 | Percentage of municipal council seats controlled by mayor's party in 2004 | 217 | 0 | 0.844 | 0.343 | 0.113 |
| Decentralization requested | Whether municipal government requested environmental decentralization | 221 | 0 | 1 | 0.298 | 0.458 |
| Ethnicity | Percentage of population self-identified as indigenous or Afro-Ecuadorian | 217 | 0.003 | 0.927 | 0.134 | 0.201 |
| Infrastructure | Percentage of population with access to basic infrastructure | 217 | 1.7 | 53.2 | 30.4 | 9.1 |

Our main dependent variable, *NRM reform_i*, is a dichotomous variable indicating whether an NRM reform was enacted in the focal canton between 1997 and 2008. In addition to logistic analysis of our binary reform variable, we also estimated event models of the total number of reforms and a survival analysis of time to first reform attempt (discussed in a later section). Specifically, *NRM reform_i* was coded as 1 if canton *i* was included in any of the lists of canton-level NRM reforms documented by Ramón and Torres (2004), the UN Development Programme (2006), and Garzón (2009), or was recognized in one of three “best practices” competitions (Mejores Prácticas Seccionales) held between 2003 and 2008 (Asociación de Municipalidades Ecuatorianas 2004, 2008; Barragán and Chamorro 2007). We have already described the kinds of reforms that this coding captures. In each case, independent Ecuadorian scholars verified that policy reforms were enacted. We cross-checked and supplemented these lists of documented canton-level reforms using data collected from dozens of expert interviews in Ecuador. In all cases, *NRM reform_i* was coded as 1 only if there was compelling evidence that the focal municipality enacted policy reform on an issue related to natural resource management, such as water, sanitation, land, or forest management. A list of cantons that were coded as having NRM reforms, and a rationalization for our coding, is available upon request. As figure 1 indicates, 94 of Ecuador’s 221 cantons documented NRM reforms during 1997–2008.

As described in the previous section, we theorize that politicians are incentivized to pursue costly changes to the status quo if, and only if, there exists mobilized demand for a policy change and some accountability mechanism that compels officials to respond to such demand. We use the following operationalizations to test the significance of these two factors.

Organic Parties

Our main independent variable, *organic party*, is somewhat unique in that it captures both the demand and accountability components of our theory. Organic party is a binary dummy variable equal to 1 if the canton’s mayor represents an organic party (an organization created by a social movement to contest elections). By definition, an organic party indicates the presence of a social movement that has mobilized to pursue its agenda from inside the political system. It therefore speaks to the demand aspect of our theory. As discussed previously, many of Ecuador’s organic parties were formed by indigenous and campesino movements in the late 1990s and early 2000s to advocate a new approach to development, which included changes to local natural resources management. Ecuador’s Supreme Electoral Tribunal published lists of political parties and social movements that fielded candidates in various elections (e.g., Tribunal Supremo Electoral 2007; Quintero 2005). Using these lists, we coded a canton as 1 if the mayor elected in 2000 represented a social movement organization. We focus on mayors because canton-level power in Ecuador is concentrated in the mayor’s office and because mayors (rather than municipal council members) are the local politicians with the broadest scope for initiating, designing, and executing new policies (e.g., Van Cott 2008; Ospina et al. 2006). Empirically, municipal experts working for the mayor

implemented the new policies. We focus on the 2000 election because this most closely matches the timing of the proliferation of organic parties in Ecuador and directly precedes the largest number of NRM reform attempts.

In addition to capturing the presence of a mobilized demand by social movements, organic party indicates a formal accountability mechanism. Candidates representing organic parties create a tacit contract with social movements. They agree to promote the social movement's interests and agenda. In exchange, the movement mobilizes electoral and political support. This reliance on social movements, rather than elite-based parties or clientelist ties to status quo interests, should make mayors more responsive to popular demands for policy change.

