

Title: *Key mechanisms on the path towards plurinationalism: Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile in comparative analysis*

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Summary: This article examines the divergent outcomes of plurinational constitutional processes in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile, three Andean countries of comparable historical and cultural backgrounds. Each drafted a constitution meant to establish a plurinational state—Ecuador in 2008, Bolivia in 2009, and Chile in 2022—but while the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions were ratified, the proposed Chilean charter was rejected. This analysis proposes three key mechanisms hypothesized to facilitate the adoption of a plurinational constitution—durable land reform, Indigenous political incorporation, and previous legal precedents. The findings suggest that the plurinational charters are more likely to be ratified when developed from more deeply established Indigenous movements.

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Key words: Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, Plurinationalism, Constitution

Abstract

This article examines the divergent outcomes of plurinational constitutional processes in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile, three Andean countries of comparable historical and cultural backgrounds. Each drafted a constitution meant to establish a plurinational state—Ecuador in 2008, Bolivia in 2009, and Chile in 2022—but while the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions were ratified, the proposed Chilean charter was rejected.

This analysis proposes three key mechanisms hypothesized to facilitate the adoption of a plurinational constitution—durable land reform, Indigenous political incorporation, and previous legal precedents. Using process tracing, this study evaluates the evidence for the observable implications generated by the key mechanisms across these three cases. The results highlight how these mechanisms created more favorable conditions in Ecuador and Bolivia, while remaining absent or incomplete in the case of Chile. These findings suggest that the plurinational charters are more likely to be ratified when developed from more deeply established Indigenous movements.

Introduction

Recent debates across Latin America have brought questions of race, equity, and national identity to the forefront of politics. While the questions themselves are not new, they have taken their modern shape in the context of growing successes for Indigenous parties and new constitutional projects. Constitutional reforms promised a new avenue for expanding rights and recognition, and nearly all Latin American countries now recognize Indigenous people in their constitutions in a spectrum of ways. Chile, Uruguay, and Suriname are notable exceptions to this trend (Aguilar et al. 2010). Ecuador and Bolivia have gone the furthest in their restructuring of the relationship between Indigenous people and the nation-state, with their constitutions establishing explicitly “plurinational” states in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Chile appeared to be on the cusp of passing a plurinational constitution in 2022 after significant civil unrest, but the reforms were unsuccessful; in a 2022 poll, the second most frequently mentioned primary cause for rejecting the charter was “plurinationalism” at 35%, just below procedural issues at 40% (CADEM). Therefore, the debate over plurinationalism was a relevant factor in the fate of the charter.

Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile are all Andean nations with significant numbers of Indigenous peoples. According to IWGIA, about 7.7% of Ecuadorians consider themselves Indigenous; in Bolivia the number is 41%, and in Chile, 9% (IWGIA). These nations have experienced centuries of interaction between European settlers and Indigenous groups, and the influence of the Spanish language, along with Spanish culture and institutions, have created new, multiethnic societies. They have each had recent debates about plurinational constitutions, but with different outcomes. Several authors have studied the Chilean constitutional process in 2022, with a focus on understanding the immediate reasons why the charter did not succeed (Disi Pavlic 2024; Landau and Dixon 2024; Leighton 2024; Herraz et al. 2026). Similarly, ethnic politics and the events preceding the plurinational constitutional processes in Ecuador and Bolivia have been studied

(Yashar 2005; Van Cott 2005; Postero 2007; Lucero 2008; Madrid 2012). However, little attention has been given to Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile together in comparative analysis, in order to understand what factors overall favor the success of a plurinational project.

This research seeks to address that gap, exploring what conditions facilitate the adoption of a plurinational constitution, alongside the broader question of why these three countries have had divergent results. Using process tracing, it examines the cases of Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile to evaluate evidence for observable implications generated by mechanisms hypothesized to shape the outcome of each proposed charter. Together, these cases highlight the importance of successive reforms that normalize Indigenous participation from within the state over time. In particular, enduring land reforms, indigenous political incorporation, and legal precedents influence the likelihood of success for plurinational political projects. These factors work together to create the groundwork for a successful movement.

This article is structured into five main sections, aside from the introduction, methodology, and conclusion. First, it is necessary to establish a theoretical framework. By defining how terms are used and delving into the history of multiculturalism and plurinationalism in Latin America, it is possible to see the foundations of this phenomenon. Then, the cases of plurinationality in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile are examined in their own sections by tracing the history of the Indigenous movement in each country. Finally, the cases are discussed together, with special attention given to the factors that Ecuador and Bolivia have in common and where Chile differs, illuminating the conditions that favor the ratification of a plurinational model.

Theoretical Framework

Latin America has always been a highly diverse region in terms of language and culture, with far more ethnic groups than could reasonably become individual, independent nation-states. Several different models of understanding this difference have evolved over time. Early Latin American independence leaders recognized that “the European model of one nation/one culture was manifestly unworkable in Latin America” (Miller 2013: 381), and began framing their nations as *mestizo* (mixed), instead of purely European or indigenous. The *mestizaje* conception of the nation reflects the real ethnic mixing that has occurred from the colonial period to the present; however, while unifying, it bowdlerizes the complex reality that the Spanish did not permeate every pocket of the Americas, and that, despite European invasions and the establishment of new states, many Indigenous groups have maintained their own languages, customs, and identities.

As *mestizos*, Indigenous people were ethnically erased in political discourse and instead framed as peasants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These populations were largely disenfranchised, though they became more fully incorporated into their respective states as citizens over the course of the last century, as their rights, and particularly their suffrage, expanded (Yashar 2005). From the 1970s onward, Indigenous organizations in Latin America increasingly shifted from class-based appeals to the articulation of a separate ethnic identity, not only in the form of specific tribal affiliation but as broadly “Indigenous,” leading to a collective

push for more participation, recognition, and protection (Lucero 2008). By the 1990s, multiculturalism had largely supplanted the *mestizaje* metaphor (Hale 2002), providing a new framework for national identity. However, the politics of multiculturalism have attracted various critics, who argue that it does not go far enough to establish meaningful collective rights for Indigenous groups.

