

I'd rather do it myself: An experiment on mayoral preferences for managerial autonomy

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This research explores the drivers of chief executives' preferences for delegating or retaining managerial autonomy. The dominant scholarly framework suggests that chief executives prefer having greater authority over decision-making. However, when considering whether to delegate responsibilities for projects, chief executives assess their perceived opportunities for ex post credit claiming against the perceived potential ex post cost of accepting blame. We argue that in calculating these tradeoffs, contextual decision characteristics shift the balance of perceived costs and benefits in the decision-making process. We consider three contextual decision levers: visibility of the decision issue, salience of decision beneficiaries, and policy stage (formulation vs. implementation). To test chief executives' preferences for delegating or retaining managerial autonomy, we conducted a survey-experiment with 239 sitting Colombian mayors. Mayors were presented with a hypothetical migration scenario in which we manipulated two decision features: (i) project visibility and (ii) salience of beneficiaries. Results reveal that when presented with a more visible classroom construction project—rather than a vaccination campaign project—mayors are less likely to delegate project implementation to the national government. Neither issue nor salience of beneficiaries have a significant effect on mayoral preference for autonomy with regard to project formulation on its own. However, we find that mayors are more likely to delegate managerial autonomy for the entire project — both the formulation and implementation phases together — when the project's beneficiaries are more salient for their constituents.

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Introduction

Decision-making among chief executives is a topic of interest for scholars, policymakers, business executives, and public administrators. The dominant school of thought suggests that chief executives dislike relinquishing decision-making autonomy, and can even perceive attempts to share or collaborate as “threats” to their agencies’ “turf” or jurisdiction area (McGuire & Agranoff 2011). Yet, chief executives and organizations do often delegate autonomy for decision making. For instance, at the local level, executives devise strategies to use delegation of autonomy in favor of their own or their agency’s interests (Agranoff & McGuire 2003, Wright 1988). Subnational government officials might also use the blurring line dividing jurisdictional autonomy to shift blame towards upper levels of governments (Mortensen 2012). At the national level, particularly in the European Union, some countries have delegated certain regulatory functions and other policy areas to supranational agencies (Pollack 2006, Hawkins et al 2006). When, and under what circumstances, do chief executives opt for delegating decision autonomy?

Existing scholarship has explained individual decisions, including delegation, primarily as a function of individual-level features such as knowledge, memory, experience, expertise, motives, and ethical and attitudinal characteristics (Anderson 1993; Gobet and Simon 2000; Johnson-Laird 2005; Fiske, Kinder and Larter 1983). Other scholars of decision-making have focused on the role of external pressures, such as transnational networks (Haas 1992) and international demands, trends, and isomorphic pressures (Ashworht et al. 2007; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Lavi-Faur 2005). An additional set of researchers has investigated how the order in and means by which information is provided affects decision-making (Bozeman and Shangraw 1989; Landsbergen, Bozeman, and Bretschneider 1997; Thurmaier 1992).

Decision-making has also been explained as a function of cognitive processes. Processes such as cognitive shortcuts, due to actors' bounded rationality (Weyland 2007), may lead to biased and imperfect choices (Gilovich, Griffin, and Kahneman 2002). Alternatively, rational comprehensive processes through cost-benefit analyses may permit decision-makers to maximize utility (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Seasons 2003). This utilitarian view, however, is rejected by sociological institutionalists, who stress decision-makers' symbolic and normative concerns (March and Olsen 1976). Others argue for a contingent process, as decision-makers choose between external and internal rationality depending on their perceived decision difficulty (Landsbergen, Bozeman, and Bretschneider 1992). Finally, some scholars allow for multiple processes of decision-making, depending on the number, influence, and nature of parties involved in the joint decision-making (Munsinger, Weber, and Hansen 1975).

In explaining the decision to delegate, we argue that chief executives consider their perceived opportunities for ex-post credit claiming and personal gains (e.g., reputation, re-election, promotion) against their perceived risk of incurring an ex-post cost of blame due to dangers of ceding decision rights (e.g., protests, non-reelection, impeachment). In calculating these tradeoffs, contextual decision characteristics act as levers to shift the balance between perceived credit claiming opportunities and blame acceptance risks. Specifically, we consider the role of three contextual decision levers: visibility of the decision issue, salience of potential beneficiaries from the decision, and policy phase (delegating the formulation of a solution vs. delegating the implementation of the formulated solution).

In the context of multi-level governance and increasing granting of responsibilities to subnational governments for policy making and service delivery (Hooghe & Marks 2003), mayoral decision to delegate managerial autonomy serves as a useful and relevant example of

decision-making. Therefore, to test chief executives' preferences for exercising or relinquishing managerial autonomy under different decision contexts, we conducted a survey-experiment with 239 Colombian mayors. A face-to-face survey instrument asked mayors whether they would relinquish to upper levels of government (state and national) either formulation and/or of a social project benefiting Venezuelan migrants to Colombia. We manipulated two dimensions of municipal context, which are expected to offer different incentives: (i) project visibility (classroom construction vs. vaccination campaigns) and (ii) salience of beneficiaries (whether or not migrants have ties to the municipality). We expect that mayors are less likely to relinquish autonomy when the social project is more visible (classrooms) and the beneficiaries are more salient (migrants have relatives in the municipality). Additionally, we expect mayors to prefer autonomy for implementing projects rather than formulating them.