Other Variables Indicating Mobilized Demand for NRM Reform

We also include the variable *ethnicity*, which equals the proportion of the canton population that self-identifies as either indigenous or Afro-Ecuadorian. We include this because much of the literature on local governance reform in Ecuador stresses the importance of indigenous groups as agents demanding social change. Theoretically, their historical marginalization explains the latent demand for change. Their capacity to mobilize demand comes partly from their high levels of social trust and tendency to be well organized, as well as their increasing ties, since the 1980s, to international development and human rights organizations (Lucero 2008; Radcliffe 2001).

Finally, we include measures of citizen participation and social trust, given their theoretical importance for overcoming collective action problems. A natural metric of citizen participation we considered is voter turnout rates. However, turnout rates in Ecuador are uniformly high and display little variation across cantons because of compulsory voting laws. We therefore use the variables *citizen participation* and *social trust*, which we constructed using 2001 survey data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).¹¹ The LAPOP survey was conducted in 64 of Ecuador's 221 cantons, selected using a stratified random sample methodology to ensure variation by region and population. Our variable citizen participation measures the average frequency with which citizens participate in each of three different types of community organizations: religious, school, and community improvement.¹² Higher scores indicate higher levels of citizen participation. Our social trust variable measures the average response in each canton to a question about the trustworthiness of others in the community. The higher the score, the higher the level of generalized social trust in the canton.¹³

11. For details of the survey, including sampling methodology and questions, see Seligson (2003). We used the 2001 survey because it corresponds most closely to the period when most reform attempts were initiated.

12. See items *cp6*, *cp7*, and *cp8* of the LAPOP survey (Seligson 2003).

13. For both citizen participation and social trust, we inverted LAPOP's original scale such that higher scores indicate higher participation and/or trust levels.

Other Variables Measuring Political "Accountability" Mechanisms

In addition to organic parties, we include three other variables quantifying distinct mechanisms hypothesized to affect a mayor's responsiveness to mobilized social demand. These include the degree of electoral competition, the presence of a legitimate participatory mechanism, and the level of financial transfers a canton receives from the central government.

Our measure of political competition is the vote margin of the winning mayoral candidate, the canton's chief executive. A smaller vote margin indicates a higher level of political competition. These data come from Ecuador's National Electoral Council and a data set of election results compiled by Simón Pachano.¹⁴ We used election returns for the 1996 and 2000 mayoral elections because most reforms occurred between 1997 and 2005, and we expect mayors to be most heavily influenced by their experience in the previous electoral cycle. As a robustness check, we also measure whether the mayor turned over in 2000 and 2004 (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Data for the variable *participatory mechanism* come from a report by the German Development Service (2008), which cataloged local participatory decision-making institutions throughout Ecuador.¹⁵ Surveys were conducted in cantons that had participatory institutions, in order to determine their perceived legitimacy among citizens. Residents ranked them as either high, medium, or low in legitimacy. Participatory mechanism is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the canton had at least one participatory institution rated as having high or moderate legitimacy (1 = yes, 0 = no). We argue that a participatory institution's ability to serve as an accountability mechanism depends on the level of citizen engagement in the institution, which in turn is based on its perceived legitimacy. Cantons were coded as 0 if they either had no participatory mechanism or their participatory mechanism(s) had low legitimacy.

We use the variable *government transfers* to measure a mayor's informal ties to national political elites. Specifically, the variable measures the percent of total central government financial transfers the canton's municipality received between 2001 and 2004 (adjusted for population size); this is the period for which data are available and that coincides with the bulk of reform attempts.¹⁶ In Ecuador, ad hoc laws negotiated in the national assembly largely determine the amount of financial transfers to a given municipality. Therefore, these transfers are indicative of the municipality's influence with national political elites through formal and informal ties. The size of each municipality's piece of the budgetary "pie" reflects the ability of local governments to extract rents from national power brokers

14. Election data produced before 2008 came from Ecuador's Tribunal Supremo Electoral (Supreme Electoral Tribunal), which the country's 2008 constitution replaced with the National Electoral Council.