Multiculturalism allows for the recognition and celebration of diversity from within a unitary state, but it is rooted in individual expression. While this rhetoric acknowledges the presence of various ethnic groups and traditions, and allows for important elements of Indigenous protection such as language and cultural expression, multiculturalism has fundamental limitations. Hale describes what he refers to as “neoliberal multiculturalism,” where the “proponents of the neoliberal doctrine proactively endorse a substantive, if limited, version of indigenous cultural rights, as a means to resolve their own problems and advance their own political agendas” (Hale 2002: 487). That is to say, in this framing, multiculturalism attempts to mollify complaints about systemic issues with superficial responses; it seeks the creation of an indigenous subject that is compatible with the state’s development goals, and it is not systemically transformative. Hale describes this new subject as the “indio permitido” (“authorized Indian”) (Hale 2004: 17)—a subject who does not fundamentally threaten the state’s sovereignty and its existing hierarchies.

However, the conflicts that arose in the Andean region between indigenous people and the state were not only rooted in demands for respect regarding the use of traditional clothing or local languages, but in deeper disagreements about land, money, power, and even basic principles. Environmentalist and pro-social alternative cosmovisions rooted in Indigenous beliefs, such as *sumak kawsay*—a Quechua term meaning “good living”—even made their way into the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions of 2008 and 2009 as a northern star for articulating the purpose of the state as a whole. Considering that multiculturalism does not directly address topics such as economic inequality, environmental degradation, or extractive industry, which have affected indigenous groups throughout the region, nor does multiculturalism provide avenues for substantive legal power, such as indigenous courts, greater local or municipal control, or reserved congressional seats, a different term grew in popularity. For those who wanted to push Indigenous rights further, *plurinationalism* became the term du jour, which implies a far greater spectrum of possibilities—situating Indigenous groups not merely in terms of culture or ethnicity, but as nations within a nation, with more explicit collective rights.

Plurinationalism first developed as a political project in Europe and in North America. Michael Keating investigated the phenomenon in the United Kingdom, Spain, Canada, and Belgium—countries that incorporate multiple linguistic or ethnic groups that hold competing claims to sovereignty within a single state. He describes concentric rings of sovereignty, where there are “multiple sites of ‘sovereign,’ in the sense of original, authority” (Keating 2001: 163). That is to say, that there is a distribution of authority across multiple communities, rather than one single source for all points of conflict and resolution; power is diffuse. While this idea may be difficult to imagine, in reality sovereignty is already diffuse and contested in many contexts: for example,

European states exist within the European Union, which has its own court separate from the member nations' courts. Additionally, Keating articulates how “more than one national identity can pertain to a single group or even an individual” (Keating 2001: 27), allowing for complex, multiple identities to be recognized. However, the push for plurinationalism in the countries Keating studied is primarily tied to this preservation of unique linguistic and cultural identities; it is not usually tied to specific economic demands. Keating himself remarks that “nearly all stateless national movements in our four states have embraced free trade and transnational integration” (Keating 2001: 56). This is not the case for Latin American movements.

In contrast, Claudia Zapata Silva asserts that one of the most fundamental elements of contemporary indigenous movements in Latin America is a critique of capitalism (Zapata Silva 2019: 27). Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes it as carrying the idea of interculturality and of overcoming postcoloniality (in Acosta et al. 2009: 38). That is to say, that plurinationalism is a more multifaceted project than multiculturalism; it is concerned with inequality, but explicitly both social and economic inequality. This economic or “postcolonial” aspect reflects the growth of Indigenous activism from agricultural unions, the influence of the political left, and the reality of racialized poverty in Latin America. In this sense, plurinationalism in Latin America must be understood as distinct from plurinationalism in Europe and Canada.

The relationship between Indigenous movements and class-based movements is complex. At times, they are overlapping and aligned, both because many Indigenous people lived in semifeudal conditions and because states have classified them as “peasants” (Lucero 2008; Postero 2007); yet at other times, the two movements have distinct objectives and trajectories. While Postero notes that “in the 1960s, ethnicity was seen as a form of racism, which had to be replaced by a vision of class” (Postero 2007: 38), these conceptions shifted and merged over time. By 1973, the indigenous Katarista movement in Bolivia had issued the Tiwanaku Manifesto, in which the authors explicitly framed the problems facing their communities “through two different lenses, in order to see how they were exploited both economically as peasants (the class lens) and culturally as Indians (the ethnic lens)” (Cunha Filho 2023: 30). This manifesto reflects the evolution over time of how these issues are articulated. This relationship between ethnicity and class is contested but emphatically related in the history of Indigenous movements, with a variety of terms and framing employed during different periods.

The Latin American use of the term “plurinationalism” specifically traces its origins to these indigenous peasant (*campesino*) unions in the Andes. In Bolivia, these confederations “began to call for a ‘plurinational’ state as early as 1979” (Tockman and Cameron 2014: 64-65), though they did not achieve success until thirty years later. These unions had clear economic objectives tied to worker’s rights and collective bargaining from the beginning. In Ecuador, many both explicitly Indigenous associations and peasant or labor syndicates formed in the twentieth century. By the 1970s, the word “nationality” was already being used (Becker 2010). While the history of the unions unfolded differently in Bolivia and Ecuador, both countries had Indigenous movements that were intertwined with workers’ struggles. In the Chilean case, an Indigenous

Republic had been proposed as early as 1931 (Foerster and Montecino 1988: 50), though an explicitly “plurinationalist” movement emerged much later, adapting elements from Bolivia and Ecuador (Millaleo 2021).

Therefore, in a Latin American context, plurinationalism implies a post-colonial restructuring of power dynamics through the recognition of multiple nations within a single state, in a way that goes beyond multiculturalism. In theory, it allows for more control over Indigenous lands, including, for example, specific Indigenous courts and jurisdictions, or decentralizing policies that increase opportunities for local governance. This discourse has evolved not only in the context of different languages and traditions, as in Europe, but in the context of inequality, marginalization, extractive industries, and at times clashing values regarding community and nature. Whether these plurinational constitutions achieve transformative change is a separate question, with some arguing that there is a marked difference between the intent behind the documents and the reality of their implementation (Merino 2018). However, this article examines only the processes leading up to the ratification of these constitutions.