Results suggest that neither issue visibility (classrooms vs. vaccines) nor salience of beneficiaries has a significant effect on mayoral autonomy preference for project formulation. However, issue visibility does significantly affect mayoral autonomy preferences for project implementation. Specifically, when presented with a classroom construction project—rather than a vaccination campaign project—mayors are statistically and significantly less likely to delegate project implementation autonomy to the national government. Moreover, we find that mayors are less likely to delegate managerial autonomy, both for the formulation and implementation phases, when the project's beneficiaries are more salient for their constituents (migrants have relatives in the municipality). These findings hold after controlling for municipal and mayoral characteristics.

Our study contributes to the scholarship in several ways. By analyzing mayoral preferences to delegate to other levels of government, this study adds to the literature on executive decision-making, intergovernmental relations, and the role of varying incentives in delegating control. In addition, this study adds to the scarce research involving experiments with political elites, which more closely resembles real decision-making conditions¹ by presenting a survey–experiment on 239 sitting Colombian mayors. Finally, because decision-making criteria tend to vary across cultures and communities (Landsbergen, Bozeman, and Bretschneider 1992, 251), this study adds to the literature by carrying out the experiment in a developing-country setting, whose unconsolidated democracy, electoral laws, and party-systems structure are expected to trigger different incentives for local public leaders than what has been seen in mature Western democracies.

This study of mayoral decision-making also has significant policy implications. Since the adoption of decentralization in the 1980s, the roles and autonomy of Latin American mayors have expanded to make the position something of “a one-man band” (Fiszbein 1997). At the Colombian municipal level, the figure of “city manager” does not exist; the elected mayor performs both political and administrative functions. To discuss how contextual decision circumstances affect the decision-making of these local officials, this article first reviews the relevant theoretical underpinnings to generate the hypotheses. Next, we describe the Colombian municipal context, data collection, operationalization of concepts, and the design of the survey–

¹ For relevant examples see Avellaneda (2013), Avellaneda and Olvera (2018), Bergan (2009), Butler and Broockman (2011), Landsbergen, Bozeman, and Bretschneider (1992), Putnam (1993), and Thurmaier (1992).

experimental analysis. Following a discussion of the results, the article concludes with research limitations and recommendations for further research.

Explaining Decision Making: Contextual Levers of Credit Claiming

Weaver (1986) and Pierson (1994, 1996, 2001) popularized the concepts of credit claiming and blame avoidance within the context of welfare retrenchment, a policy area affecting a large sector of the population. The credit claiming/blame avoidance framework suggests that “politicians are motivated primarily by the desire to avoid blame for unpopular actions rather than by seeking to claim credit for popular one” (Weaver 1986a: 371). Therefore “parties in government will be more inclined to care about how to avoid the potential blame than how to claim credit (Weaver 1986b; Pierson 1994:18-19). The salience of blame avoidance over credit claiming is explained by two factors. First, permanent austerity impedes adopting policies that permit credit claiming (Bonoli 2012, 94). Second, in a zero-sum reform, the losers are likely to be concentrated and organized in relatively small groups of beneficiaries while the gains, instead, are likely to be diffused across a large tax-payer community (Bonoli 2012, 94-95). The asymmetric capacity for mobilization between winners and the losers of a governmental policy leads to the so-called “negative bias” of voters (Weaver 1986b). This asymmetry incentivizes government to avoid cuts; and if they are forced to retrench, they will resort to blame avoidance strategies.

Weaver and Pierson argue that decisions in welfare area have electoral consequences, and chief executives consider these consequences when making these decisions. Therefore, when adopting unpopular benefit reduction reforms and cost control measures, policy makers tend to avoid blame by strategically reducing the visibility of reforms, dividing electorates between

winners and losers, making cost-cutting automatic, or delaying reforms' effects (Weaver 1986a; Pierson 1994). However, according to Pierson's (1994) view, these blame avoidance strategies may only have limited potential on reducing visibility among citizens.

The credit claiming/blame avoidance framework assumes government executives' actions are driven by both a policy-seeking and a vote-seeking logic. However, in some policy areas, these two goals may be incompatible (Weaver 1986a, Pierson 1994). That is, parties may pursue specific policies such as cut reforms. However, cut reforms may create discontent among voters, who may opt for punishing the cut reformers at the polls. For parties are expected to compete for votes, according to this framework, decision makers place more emphasis on blame avoidance than on credit claiming (Weaver 1986a, 371) due to voters' "negativity bias," triggered by the asymmetric behavior between winners and losers. That is, voters who perceive themselves as losers are more likely to adapt their voting behavior to avoid future losses than voters who perceive themselves as winners are to continue their behavior to secure future wins. As a result, decision-makers are more motivated to avoid being blamed for negative outcomes than to seek credit for successes (Weaver 1986b; Pierson 1994: 18–19).