15. In 2011 the German Development Service (DED) combined with GTZ and Inwent to form GIZ.

16. The variable is calculated as the average amount of financial transfers from the central government to municipal governments between 2001 and 2004, divided by the total amount of central government transfers during that same time period, divided by the canton's population. The data come from Ecuador's Ministry of Finance.

through clientelist ties. Thus it serves as a proxy for political ties (formal and informal) between the municipal and central government that could theoretically insulate local politicians from local social demands.

Control Variables

We include a number of control variables to help mitigate potential bias. We control for regional fixed effects using dummy variables indicating the cantons located in Ecuador's Sierra, Amazon, and Galapagos regions (leaving the Coast as the baseline). The variable *infrastructure* measures the percentage of households with access to a number of services defined by Ecuador's Multivariate Index of Basic Infrastructure (IMIB). A higher score indicates greater access to basic infrastructure (e.g., water, sanitation, paved roads). Theoretically, this higher level of development increases local governments' capacity to undertake NRM reform.

Local power relations also affect municipal government performance (Cameron 2005). Mayors committed to reform will have an easier time pursuing their agenda if their supporters control local legislative bodies. This is more likely when local political institutions are controlled by the mayor's political allies. Political fragmentation equals the vote share received by the mayor's party or social movement in the 2000 and 2004 municipal council elections.¹⁷ Because seats are allocated by proportional representation, party vote shares and seat shares on the municipality's governing council are highly correlated. The higher the vote share, the more local political allies the mayor has.

Case studies of local government reform show that leadership matters (Grindle 2007; Campbell and Fuhr 2004). Independent of the incentives and constraints in any canton, individual leaders vary in their ideas, skills, and ambition. Some leaders are more willing to pursue innovative reforms while others are risk averse. To control for the idiosyncrasies of individual leaders, we include the variable *decentralization requested*, which serves as a proxy for strong, proactive leadership. As described earlier, Ecuador's unique voluntary decentralization regime meant that mayors had the opportunity to request decentralization in a number of issue areas, including environmental management. Decentralization requested is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the municipal government requested environmental decentralization.¹⁸ We argue that this proactive action on the part of the municipal government to assume greater control over environmental management is a proxy for the initiative of local leaders.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

To ascertain which factors affect the incidence of canton-level NRM reform, we estimated three types of regression models: a logit model of our binary reform variable and ordinary least squares (OLS) and Poisson models of the number of

17. This is the only period for which such data are available; fortunately it coincides with the bulk of reform attempts.

18. Data come from Ecuador's National Council for State Modernization (López 2005).

reforms enacted by the focal canton. Our results appear in table 3. The table reports the coefficient estimates of the respective models. Because our estimates show remarkably similar results, our discussion focuses on the logit specifications in columns 1 and 2. We note that models 1 and 2 increase the analyst's predictive power by 18 and 26 percentage points, respectively, relative to the standard benchmark of guessing the modal outcome for all predictions.¹⁹

Contrary to the conventional wisdom in well-developed party systems, we find no support for the hypothesis that increased political competition increases the incidence of reform attempt. In fact, the coefficient on the margin of victory for the canton's mayor in the 1996 election is positive (indicating political competition in this election *decreases* reform incidence) and significant. The results for the 2000 election are insignificant, as are alternative unreported specifications of political competition.²⁰ Variables measuring the turnover of mayors (turnover 2000 and turnover 2004) were also insignificant.

We interpret the significance of the 1996 election as a consequence of the fact that it occurred at a pivotal point at the advent of Ecuador's reform era. Following Grindle (2007), we argue that a large victory margin could lead politicians to believe that they are sufficiently secure from political competition or have enough political capital to safely undertake costly reform. This would explain the positive coefficient for this key election. In sum, we interpret the results for the political competition variables as suggesting that political competition does not itself provide an incentive to reform, but electoral security can enhance a politician's willingness to pursue reform should the incentive come from elsewhere.