In order to provide a framework for understanding these developments, this analysis proposes three key mechanisms that are hypothesized to shape the outcome of plurinational constitutional processes in Latin America: land reform, Indigenous political incorporation, and legal precedents. These mechanisms are not the only factors that affect the outcome, and are not deterministic. However, taken together, these mechanisms create favorable conditions for plurinational charters, and shape the likelihood that such a constitution could be democratically approved.

First, access to land and the way power is distributed in that land is fundamental for the development of the additional elements. Agrarian reforms can create opportunities for decentralization, allowing for a degree of local autonomy; these reforms may create new pathways to interact with the state through the establishment of new offices or institutions. This in turn serves to foment the growth of political and social organizational spaces. Conversely, persistent land dispossession limits the ability of Indigenous people to maintain a sense of community, and limits opportunities for organizations to grow.

Secondly, this political incorporation facilitates the ability of Indigenous movements to achieve their goals. The presence of Indigenous parties and actors in state institutions increases their capacity to articulate collective demands, gain experience, create coalitions, and pass laws. The ability to navigate political institutions and build relationships contributes to their efficacy. While Indigenous actors can influence the political sphere through mass demonstrations, formal political incorporation remains vital to advancing legislation.

Finally, legal precedents shape the state’s ability to respond to Indigenous demands. Previous laws build on past laws, and reforms are more likely to succeed when part of an established trajectory. It may be easier to transition from a “pluricultural” or “multiethnic” state to a “plurinational” one than to make such a transition from an explicitly unitary state. Indigenous

parties may also benefit from these smaller wins, growing in influence and experience; plurinationalism will then be in dialogue with previous negotiations, and more familiar to voters and lawmakers. Taken together, these mechanisms are hypothesized to contribute to the likelihood that plurinational constitutions gain sufficient support to be ratified, and to partially explain the divergent outcomes in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile.

Methodology

This article uses process tracing to evaluate three hypothesized key mechanisms—durable land reform, political incorporation, and legal precedents—by deriving observable implications from each mechanism and evaluating whether the evidence predicted are present within each case. If they are present, the evidence will support the observable implications, lending credence to the relevancy of the hypothesized mechanism.

This research identifies three observable implications (OIs). First, if durable land reforms create new spaces that facilitate Indigenous organization, we should observe the development or strengthening of peasant unions, town councils, and cultural associations. Second, if organizations emerging from these spaces allow Indigenous actors to develop experience, form coalitions, propose agendas, and ultimately access political institutions, we should observe the development of political parties and the entrance of Indigenous people into the formal political sphere as lawmakers. Third, if this political incorporation facilitates legal recognition, we should observe further reforms that normalize collective and cultural rights, decentralization, and shared spheres of authority. This hypothesis is summarized in the table below.

Figure 1

Key mechanisms	Observable Implication (OI)	Evidence sought
Land Reform	Development of new organizational spaces and strengthening of associations	Land reforms create or strengthen organizational spaces (peasant unions, town councils, new offices)
Political Incorporation	Organizations and coalitions enter the formal political realm, forming parties and launching candidates	Evidence that these associations evolved into parties and developed candidates that were formally incorporated into politics
Legal Precedents	Once in the formal political realm, parties and candidates are able to pass legal reforms	Evidence that Indigenous actors or parties achieved reforms such as recognition, international treaties, or other reforms

These mechanisms may interact with and facilitate each other. When an opening finally emerges—in this study, a constitutional convention—the accumulated results of these mechanisms should facilitate negotiations over the plurinational proposals. Where the previous observable implications have occurred, plurinational provisions are more institutionally legible and politically viable. Where these observable implications are incomplete, interrupted, or wholly absent, plurinational reforms should prove more difficult to ratify.

This article relies on primary and secondary sources, including academic literature, governmental publications, and constitutional documents to examine the evidence for OIs in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile. Ecuador and Bolivia allow for an analysis of the hypothesized process where the plurinational constitutions were ratified, whereas Chile provides a contrasting case. This research will be divided into sections by country, with the corresponding trajectories examined to understand how the evidence supports the observable implications of the identified causal mechanisms.

Ecuador: Transformative Politics

The Ecuadorian case provides evidence for each of the observable implications: land reforms opened opportunities for Indigenous organization; these organizations facilitated political incorporation; and this sustained political pressure led to multiple advancements for the Indigenous movement before the plurinational constitution was ultimately adopted in 2008. Ecuador's 2008 "Montecristi constitution" was the result of a long road of lobbying from organized Indigenous groups. Strong coalitions of Indigenous associations successfully coordinated to exercise both *de facto* forms of power in the form of mass mobilizations, and *de jure* forms of power by successfully transitioning into electoral politics. In doing so, Ecuadorian leaders created a multifaceted movement that applied sustained pressure towards their goal. Over the course of the last century, Ecuador transformed from a profoundly undemocratic country into a country with one of the most progressive constitutions in the world.

Indigenous people in Ecuador were largely excluded from political life during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The 1830 constitution—the first constitution of the newly founded republic—had a litany of requirements for voting, including marriage, property ownership, literacy, and occupational requirements (Becker 2010: 64). These requirements effectively disenfranchised Indigenous people, who struggled to meet these standards and participate in democracy. It was not until the early 1920s that socialists began incorporating Indigenous causes into their campaigns (Becker 2010: 65), and coordinated, multiethnic coalitions developed that could articulate demands (Gerlach 2003: 29). As early as 1927, Indigenous leaders called for land and labor reform in Ecuador with the establishment of the labor union "El Inca," a syndicate which became a model for additional groups that appeared in the highlands (Gerlach 2003: 29). As access to land affected multiple ethnic groups and represented a fundamental need, this fight was a key factor in creating a united "Indigenous" front.

