“Somos Autonomistas de Siempre”: Public University Politics and the Negotiation of Autonomy in Bolivia

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This paper analyzes the contentious April 2010 public university elections for Rector and Vice Rector at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA) in Bolivia. University elections are especially politically significant in countries like Bolivia, in which public universities have constitutionally protected autonomy and have often served as bastions of political opposition. Using quantitative and qualitative techniques, we describe and analyze how Bolivia’s university elections interact with national and subnational politics. Looking at the three most recent rectorate elections (2004, 2007, 2010), we measure electoral volatility, party system stability, and partisan alignments within university elections. We combine this with long-term fieldwork and content analysis of newspaper coverage of each election to show how university electoral politics were reshaped after the 2005 victory of Evo Morales and his MAS party. We argue that studies of electoral politics in settings such as universities, unions, or civic associations offer insights how key constituencies interact with hegemonic parties.
At 8:30 on the evening of April 14, 2010, Bolivian anti-riot police were called to the campus of the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA), Bolivia’s flagship public university, in response to violent clashes between students. The students had gathered in the atrium of the university’s main administration building, awaiting the results of the second round rectorate elections. Every three years, the university rector (the highest position in the university) is elected in a competitive election involving all members of the university community (faculty and students). The 2010 election had been highly polarizing, hotly contested, and saw high voter turnout—particularly among students, who historically determined the contest’s winner. As they waited to learn the results in the crowded atrium, taunting turned to scuffles, which turned into a brawl and ultimately threatened to turn into a riot. By the time police arrived, several students had been injured.

After the tear gas cleared and the dust settled, university election officials announced that Dr. Teresa Rescala, a research biochemist, had been reelected as the university’s rector. In 2007, as the candidate for Vanguardia Institucional Autonomista (VIA-U), Rescala had been the first woman to win the position. In both elections, Rescala campaigned with a platform promising to defend university autonomy “at all costs.” And both times Rescala’s chief opponent was a candidate with close ties to the national government of Evo Morales. As such, Rescala’s election reflects evolving realities of contemporary Bolivian politics, with local spaces of autonomous political activity increasingly becoming oppositional spaces in which the pro- and anti-regime cleavage is reproduced and reinforced. This is particularly interesting because the metropolitan La Paz-El Alto (from where most students come from) has been a significant political stronghold for Morales and his Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party.

The reality of the tense, frequently antagonistic, relationship between the country’s flagship public university and the central government is an interesting lens with which to view the complex relationship between Morales’s populist politics and the realities of maintaining a broad coalition that includes leftist intellectuals, coca growers, indigenous communities, and various other social movements. This is particularly underscored by the long tradition of Bolivia’s public universities—and especially UMSA—as hothouses for leftist organizations. The institutional structure and governance of Bolivian public universities—and their relationship to the state—is critical for understanding how national politics shape and are shaped by local or regional constituencies. Thus, the resistance of significant elements within the university (including students, but especially faculty) to candidates closely associated with the Morales government suggests a specific reluctance by the university to lose some its institutional autonomy. But it also suggests that even in political systems marked by hegemonic parties, political competition can take many forms at the subnational level, suggesting that political scientists should pay closer attention to non-traditional political arenas.

Our analysis focuses on recent UMSA rectorate elections, and in particular the highly contentious 2010 election, but does so with a comparative perspective and in the specific context of a national political system undergoing an intense process of realignment and the potential consolidation of a hegemonic party system. In addition to a qualitative description and analysis of recent elections, based on nearly a decade of fieldwork in Bolivia, we use some standard operational measures and analytical tools employed in comparative political studies of elections. Overall, our analysis provides a snapshot of how the political discourse of “autonomy” is employed—and how it remains a contested concept—in micro-local politics. Additionally, the analysis underscores the need to incorporate other forms of competitive politics, such as
university, union, or civic association elections, into analyses of political and social trends and forms of identity-making. Although common areas for anthropological study, we believe that political science has much to contribute to the understanding of micro-politics in such settings.

**University Autonomy and Co-Gobierno in Bolivia**

Historically, Latin American universities have been oriented toward and advocated for leftist policies at the national level. University students and faculty are often the first to speak out against policies perceived as oppressive or that infringe on civil and human rights (Acosta 2008). The 1969 massacre in Mexico City and the repression of university students in Pinochet’s Chile are only the most prominent examples of universities as foci for national struggles. However, the internal divisions and fierce ideological battles within universities, especially large public ones, have not yet been described for much of Latin America, in part because they have not been as prominent.