Overall, a chief executive's decision-making process can be understood as a cost-benefit analysis in which the expected gains of credit claiming and costs of accepting blame play a significant role. Consequently, in deciding whether to assume a policy responsibility or to relinquish managerial autonomy, chief executives consider the balance between potential credit claimed and the likelihood of being blamed if the decision brings unsatisfactory consequences. However, contextual decision characteristics may work as levers, modifying chief executives' balance of expected credit claiming vs. blame avoidance and shifting their decisions to delegate or retain autonomy.

Project Visibility

The debate over whether issue salience influences decision-making has received considerable attention (Lavine et al. 1996, Mauro 1996, Tversky and Kahnemann 1981). Social cognitive theory suggests that decision-makers will concentrate their cognitive capacity on issues they consider most salient. Salient issues are more (1) “frequently thought of and discussed with others,” (2) “related to other attitudes in related domains,” and (3) “closely related to people’s tangible self-interests, core values, and social identifications” (Lavine et al. 1996, 297; see also Boninger et al. 1995 and Avellaneda 2013). In this view, issue salience acts as a cognitive shortcut through which decision-makers reduce the informational burden (Tversky and Kahnemann 1981, 11–3). Consequently, chief executives’ perceptions of issue salience can be expected to affect their decisions.

Scholars often consider visibility as a dimension of salience (Kioussis 2004). Moreover, some associate visibility to prominence and attention boosting the role of salience in agenda setting (Manheim 1986). Therefore, visible issues are more likely to become salient and play a role in the public policy process. Indeed, Gingrich (2014) has shown that the visibility of the welfare state is directly associated to the degree to which voters consider social policy positions in voting. Thus, chief executives might perceive more visible issues or projects as better targets for credit claiming, given the weight and attention voters tend to posit on them.

Although perceived visibility and salience may change over time (Price 1978, 548), in general infrastructure projects, which produce tangible outputs, are visible and thus offer considerable incentives for credit claiming. Conversely, despite the important outcomes and impacts a vaccination campaign can bring about—for example, avoiding an epidemic—its

visibility tends to be limited to the time in which the vaccine is administered, as an effective campaign will result in the disease fading from view. Moreover, it is difficult for a chief executive to target and justify restrictions of vaccinations to specific neighborhoods or households, whereas infrastructure projects can easily be targeted to a particular village or location. Consequently, decision makers are expected to prefer delegating managerial autonomy over vaccination campaigns than infrastructure projects.

Mauro (1995, 1997, 1998) and Lindert, Skoufias, and Shapir (2006) offer another explanation for understanding variation in leaders' preferences for projects. They contend that some policy issues better satisfy politicians' self-interest, thus affecting both the level and the composition of their spending decisions. Mauro (1998) relies on economic theories of rational choice to explain leaders' variation in the composition of social spending. He argues that "in a world in which governments do not always act in their citizens' best interest, politicians may be expected to spend more public resources on those items in which it is easier to levy large bribes and maintain them secret" (Mauro 1998, 263). In fact, according Shleifer and Vishny, such arguments "may suggest why so many poor countries would rather spend their limited resources on infrastructure projects and defense, where corruption opportunities are abundant, than on education and health, where they are much more limited" (Shleifer and Vishny 1993, 614). There may be few opportunities to collect bribes from people providing health care; instead, public managers prefer to have control over "state-of-the-art medical equipment, large infrastructure projects, or highly sophisticated defense equipment for rent-seeking" in which contracting companies may be capable of offering bribes (Mauro 1998, 264). In sum, compared to vaccination projects, formulation and implementation of infrastructure projects to build things — such as classrooms — may therefore offer personal as well as political benefits. Consequently,

H1: Chief executives are more likely to delegate managerial autonomy to other levels of government when confronting less visible issues.

Saliency of Beneficiaries

The saliency of the beneficiaries of a project may also influence executives' preferences for autonomy. Psychology scholars contend that heightening the saliency of a particular social identity can influence behavior, perceptions, and performance (Abrams 1994, Hinkle and Brown 1990, Hogg 1992). Some scholars have offered insights on how these influences may occur. For instance, Forehand et al, (2002) posit, "processing of identity-relevant information should be most pronounced when the pertinent social identity is an activated component of the individual's social self-schema. When this activation occurs, the individual is likely to be affected by *identity saliency*—a state characterized by heightened sensitivity to identity-relevant stimuli."

Therefore, if executives value political gains through credit claiming, they should prefer autonomy in projects that are more identity salient to their core constituency. That is, from a service provision perspective, chief executives might consider projects that benefit their constituents more identity salient and more valuable in terms of potential credit claiming. On the contrary, projects that do not directly benefit chief executives' constituents should be perceived less identity salient, less valuable in terms of potential credit claiming, and less worthy of risking blame for the project's costs. Moreover, in settings where constituents' basic needs are unsatisfied, diverting spending and managerial efforts to benefit non-constituent groups holds little appeal, encouraging chief executives to delegate autonomy over these projects. Consequently,

H2: Chief executives are more likely to delegate managerial autonomy to other levels of government in projects serving populations less salient to their constituency.