Indigenous unions achieved an early success in 1937 with the *Ley de Comunas*, a land reform law that provided important opportunities for Indigenous autonomy (Lucero 2008). To obtain recognition, communities were required to establish *cabildos* (town councils). These town councils in turn provided opportunities for increased direct participation and for building experience; they were recognized by the state and their explicit purpose was to advocate for the interests of their communities. The *cabildos* were a precursor to the increased development of later Indigenous political organization (Gerlach 2003: 66); these changes stemming from land reform are for OI1. While some forms of Indigenous organization preceded them, such as the highland syndicates, this reform is particularly noteworthy as it established formal recognition by and interaction with the state. This law thus functioned as an early decentralizing effort that created new pathways towards local autonomy, and served as an administrative and structural basis for opening new political spaces.

Still, at a national level, Ecuador remained extremely exclusionary during this period. Becker points out that “until the 1944 May Revolution, only about 3 percent of the population voted in elections” (Becker 2010: 65). However, peasant unions, town councils, and social organizations—which were not yet political parties, but which practiced political activism—continued expanding throughout the 1940s. Some groups were ethnically specific, such as the Shuar Federation, which explicitly demanded a pluralist state (Lucero 2008); others, such as the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians (FEI), were broader in scope, and able to link previously unconnected groups to articulate collective goals (Van Cott 2005). These coalitions are key institutions in the development of a political movement strong enough to apply sustained pressure in the creation of a more inclusive state.

In 1964 and 1973, further land reforms ended the *huasipungo* and *yanapa* practices. These institutions were semi-feudal systems of forced labor that particularly affected Indigenous communities (Yashar 2005). The reforms transferred “1.8 million acres to 95,000 families,” which led to a “marked decline in the concentration of land ownership” (Gerlach 2003: 64). This breakup of large monopolies on land further empowered the agrarian movements. While labor unions and leftist figures are deeply intertwined with Ecuador’s Indigenous movement, from the 1970s onward, these organizations increasingly shifted from class-based frameworks to the articulation of a collective Indigenous identity with unique rights (Lucero 2008). The social organizations ECUARUNARI (1972) and CONAIE (1986) were central to this development. CONAIE is a confederation, which intended to “create one large pan-Indigenous movement” (Becker 2011: 22), bringing together multiple previously disparate associations. Much of CONAIE’s early focus was on education, and the organization achieved its first major victory with the establishment of the bilingual education agency DINEIB (Van Cott 2005). However, CONAIE continued demonstrations, repeatedly showing the *de facto* power of the Indigenous population through mass mobilizations before engaging in electoral politics directly. That these unions grew after the land reforms of 1964 and 1973 is further evidence for OI1.

Ecuador's transition away from the military rule between 1972 and 1979 also provided positive structural conditions that made plurinationalism more politically imaginable. The country's constitution has long been a site of political struggle, as the country has gone through numerous cycles of writing and re-writing. The 1979 constitution, however, is significant in that it granted universal suffrage and banned discrimination based on race; as a consequence, the Indigenous electorate immediately expanded. For the first time, Indigenous people had full rights as citizens without restrictions. Additionally, a literacy campaign increased Indigenous literacy from 30 to 55% in the Indigenous population (Van Cott 2005: 107), providing further opportunities for participation in and access to the political sphere directly. These reforms created new opportunity spaces for local leadership to interact with the state. In turn, Indigenous leaders could gain experience, develop alliances, and articulate their platforms with state-approved legitimacy.

However, it took time for these developments to play out. CONAIE solidified its status as a significant political force about ten years later, with the 1990 National Indigenous Uprising. This series of marches shut down commerce and forced negotiations on Indigenous issues. Importantly, this campaign also signaled the expression of a new, united, and collective "Indigenous" identity to the broader public (Yashar 2005; Van Cott 2005). Additional marches occurred in 1992 and 1994. Again, land was a key issue. President Sixto Durán Ballén proposed a law allowing the division of Indigenous land, transforming it into a commodity that could be sold or mortgaged (Becker 2010: 53). While this law passed in 1994, the change provoked further organization and protest, keeping the Indigenous movement's momentum strong.

Five years after the National Indigenous Uprising, the formal creation of a specifically Indigenous political party marks the clearest evidence for the second observable implication. In 1995, Amazonian leaders decided to launch a party, which merged with a different political movement created by highland leaders and became the party known as Pachakutik (Becker 2010: 62). This decision was contested, and a reversal of a previous position adopted by CONAIE in 1990 to not participate in electoral politics (Becker 2010: 61). However, the coalition began to believe that, beyond protests and marches, formal channels such as elections were additional tools that should be utilized in pursuit of their goals. This conversion from a union to a political party is evidence for OI2. Pachakutik was imagined as an inclusive project that, while incorporating elements of ethnic identity, was not an exclusively ethnic party and worked to convince Ecuadorians at large of the value of their platform.

This strategy proved successful, and Pachakutik became involved in developing legal reforms. By 1997-1998, CONAIE/Pachakutik leaders were fully exercising these new *de jure* strategies, even assisting in the drafting of a new constitution. This new 1998 constitution emphasized collective rights, decentralization, and multiculturalism; Indigenous leaders conceded on the term "plurinationalism" to pass what was, at the time, the most progressive charter of Ecuador's history. However, the fight for plurinationalism was not over. Van Cott describes the period between 1986 and 1994 as "one sustained effort" towards plurinationalism (Van Cott 2005: 112). In 1998, the country ratified ILO 169, additionally signaling a commitment to Indigenous rights

at the international level and opening further avenues for Indigenous people to pursue claims within the state's established legal structure. These reforms are evidence of the third observable implication: once formally politically incorporated, Indigenous parties and leaders were able to pass legislation that created legal precedents for plurinational reform. While Indigenous parties were unable to implement plurinationalism immediately, they were able to move forward towards this goal once participating directly in the political system.