Why would a runoff election for the leader of a public university lead to such violence? What is at stake in these elections? And how can we understand the explicitly public and political organization of university rectorship campaigns? The answers are rooted in the fairly radical (even by Latin American standards) organizational and governmental structure of public Bolivian universities. Universities themselves are powerful political constituencies, and national politics often play out at the university level. Therefore, ideological, identity, and interest-driven struggles are often articulated in university elections. In particular, we argue that the *extent* and *importance* of co-gobierno and university autonomy is elaborated to an extreme in the Bolivian context.¹

There are several interlacing factors that must be understood in order to understand the violence surrounding the announcement of the winner of the runoff election: 1) the historical legacies of university reform in Latin America, 2) the specific nature of Bolivian universities’ relationship to the state, and 3) the trend toward public political campaigns for university elections.

Public universities in Latin America today are huge, generally urban, national systems that receive a portion of their budgets directly from the central government. UNAM, in Mexico City, has well over 250,000 students (Alcántara 2003). UMSA, in La Paz, has over 80,000 (Lizárraga Zamora, 2003), and the entirety of the Bolivian public university system has over 300,000 students enrolled as of 2010 (Plan 2010). Fiscally, the universities also receive significant resources from the central government. Bolivia’s constitution mandates that a full five percent of the national budget be reserved for public universities (compared to 10 percent set aside for municipal governments). This means that university administrators have resources roughly on par with those available to mayors in the country’s largest cities.

The outlines of the current structure of public universities in Latin America emerged in 1918, with the Córdoba Reforms, in Argentina. These reforms meant that national universities (often originally founded as Real and Pontifical universities under Spanish colonialism, as was the case in Mexico, Bolivia, and elsewhere, then converted to national institutions in the Republican period) that had been controlled by the clergy or national governments were able to

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¹ Acosta (2008) notes that “La autonomía universitaria nunca ha sido una absoluta. Siempre ha sido relativa y de alguna manera regulada, pero hoy parece ser más relativa y más regulada que nunca,” (36). However, while the extent of co-gobierno and university autonomy relative to State concerns is being scaled back elsewhere in Latin America, perhaps due to pressures from private universities, the opposite is happening in Bolivia, as we delineate below.
choose their own administration and set their own standards for curricula while still receiving state funds, the traditional Spanish principle of *autonomía universitaria* (university autonomy). Here, autonomy means free from central government control; the state cannot appoint or fire university officials or dictate curriculum. Other components of the reforms included making the universities free and open to the public (with some caveats); a principle of *co-gobierno* (co-government) that gave students and faculty a say in choosing university rectors (instead of state officials making the decisions); and charters that generally invoke the university’s role in providing service to the people and the nation. That is, in the early decades of the 20th century, universities throughout Latin America, many of which had been bastions of elite privilege, racism, and conservative thought during the colonial and republican periods, were radically reshaped. Indeed, in many countries, Bolivia among them, the right to an autonomous yet publically funded national university system was written into the constitution.

Today, many of the largest universities in Latin America are still autonomous in principle, and many maintain some degree of *co-gobierno* and free (or minimal fee) tuition. These reforms persisted despite years of dictatorship and oppressive regimes in the region (or they were dismantled but quickly returned upon the restoration of democracy).

Bolivia’s form of university *co-gobierno* is unique among universities in Latin America. It is the only country that legislates an exactly equal weight between students and faculty in choosing the new administration. The statute dictates that elections must be democratic and based on “representational parity” between students and faculty (Ramírez 2007, 3). The emphasis on an exactly equal weight given to faculty and student voices in elections gives students significant power over the administration (Lizárraga Zamora 2003; Saavedra Muñoz 2006; Rodriguez O. et. al. 2000; Rossells et. al. 2004). It also means that the population that can vote is rather large: all students and faculty are expected to participate in the elections.

Most public universities in Latin America do not elect the rector and vice-rector through direct elections, but rather by a university senate or other indirect forms of representation (Rossells et. al. 2004; Levy 1986; Condarco Morales 1982). Bolivia is thus an exception in both the extent to which it mandates *co-gobierno* and provides representation to university students. But Bolivia is also an exception in how visible and institutionalized university elections are in broader public culture. A natural consequence of the institutional structure of autonomy and *co-gobierno* is the high stakes of university politics.

We connect our argument for analysis of institutions of higher education in Latin America as political actors to our discussion of the concept of autonomy in contemporary Bolivia. It is through debates over the form, content, and function of autonomy in Bolivia that the university as complex social actor makes a claim over knowledge production and formation of new citizens. “Autonomy,” as a founding principle of public education in Bolivia and elsewhere, is central to creating a university public that relates to and responds to state demands. But it also is a concept that provides a flashpoint for regionalist and other social movements in Bolivia. We suggest autonomy is an empty signifier (Laclau 2005) capable of a multiplicity of meanings to oppositional actors who claim it as their own. Its plasticity and historical links are what animate the concept and provide its power in contemporary Bolivia.