Phase in the Policy Process

The blame avoidance and credit claiming concept may also be used to explain decision-makers' preference for relinquishing managerial autonomy under different phases of the policy process. While policy formulation is the phase in which solutions are offered to address a problem or concern (Anderson 2006), the implementation phase materializes what was formulated. In many instances, the implementation phase is the only visible phase, as constituents may have no information about policy formulation (Gromley 1985). Because the implementation phase generates the outputs and outcomes of policy, which can be seen by constituents, chief executives are expected to place more emphasis on this stage. Moreover, considerable differences often exist between what is adopted and what is implemented. Despite legislators' efforts to secure strict implementation of adopted legislation, managers and bureaucrats have considerable discretion in the implementation phase (Keiser and Soss 1998). Consequently,

H3: Chief executives are more likely to delegate managerial autonomy to other levels of government for policy/project formulation but not for implementation.

Case Selection: Social service provision in Colombia

The Colombian territory is divided into approximately 1,100 municipalities.² At the next level of aggregation, 32 *departamentos* (departments) — akin to provinces — serve as the intermediate level of government. In each municipality, mayors are the political and administrative executives who lead the local government. Mayors are elected for a four-year term and cannot run for reelection for a consecutive term. Nevertheless, former mayors

² Municipalities contain both urban and rural communities. Colombian municipalities are akin to U.S. counties.

frequently continue their political careers aiming for positions in the *departamento* cabinet, or running for a seat in the *departamento* assembly, the national Congress, the governorship, or a return to the mayoral seat after four years. For instance, a third of sitting Colombian governors are former municipal mayors. Even if a mayor does not intend to run for office in the future, it is not uncommon to see family members or other people within her inner circle running for office during the mayoral term. Therefore, it is highly likely that mayors are interested in preserving their political capital for future enterprises.

Although Colombia is a unitary republic, municipalities have enjoyed a substantial degree of autonomy since the 1991 Constitution advanced a process of political, fiscal, and administrative decentralization. Thus, municipal governments not only act as agents of the national government for policy implementation but also oversee several policy areas and play an important role in providing social services. Provision of education and health is decentralized, and is usually the responsibility of departments. However, certain municipalities are “certified” by the national government to assume the direct administration of service provision. Moreover, municipal governments often engage in partnerships with their departments and the national government to make improvements (e.g. infrastructure or training) to health and education provision.

While private provision of both schooling and healthcare exist, public provision plays a fundamental role, particularly in small municipalities. For instance, roughly 80 percent of current students enrolled in primary and secondary education in Colombia attend public schools. Subnational governments also support schools in providing transportation, lunch programs, and pre-enrollment outreach to improve access to the school system.

The Colombian healthcare system includes both contributive and subsidized schemes (Ley 100 de 1993). In the contributive scheme, formal sector employers share the burden of insurance cost with their employees, who have a range of public and private health providers from which to choose. In the subsidized scheme, a mix of national and subnational public revenues funds health insurance for the poorest households, whose members cannot afford access to the contributive scheme. Municipalities are in charge of identifying and enrolling people eligible for the subsidized scheme. The actual provision of health services relies upon a market of private clinics and a network of public hospitals and health centers. These public service providers are structured as autonomous public organizations under the oversight of municipal and department governments. Insurers in the subsidized scheme are required to contract at least 60 percent of their services with the network of public providers (Decreto 1020 de 2007). Often, the public provider is the only one present in small and rural municipalities (Jaramillo Mejia, 2016).

The study's incorporation of migrant policy reflects contemporary concerns in Colombia. Migration from Venezuela has become a critical factor for Colombian social policy, as Venezuela has been immersed in a massive socio-economic and political crisis over the past six years (The Economist, 2017, 2019). As a result, more than three million Venezuelans have migrated or sought refuge worldwide (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). Colombia, Venezuela's neighbor with which it shares a 1,378-mile border, hosts more than one million Venezuelan refugees and has served as a transitory stop for another one million Venezuelans migrating to the rest of South America (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia, 2018). Thus, Colombia has received what amounts to nearly 5% of its total population as Venezuelan migrants, one of the largest migration waves worldwide. In this challenging

context, national and subnational authorities in Colombia have struggled to provide basic services to the migrant population. Specifically, mayors have been outspoken in their demands for more attention, coordination, and resources from upper levels of government.

Survey-Experiment Design

We applied a survey instrument to mayors participating in the National Congress of Municipalities organized by the Colombian Federation of Municipalities in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, in March 2019. These mayors' terms extended from January 1, 2016 to December 31, 2019. In addition to obtaining approval from the affiliated institution's Institutional Review Board, the authors requested and received permission from the Colombian Federation of Municipalities to conduct the study. The research team were permitted to attend all events of the convention, including meals, panels, workshops, and the closing ceremony, at which the keynote speakers were the incumbent President, Iván Duque, and Vice-president of Colombia, Marta Lucía Ramirez.