The coup in 2000 brought even more visibility to the Indigenous movement. This coup, which ousted the then-president Jamil Mahuad, brought an alliance between a low-ranking military official and Indigenous leaders, who set up a provisional government before a higher-ranking general stepped in and ended the coup. While an alliance between the military and the Indigenous movement may seem unusual, the cooperation resulted from class divisions. Lower-ranking soldiers were aligned with Indigenous leaders in this regard, and equally frustrated due to an economic crisis and proposed dollarization (Becker 2010: 89). Resina notes that the “Ecuadorian indigenous movement has been characterized by combining institutional strategies with more disruptive ones” (Resina 2023: 65), using multiple avenues to pursue their goals. In the end, as many Ecuadoreans were affected by the same issues, the short-lived coup did not hurt the legitimacy of the largely nonviolent Indigenous movement (Becker 2010: 90). The aftermath of this social unrest led to the election of Rafael Correa—a candidate who staunchly opposed neoliberal policies—by an unusually large margin, and the approval of a referendum to rewrite the constitution once again.

By the time the 2008 constitution was being drafted, Indigenous leaders had already established precedents for the plurinational charter and were in dialogue with existing laws and prior proposals. Alberti and Mattiace (2023) note that “the drafters of the 2008 constitution drew on the *Circunscripción Territorial Indígena* (Indigenous Territorial Circumscription) in order to enact Indigenous autonomy, which was a legal category that had been established in the 1998 constitution, albeit never implemented” (Alberti and Mattiace 2023: 182). Van Cott (2002: 60) describes Indigenous leaders in 1998 as conceding the fight for plurinationalism in order to pass some multicultural reforms; the 2008 constitution was a direct continuation of this project, which would “maintain and expand the collective rights for indigenous peoples and Afro-Ecuadorians codified in the 1998 constitution” (Becker 2011: 57). By the time the plurinational constitution came to a vote in 2008, Ecuador had accumulated decades of human capital trained to work within institutions, and the constitution was part of a longstanding conversation developed by local actors. These legal precedents constitute evidence for OI3.

This new constitution was explicitly plurinational and incorporated the Indigenous concept of *sumak kawsay*, as well as endowed rights to nature itself. After a lengthy negotiation, it was approved. However, it is vital to note that Ecuador did not achieve the passage of its plurinational constitution by having a large Indigenous population, nor through a singular, decisive push. On the contrary, Ecuador's Indigenous population has always been a minority at about 7.7% of the population (IWGIA), and progress has been incremental. While by no means

ensuring the success of the plurinational process in 2008, the series of land reforms, strong Indigenous coalitions, and legal precedents increased the likelihood of the plurinational charter's success. Ecuador is a case with strong evidence for all observable implications, regardless of population size. This trajectory of early incorporation, democratic reforms, decentralization, and mobilizations over time created the sustained momentum that made the plurinational constitution viable, despite indigenous people being a minority in the country.

Bolivia: Enduring Reforms

Bolivia is another case where land reform, Indigenous political incorporation, and legal precedents culminated in the possibility of a plurinational charter. Bolivia had agrarian reform that opened up new political spaces, and, importantly, these reforms endured despite periods of military rule. Peasant unions, Indigenous organizations, and new political parties emerged in Bolivia in conjunction with these reforms, and gained substantial national influence. Finally, Bolivia has had several legal precedents on the path to their current plurinational constitution, including a history of social constitutions, reforms that recognized the multiethnic nature of the country, and laws that promoted decentralization and shared spheres of power.

While Bolivia has a much larger Indigenous population than Ecuador, the Indigenous population remained largely separate from the region's emerging political life during the colonial period and through the early years of statehood. Bolivia had a dual system, with a separate "Spanish republic" and "Indian republic" until the nation's independence in 1825 (Cunha Filho 2023: 25). The 1826 constitution does not explicitly mention Indigenous peoples, but, similar to Ecuador, mentions several restrictions on citizenship that limited Indigenous peoples' incorporation as citizens. Indigenous people of Bolivia paid tributes; these tributes were not substantially abolished until the *Ley de Exvinculación* abolished the *ayllu*, a system for collective labor, in 1874 (Klein 2011). While the *ayllu* had been legally abolished, peasant (*campesino*) unions grew in numbers in the Bolivian highlands. These unions date back to the 1930s (Arigho-Stiles 2024: 127), and were modern iteration of the *ayllu* (Arigho-Stiles 2024: 125), which was a pre-existing Indigenous social system.

Parallel to the development of these unions, the Chaco War (1932-1935) and the events that followed it marked the beginning of significant changes for Indigenous political incorporation. It was not until this war that Indigenous people and mestizos were brought together in greater numbers through military service, and later began organizing under reformist ideologies that ultimately destabilized the country's elite. The war was a disastrous loss for Bolivia (Postero 2007), and generated immense frustration. However, the experience also created a new class of Indigenous veterans who "returned to their communities [...] with a new sense of Bolivianess and compelling claims for greater citizenship rights" (Lucero 2008: 55). These veterans, now invested in the national project as both Indigenous people and Bolivians, began challenging the government and demanding representation.

This political crisis culminated in the constitution of 1938. The new constitution “severely limited property rights” where land “was considered a social right whose legitimacy was defined by social utility” (Klein 2011: 192). The 1938 constitution was Bolivia’s first social constitution. This was a significant break from previous constitutions in Bolivian history, which had always emphasized “defense of personal property and liberty against the State” (Klein 1966: 259), in the tradition of classical liberal constitutions. This new constitution, in contrast, was inspired by the revolutionary Mexican constitution of 1917. These background conditions informed later developments in Bolivian politics.

In particular, additional opportunities for Indigenous political incorporation emerged after the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) seized power in 1952. The MNR enacted land reform and required the formal formation of a union to acquire government benefits (Cunha Filho 2023: 28). Before the revolution, land was so concentrated that “only four percent of landowners held 82 percent of the land” (Eckstein 1983: 108). The semi-feudal *pongueaje* system was eliminated (Klein 2011), and almost half of farming families had received land within two years of the agrarian reforms of 1953 (Eckstein 1983: 108). The organizational structures that emerged out of these reforms are evidence for the first OI.

Though the Revolution operated through the lens of class, some of the reforms directly benefited Indigenous political incorporation. Lucero characterizes it as “the second great social revolution of twentieth-century Latin America,” after the Mexican Revolution (Lucero 2008: 63). The Revolution finally brought universal suffrage (Postero 2007); this elimination of literacy requirements in voting caused the voting population to surge from “some two hundred thousand to just under one million persons” (Klein 2011: 212). The combination of universal suffrage and the revolution’s encouragement of unions created opportunities for greater political incorporation that would only expand in subsequent decades.