Typically, the analysis of social movements forged around the concept of autonomy has been limited to ethnic or nationalist movements. We believe this is a limited use of a powerful set of conceptual frameworks for understanding political behavior—in Bolivia and beyond. Because of the prevalence and social importance given to the concept of autonomy, the identities of “faculty” (*docentes*) and “students” (*universitarios*) are brought into being via a looping effect
(Hacking 1995), and they must be understood as powerful political actors possessing a specific identity as *docentes* and *universitarios*, that is, that these groups are capable of mobilizing for their interests, advocating for change, and lead to grounds for identity within a professional domain. These identity categories are interrelated with other proliferating identities in plurinational Bolivia, yet there have been few anthropological, sociological, or political analyses of identities that can be roughly described as non-primordial in Bolivia, despite the excellent literature on ethnicity and social movements.

**University Politics, National Politics**

Bolivia’s universities are highly politicized and serve as incubators for national-level political careers. Because of both the size and importance of universities in Bolivian public discourse, university politics frequently reflect “national” politics. Prevailing social concerns and are often embedded into the fabric of university rectorship campaigns, which therefore encapsulate fissures, fixations, and flashpoints of a significant slice of the Bolivian, or at least *paceño*, citizenry (K. Centellas 2010). There is also a strong instrumental relationship between political parties and university politics. Individuals aspiring to political careers gravitate to university politics, and political parties actively recruit students who can demonstrate success in university politics. Moreover, because university campaigns are highly formalized, those who participate in university politics gain useful experience in modern electoral campaigns. Finally, because universities have significant fiscal resources, both political parties and individual political entrepreneurs have strong incentives to participate in university governance.

The relationship between university and national political careers is striking. Using a recent dataset (M. Centellas n.d.) on lower house candidate biographical data, we found that a surprising number of Bolivian legislators had played an active role in university politics.\(^2\) Although data on several legislators was incomplete or unavailable, the numbers are impressive, particularly in the most recent period: Between 1993 and 2005 (four elections) at least 11.7 percent of the members of the lower house are known to have been active in university politics, mostly as elected members of their university’s Local University Federation (*Federación Universitaria Local*–FUL). The number includes two former rectors of UMSA, two former rectors of UAGRM (the public university of Santa Cruz) and three former deans of UMSS (the public university of Cochabamba). The relationship between university and political arenas is even higher if we look at the number of professors elected to the legislature: an average of 14.4 percent over the same period (with a peak of 18.5 percent in 1993 and 1997). To put this in perspective, the most common professional background for legislators elected during the same period was for lawyers, who averaged 21.7 percent (with a peak of 25.4 percent in 1997).

In particular, the UMSA’s university politics are significant because of its large size and its location in the national capital. UMSA’s 80,000 students constitute roughly five percent of the total population of the La Paz-El Alto metropolitan area. The large number of votes cast is also striking. In the most recent election, more than 65,000 votes were cast in the first round. That represents about six percent of the total number of votes cast in the previous year’s (2009) presidential elections in the entire metropolitan area. Moreover, UMSA is a public university,

\(^2\) This dataset is part of a larger, multinational project funded by National Science Foundation (SES-075166) collected by one of the authors. The full dataset is currently under embargo, until the project is completed. The dataset includes data on unelected candidates to the Chamber of Deputies, as well as incumbents who did not run for reelection or ran for another office. Here, we have chosen to focus specifically on the 130 candidates elected to the chamber on any given year.
and the demographics of its student body roughly mirror that of La Paz-El Alto. There are a few extremely wealthy students, though these students generally attend private universities or study abroad, and many students from the middle and lower class neighborhoods in La Paz and El Alto.

As is common throughout Latin America (and elsewhere), UMSA’s institutional politics tend to be leftist. University faculty and students tend to be Morales supporters, overtly Andean-centric (Albro 2010), and highly critical (even suspicious) of pro-autonomy demands made by the lowland departments. This trend has been used to great effect in the past three university elections. Most platforms have invoked symbols recognized as explicitly national, yet historically tied to Andean groups. For instance, recent slates have used the wiphala (the multicolored Andean flag), the coca leaf, or the Aymara word for “one” (maya) or “first” (naira) as campaign symbols and party titles. The explicitly Altiplano nationalist orientation is now de rigueur for university elections. Most platforms emphasize the national importance of the public university in general—and UMSA’s top ranking in particular—to national development and identity, while arguing that they represent the best, even “truest,” spirit of the university.

One way to understand the relationship between university elections and national politics is to use the same conceptual framework commonly used to analyze municipal elections. By the sheer size of their “constituency,” university elections are some of the largest elections in Bolivia. More ballots were cast in the 2010 UMSA rectorate election than were cast in all but nine of Bolivia’s 329 municipalities that same year. Like elections in key municipalities, the national government is attentive to and responsive to the results of the UMSA (and other university) elections. If nothing else, the universities are strategic partners in social and economic development projects. Moreover, university election campaigns play out within the context of national political developments. All this makes the shifting emphases of party platforms somewhat understandable: after all, they reflect and perhaps expand prevailing social concerns at the time. Similarly, politicians must pay attention to the demands from universitarios, as they are a vocal and influential constituency.