We found that the variables with a significant effect on the incidence of NRM reform were those that indicated institutional ties between mayors and a mobilized civil society. The variable organic party was positive and highly significant across all models. Calculations of average marginal effects show that in the "average canton," having a mayor representing an organic party increased the likelihood of NRM reform by 33 percent in model 1 and 43 percent in model 2, compared to an identical canton whose mayor had no such association.²¹ We interpret this as evidence that social movements provided an important impetus for reform and served as "transmission belts" for diffusing reform proposals. As mentioned already, organic parties also provide an important accountability mechanism when mayors linked to social movements win office. The fact that organic party remained significant while controlling for ethnicity is interesting, as many of Ecuador's most influential organic parties emerged from indigenous social movements (Van Cott 2008). This suggests that organic parties had an effect independent of the influence of informal ties rooted in ethnicity.

Participatory mechanism was also highly significant with a similarly large

19. For example, goodness-of-fit tests (see Hosmer and Lemeshow 2000) show that model 2 correctly predicts 77 percent of the reform attempt cases, whereas chance (always guessing that a canton would not attempt reform) would be correct for 51 percent of cases.

20. In particular, we estimated the effect of the change in the mayoral victory margin between 1996 and 2000.

21. We used Clarify software to compute the average marginal effects for our strongest treatment variables using the first-differences approach (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003; Long and Freese 2006).

Table 3 Determinants of canton-level natural resource management reform efforts

| | Model 1: Logit of NRM reform | Model 2: Logit of NRM reform with LAPOP variables | Model 3: OLS estimate of number of reforms | Model 4: Poisson estimate of number of reforms |
|--|---------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Organic party | 1.393*** (0.005) | 2.016* (0.076) | 0.418*** (0.003) | 0.466** (0.039) |
| Participatory mechanism | 1.327*** (0.007) | 1.841* (0.062) | 0.615*** (8.05e-06) | 0.782*** (0.000) |
| Citizen participation | | 2.397* (0.051) | | |
| Social trust | | 2.361 (0.117) | | |
| Political com- petition 1996 | 4.345** (0.025) | 11.36** (0.017) | 1.715*** (0.000) | 2.538*** (0.002) |
| Political com- petition 2000 | -1.129 (0.480) | 0.838 (0.734) | -0.469 (0.301) | -0.646 (0.496) |
| Central government transfers (per 100k persons) | 0.107 (0.623) | 0.901 (0.336) | 0.00180 (0.978) | -0.0958 (0.651) |
| Political frag- mentation 2000 | -0.843 (0.648) | -4.757 (0.210) | -0.391 (0.452) | -0.0778 (0.703) |
| Political frag- mentation 2004 | -1.358 (0.460) | 0.751 (0.874) | -0.118 (0.817) | 0.0220 (0.869) |
| Turnover 2000 | -0.252 (0.518) | -0.177 (0.855) | -0.0524 (0.625) | -0.670 (0.500) |
| Turnover 2004 | -0.0726 (0.846) | 0.162 (0.876) | -0.0104 (0.920) | -0.521 (0.607) |
| Decentraliza- tion requested | 0.345 (0.375) | -0.484 (0.627) | 0.109 (0.305) | 0.130 (0.537) |
| Ethnicity | 1.525 (0.214) | 1.304 (0.718) | 0.245 (0.462) | 0.393 (0.475) |
| Infrastructure | -0.00166 (0.942) | -0.00691 (0.910) | 0.00732 (0.253) | 0.00725 (0.558) |
| Constant | -1.393 (0.300) | -13.56** (0.0430) | -0.0125 (0.973) | -1.593** (0.0375) |
| Regional fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 203 | 62 | 203 | 203 |
| Pseudo R ² | .249 | .407 | .338 | .162 |

Note: *p*-values in parentheses.

p* < .1; *p* < .05; ****p* < .01.

effect. The presence of a legitimate participatory mechanism for citizens to hold government leaders accountable in between elections increased the probability of reform by 32 percent in model 1 and 40 percent in model 2, *ceteris paribus*. Citizen participation was also significant, with coefficients in the expected (positive) direction (see model 2 in table 3). All else being equal, in the average canton, a one-standard-deviation increase in the level of citizen participation increases the likelihood it pursues NRM reform by 20 percent. These results further support the importance of both a mobilized, engaged citizenry and institutions allowing them to hold local politicians accountable.