While the MNR was deposed by the military in 1964, many of the changes instituted were maintained during military rule. The new regime “declare[d] its unwavering support for Agrarian Reform” (Klein 2011: 223), and was able to position itself as a “conservative military regime allied with the Indian peasantry” (Klein 2011: 224). Unlike in some regions of Latin America, the military did not attempt to repossess Indigenous land during this period, and relevant achievements of the revolution—universal suffrage and land reform—were preserved. The alliance is significant; for the purposes of OI1 and OI2, it allowed organizational spaces to persist beyond the dissolution of the MNR, even if the regime imposed restraints.

While Bolivia continued to experience instability and repression in the late twentieth century, the Indigenous movement continued developing. By 1973, the Katarista movement, which took its name from the rebel figure Tupaj Katari, had issued a manifesto framing the problems facing their communities “through two different lenses, in order to see how they were exploited both economically as peasants (the class lens) and culturally as Indians (the ethnic lens)” (Filho 2023: 30). The first recorded use of “plurinationalism” as a concept dates back to 1979, during

meetings of the Unified Syndical Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB). This union was the largest of the peasant unions (Tockman and Cameron 2014: 64-65), and “the syndical wing of the *Katarista* movement” (Arigho-Stiles 2024: 121). These unions would directly influence Bolivian politics and successfully translate their organizational strength into real political power.

For the purposes of OI2, the transformation of these peasant unions into fully incorporated political figures becomes most clear in the 1990s and 2000s, after democratic restoration. By 1993, one of the founders of the CSUTCB, Victor Hugo Cardenas, was elected vice president. His appointment represented “a recognition by the elite of the new importance of the mestizos and indigenous urban and rural populations in national politics” where even “the vice president’s wife [made] it a custom to dress for political and social occasions in traditional indigenous dresses” (Klein 2011: 257). This period saw substantial activity and reforms. 1991 saw the ratification of ILO 169, and the 1994 March for Sovereignty and Dignity in Bolivia made Indigenous organizer and future president Evo Morales a national figure (Van Cott 2005). Between 1994 and 1995, the constitution was again reformed. This constitution affirmed Bolivia as “multiethnic and pluricultural” (Klein 2011: 257). While not yet “plurinational,” this constitution was a key reference point for the later process in 2009.

Additionally, Bolivia passed the 1994 Law of Popular Participation—a law which directly created more municipal districts, allowing Indigenous parties to be an increasingly viable option for voters (Postero 2007); 1995’s Law of Administrative Decentralization, which dramatically improved the performance of ethnic parties (Van Cott 2005); and, finally, an additional agrarian reform law in 1996 (INRA law), which recognized additional communal land rights for indigenous populations (Yashar 2005). Centellas describes this decentralization as “a boon for the Indigenous movement [...] both MAS and MIP were forged in municipal-level contests, which became springboards to national politics” (Centellas 2013: 95). The bundle of reforms in the 1990s can be seen as a second cycle of reform after the interruption of military rule, and as evidence of OI3.

By the time the constituent assembly began debating the plurinational constitution, Bolivia had already accumulated significant precedents that made the document institutionally legible and politically imaginable. Faguet comments that “new autonomies are in many ways an extension of the logic of popular participation” (Faguet 2014: 27); that is to say, that the state was already practicing ways of sharing autonomy and empowering Indigenous groups to participate directly in matters that affected them. Moreover, Bolivia had already recognized the country as “multiethnic and pluricultural” (Klein 2011: 257), signaling a shift towards recognizing and preserving its Indigenous cultures. Centellas (2013) calls the 2009 constitution “only a modification of the previous charter” (Centellas 2013: 101) that is “not quite as radical a departure from previous political traditions as is often imagined” (Centellas 2013: 89). That is to say, that in some ways, Bolivia was already practicing the essence of plurinationalism through a bundle of laws before moving to constitutionally define themselves with that terminology. These

precedents are strong additional evidence of OI3—the 2009 charter benefitted from prior reforms that make plurinationalism more institutionally legible.

Taken together, the Bolivian case demonstrates strong evidence for each of the observable implications. Agrarian reforms enacted by the MNR persisted even through military rule; these reforms created new organizational spaces, which strengthened peasant unions; these unions fostered individuals who entered the formal political realm and developed parties; and these parties then achieved national influence. The Bolivian case shows that the key mechanisms—while interacting and facilitating each other—do not need to occur in a purely linear sequence. Legal reforms can reinforce political incorporation, for example. Bolivia had two distinct periods of reform before and after military rule, though importantly, organizations persisted throughout that period. The significance of the mechanisms lies in their strength and interaction. Overall, the degree of evidence for each OI supports the expectation that a plurinational constitution is politically viable in Bolivia.

Chile: Missing Precedents

Chile presents a case where many of the hypothesized mechanisms—and, subsequently, the observable implications—are weak, interrupted, or wholly absent. Firstly, Chile's attempts at land reform were interrupted by the dictatorship; later reforms emphasized individual instead of collective restitution of lands, assimilating them to the logic of private property and inhibiting the development of new democratic spaces. Secondly, Indigenous organizations struggled to enter the formal political realm. Political parties were banned during the dictatorship, and after the transition to democracy, these associations largely failed to form parties and coalitions that could appeal to a broad base of voters. Finally, Chile has established very few precedents for plurinationalism or for the recognition of Indigenous peoples in general. The current constitution emphasizes “unity,” and state power remains largely centralized in the capital region.

While Chile is home to multiple Indigenous groups, the Mapuche are greater in number than all the other groups combined, totaling about 1.8 million individuals. This quantity dwarfs the next largest group, the Aymara, who are only about 156,000 in number (IWGIA). For this reason, it is difficult to speak of an “Indigenous” movement in Chile; there has historically been a “Mapuche movement,” but coordination between groups has only recently emerged, such as in the 2022 constitutional process. Therefore, this analysis will focus largely on the Mapuche, who have been most frequently described in the literature on this topic.