University rectorship elections involve highly sophisticated electoral campaigns, bearing a close resemblance to national- or municipal-level elections. Candidates for rector and vice-rector are nominated by a “political party” with its own unique slogan, snazzy graphic symbol, and catchy a platform title (often an acronym). Candidates for rector and vice-rector give interviews to local print and broadcast media and hold debates that are free and open to the public. They advertise by recruiting student and faculty volunteers who, among other tasks, distribute fliers and paint slogans throughout downtown public spaces. Most recently, slates have begun using social media, such as blogs and Facebook, to reach an increasingly networked student and faculty population. Prior to election day, lists are published in major national newspapers of voters that have been “habilitados” (verified, qualified) so that they may vote (this involves ensuring that the person is a student or faculty member at the institution in question). On election day, voters arrive at the central offices, present their identity card, and fill out their ballot at election tables. Results are announced, usually live, on the evening news, and the next day in the main newspapers. All of this closely mirrors the electoral process used in national and municipal elections.

In the last three elections, the level and quality of media attention paid to UMSA elections has increased noticeably. As part of our analysis, we conducted a simple content analysis of newspaper coverage of UMSA elections in 2004, 2007, and 2010. We limited our analysis to a time frame of 15 days before the first round election and 15 days following the first
round election. This period covered most of the campaign. Although intense, political campaigns in Bolivia are relatively short; candidate slates are often not officially announced until about two weeks before the election. The elections also use a simple runoff system, but second-round elections are held a week after the first round. Thus, our time frame encapsulates most of the electorate campaign, plus a few days following the announcement of the winner. For our analysis, we selected the two most widely read newspapers in La Paz: La Razón and El Diario. We used a combination of manifest and latent content analysis. Manifest content analysis simply records the number of mentions given to the UMSA election; latent content analysis looks at the “quality” of the coverage coded on a three-point scale. For example, if a newspaper simply mentioned the UMSA election (in a short paragraph or sidebar), the mention would be counted, but it would be coded as “minimal” coverage. In contrast, a story that included photographs and detailed analysis of the campaigns, platforms, or candidates would also be counted, but would be coded as “in-depth” coverage. The table below shows that both the overall amount and the quality of coverage of UMSA elections increased significantly across the last three elections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Mentions</th>
<th>Quality of Coverage</th>
<th>Overall Quality of Coverage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La Razón</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Minimal 2</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Moderate 2</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>In-Depth 7</td>
<td>In-Depth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Diario</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Moderate 4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>In-Depth 3</td>
<td>In-Depth</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>In-Depth 5</td>
<td>In-Depth</td>
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The analysis shows a gradual shift towards more and better quality coverage over time, with El Diario shifting earlier. This is perhaps not surprising: El Diario has a reputation as a more “populist” newspaper and is more widely read by poorer sectors. Additionally, El Diario is printed on a traditional broadsheet and tends to have more articles (and fewer pictures) than more modern newspapers, like La Razón. Still, there’s a notable increase in quantity and quality of coverage between 2004 and 2007 in El Diario. The high level and quality of coverage in 2010 is particularly remarkable because the UMSA elections took place less than a week after municipal elections (the municipal elections were on April 4; the UMSA elections were held on April 8). That year both newspapers had 12 stories on the UMSA elections. This amounts to almost one story every other day, in the context on the heals of a hotly contested municipal election in which the city of La Paz elected an opposition mayor and the city of El Alto almost did so. We should note that the 2010 coverage in La Razón includes an in-depth story in which national legislators commented on the impact of the UMSA election results.
Significant local and national attention is paid to UMSA elections because they reflect and help shape broader political, national, and ideological discourse. Within the university, the elections also serve as a rite of passage, a way of marking a university identity and community that is embedded with Bolivian and paceño identity. It is here that a ritual of public belonging, of collective citizenship (Lazar 2008) allows people to start thinking of themselves as group members, part of a sub-population within a broader national context. By being in the group universitario or docente—in which membership is in part mediated through periodic public demonstrations like these elections, via student and faculty unions. And university identity is firmly embedded within paceño identity through rituals like the annual entrada universitaria (a folkloric dance that weaves through the main avenue of La Paz and is rivaled in scope only by the Gran Poder entrada), a form of collective citizenship through practice (Lazar 2008, Holston 2008)—individuals begin experiencing their identity as slightly different than before, where commonalities between group members become of prime importance (at least during such collective rituals that mark group membership). This is an example of the “looping effect” (Hacking 1995, see also Hacking 1986) whereby once one is categorized as part of a group, one experiences oneself differently, and therefore understands one’s own identity as connected to and mediated by group membership.