A total of 468 of 1,100 Colombian mayors attended the Congress. It is important to highlight that the mayors from the 32 *departamento* capitals and Bogotá do not belong to this Federation. Therefore, they were not expected to attend this Congress. We surveyed a convenience sample of 250 mayors from 27 out of the 32 Colombian departments. Conference attendance likely involved self-selection, as mayors from nearby locations and mayors from larger and wealthier municipalities could be expected to encounter fewer barriers to attendance. However, Figure 1, which shows the geographic distribution of included municipalities, shows that surveyed mayors are well distributed across the country. Only the scarcely populated areas corresponding to the Amazon rainforest and the Orinoco basin lack representation in the sample.

[Figure 1 about here]

Once at the event venue in Cartagena, Colombia, over a 3-day period, the research team, who are native Spanish speakers, randomly approached 250 mayors after meals, during summit breaks, at the hotel lobby, and at the exhibition hall. Research team members explained to each mayor the nature and objectives of the study and asked for their cooperation. After agreeing to participate, each mayor received a municipal scenario and a post-treatment survey of 20 questions that collected—among other information—data about his/her age, education, public sector experience, estimated number of Venezuelans immigrants in their municipality, and what they considered to be their municipality's most important problem.

The study is a between-group factorial design of a 2 x 2 matrix that results in four possible municipal conditions or scenarios: 1) visible issue and salient beneficiaries; 2) visible issue and non-salient beneficiaries; 3) less visible issue and salient beneficiaries; and 4) less visible issue and non-salient beneficiaries. Each randomly selected mayor was assigned to one of four scenarios by chance. To guarantee random assignment of the municipal condition across mayors, we organized the municipal scenarios in sets of the four possible scenarios. We consecutively circulated through the municipal scenarios, switching to the next scenario every time we approached a mayor. Schedules allowed us to approach 260 mayors, of which 10 declined to participate because of time constraints. In general, mayors were very receptive to participating in the survey–experiment. Given the circulation through the four options for scenarios, approximately 60 mayors were placed in each scenario for a total of 239. Although 250 mayors participated; we lost 11 responses because mayors failed to answer either the pre-treatment or the post-treatment survey. There is considerable diversity in terms of gender representation across the four scenarios. In total, 37 female mayors were part of the survey–experiment.

Although the sample was not selected randomly, these municipalities fairly represent the overall population of Colombian local governments, excluding the capital cities. Table 1 presents a comparison between included and non-included municipalities in terms of total population, municipal revenue, share of rural population, distance to the *departamento* capital, and distance to Bogotá. Differences in these categories between both groups are statistically insignificant. Ideally, one should also compare individual characteristics between included and non-included mayors; however these data are not publicly available.

[Table 1 about here]

The instrument presented mayors with a context in which Venezuelan migrants made up 10% of their municipality's populations and the national government allocated resources to provide social services to those migrants. Migration from Venezuela not only is a highly salient and turbulent topic, but it also allows the introduction of exogenous shifts to the local policy context. Indeed, migration recently has been used to represent external shocks for local governments in both observational (Andrews et al, 2013) and experimental studies (Avellaneda & Olvera, 2018).

The experiment introduces two manipulation types. First, we manipulated issue visibility by presenting two different projects: 1) construction of classrooms and 2) vaccination and preventive health campaigns. While both projects are in the realm of social service provision, the school project involves infrastructure building, which makes it a more visible project than the health project. The second manipulation allows us to explore differences in the saliency of beneficiaries for the municipal constituents. To do so, we presented one set of scenarios in which migrants have Colombian relatives in the municipality and another set in which migrants do not have local connections. We expect mayors to prefer more autonomy when migrants have

Colombian relatives in their municipality, as mayors might politically capitalize and claim credit from benefiting their constituents' relatives.

We asked mayors two questions: 1) Who would they prefer to formulate the project? and 2) Who would they prefer to implement the project? In both cases, we presented the mayors with four options for decision makers: the national government (either the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Health), the intermediate government (*departamento*), the municipality, or another actor to be the formulator or implementer of the project, respectively. Table 2 shows an example of the vignette presented to the mayors in the original Spanish and its translation to English.

[Table 2 about here]

Results

Descriptive results

Table 3 presents the raw results of the survey experiment. The sample is roughly evenly split between treatment conditions regarding both project type and migrants' local relatives. We obtained 238 full responses for the project formulation question and 239 for the project implementation question. Some clear trends appear from the data. First, a majority of mayors choose autonomy (municipal government) for both project formulation (58.8%) and implementation (70.3%). Second, the proportion of mayors choosing autonomous project implementation is significantly greater than the proportion choosing autonomous project formulation ($z = 2.62$) at the 0.05 level. Although this information is not an experimental result, it is consistent with our expectation that mayors will be more inclined to prefer autonomy for implementation rather than for formulation. However, the relationship between formulation and implementation choices is not straightforward; not all the mayors who preferred autonomous formulation chose autonomous implementation as well. Table 4 presents the combination of

choices involving formulation and implementation. To highlight the main trends: 114 mayors chose not to delegate any policy phase (both municipal formulation and implementation), 24 mayors chose full delegation to the central government (both national formulation and implementation), and 45 mayors chose national formulation and municipal implementation. Mayors seldom chose delegating formulation or implementation to *departamentos*.