Land has been a contentious issue for the Mapuche for the past 150 years. Unlike the Indigenous groups in Ecuador and Bolivia, the Mapuche were an independent nation until they were defeated militarily by Chile and incorporated into the state in 1883. From this point on, the Mapuche were removed from their large familial land occupations and relegated to small-scale farming. These plots, called *reducciones*, comprised of “just 6.4 percent of their previous territory” (Richards 2010: 62). Organization following this defeat proved challenging. In the years following, sons of prominent chiefs who could read and write—the elite class—did form

Mapuche organizations with various aims, including education, tax reform, and land reform (Foerster and Montecino 1988). One Mapuche candidate was elected to congress as early as 1924 (Tricot 2023: 189), but the lack of opportunities for local offices, along with strict literacy requirements for voting, disenfranchised large numbers of the Mapuche people from participating directly in the country's political life.

Land reform finally occurred during the Frei (1964-1970) and Allende (1970-1973) administrations. The Directorate of Indian Affairs was formally established in 1964, and “163 properties, totaling more than 152,000 hectares, were expropriated in favor of the Mapuche between 1962 and 1973” (Richards 2013: 59). However, there was little time for these reforms to generate new institutional spaces as hypothesized in OI1. The Allende administration ended in a coup in 1973, and the Pinochet government instituted aggressive counter-reforms. In 1979, a new law (2.568) replaced the 1972 Indigenous Law (17.729), and erased the legal category of Indigenous land entirely (Neira and Rodriguez 2016: 598). Pinochet himself stated “there are no indigenous people, only Chileans” (Haughney 2006: 56), and it is this dispossession of land that is “the immediate antecedent of present-day conflicts among the communities, local farmers, timber companies, and the state” (Richards 2013: 61). Land reform in Chile was not a durable mechanism that allowed for new organizational spaces to open. Instead, its reversal further fragmented Indigenous groups and contributed to direct conflict with the state.

Indigenous political incorporation was also complicated by the dictatorship. Not only did Indigenous groups struggle at the beginning of the century to participate directly in democracy—due to low literacy and restrictions on voting—but political parties were also outlawed during the dictatorship (Loveman 1986: 17). Mapuche organizations did form and survive during this period, but were, by necessity, primarily cultural in nature. For example, the Centros Culturales Mapuche (CCM) was founded in 1978, but “largely ‘depoliticised,’” (Neira and Rodriguez 2016: 599) until rebranding as Admapu in 1982 (Neira and Rodriguez 2016: 600-601). Despite becoming more politicized, organization remained difficult. Neira and Rodriguez assert that political questions “did not produce a consensus in Mapuche society” (Neira and Rodriguez 2016: 607). While a Mapuche political party had been proposed as early as 1932 (Foerster and Montecino 1988: 117), the project did not come to fruition until well after the transition to democracy.

This Mapuche political party, Wallmapuwen, emerged in 2005, but was dissolved by 2017 (Tricot and Bidegain 2020). Consistent with the OI, the lack of organizational spaces was accompanied by weak political incorporation. Indigenous demands in Chile have typically been funneled through traditional parties (Tricot and Bidegain 2020), and no successful Indigenous party or coalition had gained notable power or influence by the time the *estallido social* erupted in 2019. The *estallido* was not a planned march by a political party or organization, but a spontaneous popular movement.

Despite weak political incorporation, democratization in the 1990s did open the door to possibilities for establishing new cultural and civic rights for Indigenous people. The legislature did establish the National Corporation for Indigenous Development (CONADI) in 1993, which formally recognized Indigenous people as part of the fabric of the Chilean nation and created opportunities for economic development, including land-buyback programs (Richards 2013). Yet, these reforms provide only partial evidence for OI3. Instead of broad land reforms that established communal lands and new institutions that could interact with the state (such as town councils), CONADI operates based on individual claims and petitions, assimilating the redistribution to the logic of private property. Subsequently, this infrastructure provides limited opportunities for the development of new institutions.

However, Chile passed limited additional reforms relatively late compared to peer countries like Bolivia and Ecuador. While Chile did advance Indigenous rights by ratifying ILO 169 in 2008 and endorsed UNDRIP in 2016, no legal precedents existed constitutionally for recognizing Indigenous people, and the reforms passed provided comparatively limited frameworks for Indigenous autonomy. No new constitution had been established since the dictatorship, and so there were no intermediate steps such as constitutionally recognizing the nation as multicultural or pluriethnic. On the contrary, the 1980 constitution establishes the state as “unitary” and makes no mention of Indigenous people at all.

Some efforts emerged during and after democratization to reform the constitution, but did not advance. The Bachelet administration submitted a constitutional draft to Congress, but the process lacked the support to be formally activated (Larrain et al 2023). Piñera, the subsequent president, attempted to “[bury] the whole process” (Larrain et al. 2023: 235). By the time an opening occurred in 2021 with the constitutional process, the hypothesized mechanisms toward plurinationalism had developed in Chile only weakly. Chile remained incredibly centralized, and had few precedents that would make plurinationalism institutionally legible.

Still, the constitutional opening in 2021 provided new opportunities for Indigenous political incorporation. Seats were reserved for Indigenous people, ensuring their participation (Bidegain and Tricot 2021), and a Mapuche woman, Elisa Loncón, presided over part of the convention. However, the convention did not originate from a series of specifically Indigenous marches or protests. The *estallido social* encompassed a broad range of issues affecting the whole of society. Thus, Indigenous groups came into unprecedented access to the political process, but without a strong history of the preceding developments identified by the observable implications.

On the whole, the key mechanisms are either incomplete or absent. Agrarian reform did not lead to new opportunities for Indigenous people to exercise autonomy and interface with the state, as it was swiftly reversed; Indigenous organizations remained primarily cultural and did not form strong political coalitions; legal rights, recognitions, and precedents remained limited. While the weakness of the key mechanisms in the Chilean case cannot be said to have caused the charter’s

failure, the lack of evidence for the OIs is consistent with the notion that involvement in the process alone may not be enough to ensure success where precedents are limited.