The model we suggest for understanding how the public university influences state processes and policies (and vice versa) is more complex than a simple top-down or bottom-up approach. Even though the university is autonomous, the university is treated as part of the state in the media and in many policies. Similarly, faculty and students view themselves in a similar light—perhaps a liminal position vis-à-vis state power, but nonetheless encompassed by and comprising part of a state institution. It is worth noting that the rector from 2004-2007, elected on the Maya-U slate, is now Minister of Education. There is a circulation of ideas, a creation of reiterating “ideoscapes” (Appadurai 1996) around the institution of the public university, which is often portrayed as a singular entity, the embodiment of national knowledge production and future promises for the nation.

We can see the injection of “national” politics into university elections in the 2004 UMSA elections. Those elections took place shortly after the mass protests (focused in La Paz and El Alto) forced Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada to resign the presidency and flee the country. The aftermath saw an unraveling of the traditional party system, which included campaigns within the UMSA FUL to “purge” members with ties to the traditional parties (mostly ties to MIR, a center-left party that had become a defender of neoliberal policies). The question of defending the new “process of change” became a central issue in the 2004 UMSA election. That year, student and faculty elected Roberto Aguilar Gómez, the Maya-U candidate, in a lopsided contest. The Maya-U campaign closely tied itself to the October 2003 social movement:

Why do we fight?

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3 With the exception of UAGRM, the Santa Cruz public university, other Bolivian public universities do not receive as much national press attention. Neither are their electoral campaigns as elaborate as UMSA’s.

4 Defined as “concatenations of images, but they are often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented toward capturing state power or a piece of of it,” (Appadurai 1996: 36).
For a sovereign country that is able:
To eliminate the big economic differences between social, cultural, and ethnic groups.
To govern with the full participation of marginalized national majorities.
To achieve the rational use of natural resources, fostering national production.
To establish technological and scientific development respecting our sociocultural values and the environment.

Maya-U (2004).

Indeed, all of the slates in 2004 referenced Andean symbols of resistance or cultural identity and several used wiphala, coca leaves, and Andean crosses as part of their logos (all strongly resonant and claiming a particular militant, Andean cultural identity).

The 2004 winner was a Morales ally. Two years later, in 2006, he was elected a member of the Bolivian constituent assembly on the MAS party list, and in 2008 he was appointed Minister of Education.

But it is important to note that the 2004 UMSA election came a year before the 2005 presidential election. Although many expected Evo Morales to do well in that contest, his victory was somewhat unexpected (in fact, Morales was not the frontrunner in most polls heading into the election). Thus, when students and faculty elected Aguilar Gómez, he was (in the national sense) an “opposition” candidate. In the subsequent elections, Maya-U was unsuccessful: in 2007 it did not make it into the second round and in 2010 it disappeared. Instead, both elections went to Teresa Rescala Nemtala, the candidate of VIA-U (Vanguardia Institucional Autonomista–Universitaria). An identifiably (and self-described) “leftist” university party (the use of “vanguard” in the name is used in an explicitly Leninist sense), it stands for a defense of the radical tradition in university politics and—specifically—a strong line on university autonomy. The emphasis on autonomy distinguishes VIA-U from its major opponents, such as Revolución-BMQ (Bloque Marcelo Quiroga), named after the leftist martyr, Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz), which closely align with the Morales government and does not mention autonomy in any of its campaign materials.

There is a key difference in university-state relations in contemporary Bolivia, when compared to a decade ago. University students traditionally have opposed those in power, as universities have been a bastion of leftist (even radical) thought in Bolivia and elsewhere. However, with the election of Evo Morales, more university students and faculty at UMSA are vocal supportive of Morales’ governmental programs so that the university constituency is more aligned with official state policies than was the case under Banzer (1997-2001) or Sánchez de Lozada’s second term (2002-2003).

The result is a new, highly polarized political cleavage within university politics divides those who want to work closely with the Morales government and those who emphasize the university’s autonomy (though not aligned with the broader “national” opposition). Both groups are likely to vote for Morales and MAS—but one group is committed to retaining institutional distance between the central government and the university administration.

The 2010 UMSA Election
Rescala’s campaign for reelection as rector in 2010 took place in a much different context than the 2004 or even 2007 election. By 2010, Morales had been in office for five years and had just won reelection the year before, bringing with him supermajorities in both legislative
chambers. Moreover, between the 2009 general (presidential and legislative) election and the 2010 municipal election, the popular mayor of La Paz, Juan Del Granado, had broken with MAS and taken his Movement Without Fear (Movimiento Sin Miedo—MSM) into the opposition. Although MAS ran a tough campaign against the MSM mayoral candidate, few expected MSM to lose control of city government. MSM had controlled the La Paz municipal government since 1999 and Del Granado’s alliance with Morales was credited with helping make Morales and MAS a viable choice for many middle class La Paz voters. In 2010, months after a bitter split with MAS, MSM won the municipal election for the third straight time with 48.5 percent; the MAS candidate took only 34.9 percent (compared to 63.1 percent for MAS in the presidential contest only five months earlier). Most surprisingly, MAS faced stiff opposition in the El Alto municipal race; its mayoral candidate there took only 38.8 percent of the vote (compared to 87.5 percent for Morales in the presidential election). Thus, Rescala and VIA-U were running for reelection at a particular moment when Morales had recently won reelection, but just as MAS was losing its hegemonic position in La Paz-El Alto.