[Table 3 about here]

[Table 4 about here]

Balance testing of treatment groups

In experimental data, treatment groups must be assigned randomly, meaning characteristics across groups will be approximately equal. Indeed, Mutz et al., (2017, 1) contend that “balance tests can be an important tool in determining whether to treat the data as observational versus experimental”. Therefore, to check for equal subject characteristics across treatment groups, we surveyed the mayors’ demographic information such as educational attainment, gender and age, socio-economic indicators (population, revenue, existing migrants), geographic indicators (distance to Bogotá and to the *departamento* capital, whether the department shares a border with Venezuela) and political indicators (political party of the mayor and vote share of the gubernatorial winner) of their respective municipalities. Table 5 and Table 6 report the balance of these covariates when dividing the sample by each manipulation: project type and migrants’ local relatives. None of the covariates presents a statistically significant difference between groups when treated for whether or not migrants have local relatives. Meanwhile, only the distance to the department capital presents a significant difference between groups by project type.

[Table 5 about here]

[Table 6 about here]

Experimental analysis

Considering that mayors were offered four choices for each question, we conduct a multinomial logit regression to elicit the effect of the treatment manipulations. Table 7 presents the results of a multinomial logit regression with municipal choice as base option. Neither project type nor migrants' local relatives holds a significant effect on the project formulation choices. However, project type significantly affects national project implementation. Mayors are less likely to choose national project implementation when facing a classroom construction project than a vaccination campaign project. The finding holds when we include covariates in the multinomial logit regression (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

[Table 7 about here]

We grouped choices presented to mayors in order to differentiate between mayors who preferred not to delegate any project stage and all others. To do so, we ran ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions on the mayors' choices coded as "1" if there is non-delegation for both project formulation and implementation, and "zero" otherwise. Results for this stricter consideration of non-delegation are shown in Table 8 and reinforce the finding that project type influences preference for implementation, as mayors are more likely to prefer municipal implementation for the classroom construction project, but not for formulating the project. Moreover, project type fails to significantly influence mayoral preference of strict non-delegation in this analysis.

[Table 8 about here]

We conducted a similar exercise comparing the choice of "full centralization", or delegating to the national level for both project formulation and implementation, against all other options. As seen in Table 9, we observe the same effect for project type on implementation; there

is less likelihood of delegating authority for a classroom construction project. Moreover, mayors are significantly less likely to delegate when Venezuelan migrants have local relatives. These results hold after including covariates in the regression (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

[Table 9 about here]

Manipulation checks

We asked mayors what they consider to be the main problem facing their municipality. Only eight mayors mentioned either education or health to be their main problem. Therefore, as a manipulation check, we ran the statistical analyses removing these eight observations. Significant results hold.

Discussion

This survey experiment provides some evidence that contextual decision characteristics modify the incentives of chief executives regarding their preference for autonomy. One could expect chief executives to consistently prefer autonomy to formulate decisions and implement them. As such, it is not surprising that a majority of surveyed mayors opted to keep project formulation and implementation under their purview. However, this decision is expected to be the result of a rational strategy to balance the benefits and costs of such autonomy. Therefore, changes in the decision context might modify a chief executive's incentives — her perceived benefits and costs — thus leading her to prefer less or more autonomy.

The results in the previous section support this claim. The reduced likelihood to delegate decision-making in a project devoted to the construction of classrooms than in a vaccination campaign project is consistent with our hypothesis that mayors seem to perceive greater opportunities for credit claiming in more visible projects. While both projects are associated with social services, the constructed classrooms constitute a more visible and tangible asset than the

vaccination campaigns, so mayors might potentially use these achievements for political gain in the future. An alternative mechanism that might also increase the preference for autonomy in the case of the classroom project is the potential for “bribe-generating” activities (Liu & Mikesell, 2014). Notably, this effect occurs in the implementation stage of the project, where more opportunities for both credit claiming and private gain might exist, rather than in the formulation stage. The shift from a classroom construction project to a vaccination campaign is associated with a 9% drop in mayoral preference for local implementation.

The second treatment manipulation included in this experiment — whether migrants had relatives in the Colombian municipality — does not seem to affect the choice of project formulation or implementation when studied independently. However, this contextual shift does influence the proportion of mayors who opt for the most stringent option of delegation, i.e. both national formulation and implementation of the project. Mayors are more likely to fully relinquish their autonomy over projects to the central government when migrants do not have local relatives in their municipality. While 15.7% of mayors would prefer full centralization when the project involves migrants that have no local connections, only 8% of mayors make the same decision when migrants have local relatives. Clearly, the salience of a project’s beneficiaries does not affect most of the chief executives when deciding on delegating decision-making authority. However, the shift from more to less salient beneficiaries seems to have a strong effect among the small proportion of mayors who would rather cut ties entirely with a project if it does not relate to their constituents directly.