Discussion

Across these three cases, the evidence provides different levels of support for the observable implications (OIs) generated by the hypothesized mechanisms. Ecuador and Bolivia provide ample evidence for the three OIs: durable land reforms opened new organizational spaces; the associations developed in these spaces became politically incorporated by launching candidates and political parties; and legal precedents emerged from political negotiations. By the time an opening emerged for a constitutional convention, these OIs were already strongly present. Chile provides a contrasting case where the first hypothesized mechanism was reversed, and the subsequent OIs developed only partially. Despite gaining direct access to the Chilean constitutional process in 2021, this opportunity occurred without the same degree of prior political incorporation and legal precedent as in Ecuador and Bolivia. Therefore, this research suggests that land reform, political incorporation, and legal precedents make a plurinational constitution more politically viable, and facilitate—though do not guarantee—its adoption.

First, land is a fundamental issue of importance for Indigenous peoples. Lynn Meisch goes as far as to say the issue is “the glue that binds the Indigenous movement” (Meisch 1992: 58). The evidence for OI1 is strongly present in Ecuador and Bolivia, but comparably weak in Chile. Ecuador had the advantage of an early land reform law that created town councils, and the issue of land continued to be relevant, fueling the creation of organizations and sparking mass mobilizations in the 1990s. In Bolivia, an early example of a social constitution limited land privatization, and the Bolivian revolution enacted further agrarian reform. Even after the military takeover, the military did not reverse agrarian reforms and created a pact with the peasants. These features formed a strong basis for Indigenous organizations to flourish. In Chile, land reform came later, and was reversed swiftly. This extremely limited window of reform constrained the development of Indigenous organizations. While the establishment of CONADI later redistributed some parcels, the individual nature of the project inhibits communal organization. The relevant difference is not so much whether land reforms occurred, as they did in all three cases, but the quality of institutions that those reforms created and the amount of time that they endured.

Second, formal political incorporation is vital for the Indigenous movement to achieve objectives. Again, this OI is present in Ecuador and Bolivia, but relatively weak in Chile. The development of cultural and labor organizations provides a basis for the articulation of demands, the formation of political parties, and the ability to form coalitions and work as a whole. Several coalitions formed in Ecuador, including FEI and CONAIE, who later launched the party Pachakutik. In Bolivia, labor unions like CSUTCB and coalitions like CIDOB played a role in the country’s civic life, and influenced the development of the MAS party that launched Evo Morales to the presidency. Chile also had Indigenous labor and cultural unions in the early

twentieth century (Foerster and Montecino 1988), however these organizations struggled to form a united front. Moreover, the dictatorship banned political parties. It was not until the early 2000s that a specifically Mapuche party emerged, and it had dissolved before the *estallido social* even began. While Indigenous groups were formally incorporated into the 2021 convention, they did not arrive as a united, sustained movement with clear goals, such as in Ecuador and Bolivia after their series of planned marches.

Finally, legal precedents for plurinationalism are considerably fewer in Chile than in Ecuador and Bolivia. These prior reforms affirmed the multiethnic nature of the nation, normalized the shared spheres of power, and made plurinationalism more institutionally legible. Prior constitutional reforms in Ecuador and Bolivia recognized Indigenous people; before the ratification of their plurinational constitutions in 2008 and 2009, respectively, the constitutions of Ecuador (1998) and Bolivia (1994) explicitly define the country as both “multiethnic” and “pluricultural.” These countries have had numerous constitutional processes, allowing for multiple opportunities for reform and for a longstanding, open debate on the subject. Chile, on the other hand, has had “only four or five constitutions [...] depending on how one counts” (Negretto and Couso: 53), providing fewer openings for modifications. The current constitution, established in 1980, specifically describes Chile as “unitary” (Article 3), despite the many ethnic groups that exist there. Richards asserts that “in Chile, the word ‘multicultural’ only became prevalent in state parlance under Bachelet” (Richards 2013: 110), indicating this use as a relatively recent development. The window of opportunity has been smaller in Chile. On the whole, the country has had far fewer incremental steps towards plurinationalism before the voting on the 2022 constitutional charter.

Taken together, this study illustrates how the observable implications generated by the hypothesized mechanisms should facilitate negotiations over a plurinational charter. Ecuador and Bolivia have a higher degree of identifiable OIs than Chile. They arrived at their constitutional openings with established Indigenous organizations and parties, experience in constitutional negotiations, and prior recognition of their cultural rights. For Ecuador and Bolivia, plurinationalism represented a continuation of an established dialogue. While the Chilean case illustrates that the strong presence of the three OIs is not necessary for plurinationalism to enter the conversation, it may be key for building the experience, coalitions, and institutional legibility necessary for re-negotiating their status and bringing a proposal to ratification.

Conclusion

This article traced the key mechanisms hypothesized to facilitate the ratification of a plurinational constitution and their subsequent observable implications in Ecuador (2008), Bolivia (2009) and Chile (2021-22). The analysis finds considerable evidence for the observable implications in Ecuador and in Bolivia, while the evidence for the OIs in Chile is limited, with many of the expected elements only partially present. While Chile experienced a constitutional opening comparable to that of Ecuador and Bolivia, including explicitly reserved seats for

Indigenous participants, this element alone may not be enough to sustain a proposal through difficult negotiations in the absence of strong organizations, coalitions, and accumulated experience from previous processes.

The theoretical contribution of this article is to detail how plurinational charters are shaped not only by the immediate circumstances surrounding the constitutional conventions, but also by the historical circumstances that precede them. While the Ecuadorian and Bolivian cases are well studied, the Chilean case has received less attention. Several authors have commented on the Chilean process specifically (Disi Pavlic 2024; Landau and Dixon 2024; Leighton 2024; Herraz et al. 2026; Palanza and Sotomayor-Valarezo, Verdugo and García-Huidobro, Ginsberg and Álvarez), and this analysis seeks to place the Chilean case in dialogue with the processes of peer countries. While not the only factors that influence a process as complex as a convention, this research suggests that strong coalitions, longstanding relationships, and political experience may facilitate the passage of these proposals. As happened in Ecuador and in Bolivia, plurinational constitutions may be more viable where prior land reforms enabling collective organization, formal political incorporation, and legal precedents make the proposal politically and institutionally familiar.

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