Two other factors were important in the campaign: First, VIA-U was more successful at adopting modern, technology-driven campaign strategies. Second, VIA-U’s main rival, Revolución-BMQ had particularly close, personal ties to the Morales government—ties that went beyond ideological or institutional adhesion: In addition to fielding Jorge Tapia (then Minister of Health), Sylvia Alarcon, the Revolución-BMQ vice-rector candidate, is the sister-in-law to Alvaro García Linera (Bolivia’s vice president). VIA-U’s media savvy gave it a clear advantage in the context of an increasingly sophisticated electoral arena. And the relationship between Alarcon and García Linera made accusations of nepotism particularly sticky.

VIA-U ran a sophisticated, cutting-edge campaign. It had an informational website that highlighted the successes of the first term and the plans for the second. It mirrored the website on a Facebook page to take comments. In contrast, though Revolución-BMQ also had a Facebook page, it was thin on details and somewhat impersonal and did not elicit much interaction from students or faculty. Not surprisingly, Revolución-BMQ’s platform was the most closely allied with official MAS policies. Its platform reads, in its entirety:

Revolución nace como un frente que se sustenta en un logro histórico, la unificación de los diferentes sectores de izquierda con presencia en la universidad, y tiene un objetivo claro: llevar adelante la Revolución Universitaria que necesita la UMSA. Esta voluntad transformadora de los sectores revolucionarios de nuestra universidad asume que ella está en una coyuntura histórica de extrema importancia: al haber reasumido el Estado su intervención en la producción pero, además, al haber establecido en materia de educación un modelo sociocomunitario productivo, la UMSA tiene condiciones propicias para reasumir no sólo un vínculo con lo productivo y lo social sino un liderazgo académico vinculado al desarrollo regional.

Revolución-BMQ (2010)

The tone is one of having already achieved a goal by MAS, of being in a hegemonic position, of being able to take advantage of the new, post-neoliberal, model of state control and economic production, despite the references to “needed” university revolution. In other words, it is profoundly conservative. The whole-hearted support of the MAS project is no coincidence, given the personal relationship between Alarcon and García Linera. Indeed, some media reports claimed that two days before the run-off, Alarcon “se reunió con algunos docents de la UMSA en oficinas de la Vicepresidencia, con el objetivo de intervenir en el manejo de la Universidad,”
This was widely interpreted as proof that MAS planned to interfere with the running of UMSA, in violation of the charter to be an autonomous university. It also led to students burning a MAS flag in the atrium of the Monoblock (the main building on campus) after run-off results were announced (La Razón 2010a).

Via-U actively presented Revolución-BMQ’s platform and close ties to the Vice-President as a threat to university autonomy. Rescala also emphasizes that autonomy in general is crucial to a pluricultural Bolivia. VIA-U presented significantly more detail about its plan and positions on its Facebook page than Revolución-BMQ did, including this discussion of the history, importance, and use of “autonomy” in a university setting:

Somos autonomistas de siempre … la autonomía ha sido la razón de ser de la universidad pública … en este contexto de reforma constitucional, la UMSA con la marcha multitudinaria e histórica se moviliza en 2007 para ratificar el principio autonomista y la necesidad de consagrarla en la Asemblea Constituyente, que finalmente se expresa en la nueva Constitución … Los referendums organizan nuestra sociedad en un Estado Plurinacional con Autonomías Departamentales e Indígenas Originarios Campesinos. Es decir, el concepto y principio autonómico que las universidades públicas conquistamos y asumimos en nuestra construcción identitaria, se profundiza a nivel de la organización territorial del Estado …

VIA-U (2010)

Notable here is the emphasis on historic processes of change coupled with inflexibility around autonomy. This position statement also references events still fresh in many Bolivians’ minds: the violent marches against the Constituent Assembly by Sucre’s public university students in 2007 (where well over 50 people were injured; see Correo del Sur 2007). Universitarios were marching against some of the proposed reforms, which, in their interpretation, would weaken the principle of university autonomy (and possibly indigenous and regional autonomy). These clashes were widely interpreted in Bolivia as being a strike against the MAS government’s goal of weaker regional autonomy statutes, which also had been the subject of intense conflict, even outright secessionist threats, from the wealthier lowland departments. Regardless, ultimately the principle of autonomy for several social sectors—universities, regional governance, and indigenous authorities—was included in the 2009 Constitution. In so doing, the very outlines of Bolivian state-citizen relations were reshaped, with both symbolic and institutional moves away from a traditional nation-state model to a plurinationalist one. The 2009 Constitution also seems to incorporate university governance as a political actor in the same way as the more traditional groupings of indigenous communities and local or regional governments. What is different, of course, is that membership in UMSA is not mediated via place-based forms of belonging, nor via ethnic or linguistic lines.