Given the clientelistic nature of Ecuadorian politics, it is interesting that our indicators of a mayor's ties with national and local power brokers were insignificant across all models. Central government transfers (the municipality's ability to extract transfers from the national government), political fragmentation (the mayor's partisan plurality on the municipal council following the 2000 and 2004 elections), and decentralization requested (a proxy for active local leadership) were insignificant across all models. We interpret these findings as further support for the idea that the impetus for policy reform comes from outside local government—from policy entrepreneurs within civil society that mobilize social demand and use accountability mechanisms to convert this demand into political action.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented a quantitative study of why costly natural resource management (NRM) reforms were pursued in some Ecuadorian cantons but not others. As Ecuador suffers from political instability, a weak party system, and clientelistic politics, we argued that Ecuador is an interesting case for understanding reform attempts in developing democracies around the world, where political accountability mechanisms do not typically function as theorized for advanced democracies. We argued that, theoretically, the incidence of reform attempts is driven by the presence of two necessary factors: mobilized demand for policy change and accountability mechanisms for turning such demand into political action. We tested the influence of these factors using an original quantitative data set of local NRM reform attempts in Ecuador.

Consistent with our theoretical arguments, we find that both the presence of organic parties tying mayors to mobilized social movements and the existence of legitimate participatory decision-making institutions increased the likelihood that local governments pursued NRM reform. We argue that this signals the importance of social movements for diffusing policy reforms, mobilizing demand, and using institutional accountability mechanisms to convert citizen demands into political action. The results also support the hypothesis that higher levels of civic engagement increase the probability of reform by helping citizens overcome collective action problems and providing informal accountability mechanisms.

Our findings speak to several literatures. First, they support the small but growing literature pointing to the political significance of organic parties for reform

movements in Latin America (Van Cott 2008, 7, 98–101; Roberts 1998; Panebianco 1988). They also provide further support for the efficacy of participatory decision-making institutions. Third, these results complement recent case studies from other parts of the developing world that emphasize the importance of institutions other than highly institutionalized, programmatic parties. Tsai's (2007) work on grassroots political reform in China, for example, suggests that elections and a strong party are not sufficient conditions for improving village governments' provision of local public goods. Tsai's work shows that civic institutions—specifically village temple and "lineage" institutions—can compensate for low levels of party competition to incentivize politicians to produce more public goods. Rural China and Ecuador are thus alike in that elections by themselves fail to incentivize improvements in public goods provision, but institutions providing strong ties with society can nonetheless spur local officials to undertake costly reform.

These findings have some interesting implications. Empirically, the conditions thought to incentivize politicians to improve public goods provision are largely absent in less developed democracies like Ecuador. In fact, conventional wisdom says that in such countries electoral inducements and party systems often incentivize perverse outcomes. Because traditional parties are clientelistic rather than programmatic and have weak ties with society, politicians often underprovide nontargetable public goods (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; Keefer and Khemani 2005; Keefer 2007). Our study suggests that even in such environments, alternative institutions—such as organic parties and participatory decision-making institutions—can build strong institutional ties between local politicians and society. While organic parties in Ecuador tend to be weakly institutionalized compared to traditional parties in advanced democracies, they operate according to a similar logic and produce similar results. Because they emerge from social movements, they have strong roots in society and become associated with a programmatic agenda. Where society has mobilized around a reform agenda of greater public goods provision, these institutions provide important mechanisms for holding politicians accountable. When organic party candidates win elections, they are therefore more likely to buck the clientelist norm and increase their provision of public goods, including those related to natural resource management. Legitimate participatory decision-making institutions provide an additional mechanism for holding leaders accountable between elections.

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