While not tested in the experimental framework, this study also offers evidence of the effect of the policy process’ stage on the preferred degree of autonomy by local chief executives. The share of mayors that chose autonomy for project implementation is significantly greater than

that of mayors choosing autonomy for project formulation. This result might be indicative of the greater incentives for credit claiming in the implementation stage vis-à-vis formulation. In the specific case of Colombian municipalities, one incentive for delegating project formulation is the lack of technical capacity for project formulation among local governments (Gaviria, 2018). Hence, the results correspond to a situation in which some mayors are more wary of assuming responsibility for formulating projects due to the risk of failing the approval process, and would rather cede this responsibility to the central government and focus their energies on the implementation stage.

Conclusions

This research provides experimental evidence of the effect of contextual factors on executives' preference for managerial autonomy. Our survey experiment with Colombian mayors, who are political and administrative executives of local governments, shows that executives are more likely to prefer autonomy - less likely to delegate decision-making - for the implementation of more visible projects such as the construction of classrooms. However, we do not see any effect of this treatment manipulation regarding project formulation. Meanwhile, we also aimed to manipulate the saliency of beneficiaries by modifying the association of migrants — the target population for the public services referenced in the survey-experiment — with the local constituents. This shift does not seem to affect mayors' likelihood of retaining autonomy in either formulating or implementing social projects. However, there is a substantial effect on the likelihood of ceding *both* project formulation and implementation to the central government. While mayors opting for full delegation to the national government make up only a small fraction of the total sample, their share is significantly greater when facing a context in which migrants do not have any attachment to the local population. We interpret this result as evidence

that mayors take into consideration the opportunities to claim credit for project implementation in their decision-making process. Such opportunities are reduced in a scenario in which the beneficiaries are not related to voters. Again, we do not see any effect of this manipulation in the formulation stage.

The lack of influence of shifting contexts on the autonomy preferences for project formulation suggests that, unlike implementation, this policy stage does not offer enough flexibility in terms of incentives for credit claiming to influence mayors to change their decisions. Moreover, we observed that the proportion of mayors opting for autonomy is significantly greater for implementation than for formulation. Therefore, not only do contextual factors affect preference for autonomy, but this effect is contingent on policy stage, which also independently affects these preferences.

Overall, only a small share of mayors preferred the involvement of the intermediate level of government, the *departamento*, at any stage. This finding is somehow surprising given the substantive role that *departamentos* play in the provision of education and health in Colombia. A plausible interpretation might be that mayors willing to delegate decision-making might look for a more capable level of government. Given the strong tradition of centralization in Colombia, only modified in recent decades, mayors might still perceive the central government as more capable than intermediate governments, which are yet to consolidate its role in the governance system (Estupiñán Achury 2012). Furthermore, mayors might prefer the more distant authority, i.e. the national government, when opting for relinquishing autonomy if their motivation is to shift the blame in case a project fails (Mortensen 2012).

This study faces some limitations regarding, for instance, external validity. While the findings can arguably be extended to the majority of municipalities in Colombia, capital cities

are particularly different from the small municipalities whose mayors are the subjects of this study. In Colombia, capital cities are the respective *departamento*'s largest municipalities in every case. Therefore, capital cities and their mayors face a distinct political and economic environment than that of the rest of municipalities. Indeed, such differentiation was among the reasons for the creation of the Colombian Association of Capital Cities (*Asocapitales*) and withdrawal from the Colombian Federation of Municipalities (Asocapitales 2020, RCN Radio 2018).

In relation to external validity, one should carefully consider the characteristics of the institutional framework before aiming to generalize these findings to other countries' local chief executives. For instance, while most Latin American countries have experienced a decentralization process in the last few decades, each country's process has advanced at different paces. That is evident with the considerable variation in autonomy vested to localities across the region. Therefore, mayoral perspectives on autonomy and delegation of decision-making power might differ depending on the baseline level of power, resources and responsibilities allocated to their respective local governments. While this is a limitation on the generalizability of this study's findings, it also highlights the opportunity to replicate the study in other country settings.

In spite of the institutional context's caveat, this research offers some policy implications for national governments in their interactions with local governments. In a general sense, this study reinforces the idea that central governments ought to take into consideration local officials' incentives and motivations (Weingast 2014). More particularly, mayors' strategic behavior to favor their political prospects might play a role in their decision to relinquish decision-making autonomy to collaborate with other levels of government. Such behavior might bring results that are not aligned with the national government goals, thus risking potential imbalances or

inequalities. Therefore, national governments might need to directly provide services in policy areas where impact is less visible as these are less preferred by some mayors. Similarly, as certain mayors do reflect preferences for certain groups that are more salient for their constituents, national governments might need to intervene to guarantee the provision of services to less salient populations. This is particularly important in critical issues such as the attention to migrants and refugees, which can soon become a burden to localities if national governments opts for not taking the main role in coordinating policy formulation and implementation.