Via-U rooted its program in a recent history of opposition to state control and power over university matters, in contrast to Revolución-BMQ’s close ties to the MAS government. However, nowhere in VIA-U’s platform is there explicit opposition to MAS. On the contrary, the party’s platform emphasizes the progressive nature of the current Bolivian context and statutes while maintaining a strong line on autonomy. It also reinforces the idea of university members as part of a community or constituency, even invoking university identity construction as a component of VIA-U’s program.

Bolivian academics hold the concept of university autonomy—which goes much further than “intellectual freedom” in the United States—as sacrosanct. In the days leading up to the
election and the runoff, there were frequent editorials expressing concern over the close ties between Revolución-BMQ and the MAS government, as well as questions about what a Revolución-BMQ victory would mean for autonomy, the university, and student-faculty identity. Three days before the runoff, Ricardo Paz Ballivián, a well-respected sociologist and advisor to the Constituent Assembly, published an opinion piece in La Razón endorsing VIA-U over Revolución-BMQ precisely because of their stance on autonomy:

Es mucho lo que la Universidad está poniendo en juego en la presente elección. Es nada menos que la Autonomía Universitaria la que está en cuestión. La Dra. Rescala ha sostenido, tanto en su gestión como en su actual propuesta, una defensa intransigente de este principio básico heredado de principios del siglo XX y no ha sido cuestionado sino en momentos revolucionarios como el del proceso inaugurado en 1952.

En cambio el Dr. Tapia, alineado al actual partido gobernante, tiene ahora y así lo materializó en su gestión como Ministro de Salud, una actitud menos radical con relación a mantener el principio de la Autonomía como la columna vertebral de la identidad docente-estudiantil.

Son dos concepciones antagónicas: Una, la de Teresa Rescala, pretende que prevalezca la autonomía de la Universidad respecto del Estado, y la otra que desde la orilla de la revolución (así se denomina el frente de Ramiro Tapia busca otro tipo de relacionamiento. Docentes y estudiantes decidirán si se mantiene la Autonomía vigente como hasta ahora o si se la “redefine al servicio de la revolución.

(Paz Ballivián 2010)

Paz Ballivián specifically argues that the very identity of the university as it is currently known in Bolivia was at stake in the election. He made a direct accusation that, if Revolución-BMQ won, MAS would assert significantly more control over the day-to-day governance and knowledge production activities at UMSA. Crucially, MAS affiliates are identified as the conservative party (probably because MAS is in power and has consolidated significant popular support in La Paz), while Rescala—the incumbent—was identified as the radical choice because of her unwavering position on university autonomy. This creates somewhat of a through-the-looking glass effect: the incumbent predicing her campaign on autonomy is viewed as the radical choice while the opposition, affiliated with the “new” Bolivian revolution in MAS, is viewed as conservative, or even reactionary.

That VIA-U emphasized autonomy so strongly flags how it is a motivating term in Bolivian political discourse. We are concerned here with how autonomy acts as an empty signifier in multiple conflictive local contexts or ideoscapes and why it is an effective tool for organizing political action and socio-cultural identities. University autonomy is understood as a key component in the institutional structure of the university and also the conditions of possibility for acting as a public university affiliate. This is conditioned by historical understandings, but also how the university is perceived as a social good and a space where locally-appropriate and necessary knowledge can be produced, relatively free of outside influence.

The table below presents the election results for the three most recent UMSA elections. The rectorate election uses a simple majoritarian runoff system: if no slate wins an absolute majority in the first round of voting, a second round of voting limited to the top two finishers decides the winner. Because of the system of co-gobierno, however, the electoral system is
slightly more complicated. Faculty and students cast their ballots separately. The results for each category of voter (students and faculty) are then weighted. Not surprisingly, there are many more student votes than faculty votes (roughly a 20:1 ratio).

Table 2. UMSA rectorate election votes (% valid vote) for first and second round, 2004-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAYA-U</td>
<td>34.48</td>
<td>61.96</td>
<td>21.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIA-U</td>
<td>13.99</td>
<td>12.47</td>
<td>24.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somos-U</td>
<td>26.20</td>
<td>33.31</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URUS</td>
<td>7.54</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acreditación</td>
<td>14.09</td>
<td>17.23</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolución-BMQ</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>23.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despertar</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>25.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDEA</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo Cambia</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Votes Cast</td>
<td>26,050</td>
<td>1,480</td>
<td>29,803</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 offers some interesting insights into UMSA elections. Traditionally, the winning candidate for rector placed first among student votes. This was true in 2004 and 2007—but not 2010. Another interesting observation is that VIA-U is the only party that has campaigned across three consecutive elections. In a system with significant electoral volatility (over 0.60 in 2007 and 2010), this is a remarkable achievement. Moreover, the effective number of parties (using Golosov’s new index; see Golosov 2010) saw a steady decline over the years. Among faculty, the effective number of parties (in the first round) dropped from 4.3 to 3.8. The drop was higher among students: from 3.9 to 3.0.

**Autonomy in Other Contexts**

Autonomy operates and is conceptualized differently at the departmental level. These—which ultimately allowed regions to elect their own governors and control more local revenue—were opposed by MAS, despite massive pro-autonomy marches in Santa Cruz and other lowland cities. In the highlands and among MAS supporters, there were frequent accusations that the autonomistas (such as Rubén Costas, the governor of Santa Cruz department) were racists who wanted to deny highland indigenous peoples their newfound political power and their own recent heritage, or even that they were anti-democratic fascists who insisted on maintaining the old status quo of class and racial privilege. Being called an autonomista became equated with being...
anti-MAS. For many people living in the Altiplano region that also means there is a constellation of other traits attached to autonomista identity: racist, white, and resentful of the change in access to and use of political authority. Autonomistas also stood for a regional identity: that of the lowland so-called media luna, the wealthy farming and gas-producing regions in eastern Bolivia. The media luna departments never supported MAS to the degree that the Altiplano did, and indeed have become increasingly resentful of Morales’ symbolic politics predicated on a pan-indigenous highland Andean identity.

Finally, there are regional indigenous autonomies, where ayllus or other forms of indigenous social organization can act as local, state-sanctioned authorities, including administering community justice. This is both a decentralization of state power and legitimization and promotion of indigenous cultural forms and values.

It is through these forms that the idea of a plurinational Bolivia emerges: local groups that self-identify as indigenous or members of a regional category (e.g. cambas in Santa Cruz) and emphasize local governance, hence the invocation of “national” instead of “cultural” here. Therefore, universitarios, in claiming autonomy as an organizing focus of identity, are also making a larger claim to group status within Bolivia. It is an identity claim, albeit one predicated on profession and affiliation rather than primordial ethnicity (which is how indigenous affiliation is ideologically understood in Bolivia) or regional location. This is also what allows VIA-U to make a historical argument that the university was at the vanguard of autonomy movements, and, to a certain extent, introduced such terminology to Bolivian discourse. In so doing, it argues for the centrality and importance of the public university in forming national identities, providing terms of and for debate, and orienting policy and local knowledge production.

Regardless of the material truth status of these claims—obviously these are carefully crafted campaign slogans and how effectively they will be put into practice on the ground is an entirely different matter—they have profound social resonance and ability to motivate people to action. That is, by acting as experts about autonomy, VIA-U candidates present themselves as local experts about autonomy, experts that are difficult to challenge because of how well they’ve enacted expertise (Carr 2010). The profound symbolism of autonomy in 21st century Bolivia is powerful and indicative in microcosm of the process of “refounding” (Dunkerley 2007) the nation and all of its attendant conflict and crisis. After all, VIA-U ultimately won, which legitimizes and institutionalizes its vision for the university’s independent role producing knowledge about and within the state but without overt interference. This is similar to how other autonomies work: demands for local oversight, local governance, and respect for specific socio-historical values and processes.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have highlighted three factors that explain why the 2010 Bolivian university elections were so violent and make the case for studying other forms of elections and micropolitics in different contexts:

1. The institutional structure of the Bolivian university and how it can be conceptualized as a powerful political actor
2. The role of university elections as a form of micro-politics that influence and respond to national political discourse, particularly around party hegemony
3. The role of “autonomy” as an empty signifier; a diverse conceptual framework; that motivates much political action in Bolivia today
Though we only examined one case, we advocate for more comparative study of micropolitics in other institutional contexts in order to better understand the dynamics of how national and subnational politics interact. This also opens up a study of potential fissures and future (national-level) political actors and parties.

The characteristics of micropolitics have thus far been understudied, despite the potential insights they offer about politics and conflict. We encourage additional studies of unions, corporate boards, non-profit institutions, and university elections in order to expand our understanding about the dynamics of politics in sub-national settings. Methodologically, our conceptual tools are adequate, though we found that obtaining sufficient data is challenging.

Finally, paying attention to political slogans at the micropolitical level provides a lens into how national politics is understood, supported, and contested at the local level. In our case, we took the rallying cry of “autonomy” as our lens, which helped to connect yet differentiate what was at stake in the university elections.

Overall, we can understand the violence of 2010 only when we grasp that what was at stake was nothing less than the institutional identity of UMSA as an oppositional force in national politics, one that many faculty feared would be eroded if Revolución-BMQ won. Not only that, but UMSA’s budget exceeds the municipal budgets of many communities in Bolivia. From this perspective, the violence is not surprising. Of course the elections would be hotly contested: money, power, and the ability to determine the contours of knowledge production is at stake. Why wouldn’t tensions run high?

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