TABLES

Table 1. Characteristics of Included and Non-included Colombian Municipalities

Characteristic	mean (included)	mean (non-included)	t (difference)	p value
Population	25984.68	22739.86	0.9599	0.3373
Revenue (Billions of COP)	31381.33	25707.53	1.4845	0.1380
Rural population (%)	56.64	56.20	0.2528	0.8005
Lineal distance to departamento capital (km)	80.36	85.70	-1.3018	0.1933
Lineal distance to Bogota (km)	311.50	312.44	-0.0682	0.9456

Table 3. Summary Results by Manipulated Scenarios

	Local relatives			No local relatives			Grand Total
	Classrooms	Vaccines	total	Classrooms	Vaccines	total	
Project Formulation							
Municipal	36	34	70	34	36	70	140
Department	5	5	10	2	8	10	20
National	21	17	38	20	19	39	77
Other		1	1				1
Grand Total	62	57	119	56	63	119	238
Project Implementation							
Municipal	46	38	84	41	43	84	168
Department	8	6	14	4	6	10	24
National	6	12	18	8	14	22	40
Other	1	1	2	3	2	5	7
Grand Total	61	57	118	56	65	121	239

Table 4. Combinations of formulation and implementation choices

		Implementation				
		Municipal	<i>Departamento</i>	National	Other	Total
Formulation	Municipal	112	10	14	3	139
	<i>Departamento</i>	9	7	2	2	20
	National	45	7	24	3	79
	Other	1	0	0	0	1
	Total	167	24	40	8	239

Table 5. Balancing Table by Project Type

Variable	Mean (Vaccines)	Mean (Classrooms)	t	P
Education (years)	16.20	16.21	-0.03	0.97
Female	0.15	0.16	-0.29	0.78
Age (years)	46.15	47.06	-0.76	0.45
Municipal revenue (Billions of COP)	24.80	27.77	-0.90	0.37
Municipal population (thousands)	21.44	24.94	-1.16	0.25
Existing migrants (% of total population)	0.02	0.01	0.76	0.45
Municipal revenue per capita (Millions of COP)	1.51	1.36	1.60	0.11
Department border with Venezuela	0.06	0.08	-0.32	0.75
Linear distance to department capital	95.84	77.71	2.26	0.02
Linear distance to Bogotá	303.86	318.60	-0.66	0.51
Vote share for gubernatorial winner	0.41	0.41	-0.44	0.66
Mayor from Liberal Party	0.17	0.17	0.06	0.96
Mayor from Conservative Party	0.18	0.18	-0.12	0.90
Mayor from Radical Change Party	0.18	0.18	0.05	0.96
Mayor from Social Unity Party	0.15	0.18	-0.63	0.53
Mayor from Democratic Center Party	0.07	0.03	1.36	0.17
Mayor from Green Alliance Party	0.05	0.03	0.97	0.33
Mayor from Citizen Option Party	0.05	0.07	-0.61	0.54
Mayor from Social Independent Alliance	0.05	0.04	0.25	0.80

Table 6. Balancing Table by Silence of Beneficiaries: Migrants with Local Relatives

Variable	Mean (No)	Mean (Yes)	t	p
Education (years)	16.24	16.17	0.24	0.81
Female	0.15	0.15	0.12	0.90
Age (years)	46.07	47.13	-0.88	0.38
Municipal revenue (Billions of COP)	26.53	25.98	0.17	0.87
Municipal population (thousands)	23.53	22.78	0.25	0.80
Existing migrants (% of total population)	0.01	0.02	-0.36	0.72
Municipal revenue per capita (Millions of COP)	1.44	1.43	0.19	0.85
Department border with Venezuela	0.08	0.06	0.72	0.47
Linear distance to department capital	86.86	86.99	-0.02	0.99
Linear distance to Bogotá	309.80	312.44	-0.12	0.91
Vote share for gubernatorial winner	0.40	0.42	-1.00	0.32
Mayor from Liberal Party	0.16	0.17	-0.23	0.82
Mayor from Conservative Party	0.16	0.20	-0.72	0.47
Mayor from Radical Change Party	0.21	0.14	1.45	0.15
Mayor from Social Unity Party	0.15	0.19	-0.91	0.36
Mayor from Democratic Center Party	0.07	0.03	1.39	0.16
Mayor from Green Alliance Party	0.03	0.04	-0.36	0.72
Mayor from Citizen Option Party	0.04	0.07	-1.13	0.26
Mayor from Social Independent Alliance	0.05	0.04	0.28	0.78

Table 7. Multinomial Logit Regression for Delegation – Base choice: Municipal

	Project Formulation			Project Implementation		
	Department	National	Other	Department	National	Other
Project type (1 = Classrooms)	-0.621 (0.499)	0.132 (0.285)	-14.80 (1543.6)	-0.0892 (0.438)	-0.682* (0.366)	0.262 (0.782)
Migrants have local relatives (1 = Yes)	0.0335 (0.480)	-0.0333 (0.284)	14.80 (1543.7)	0.341 (0.443)	-0.166 (0.356)	-0.930 (0.852)
Constant	-1.699*** (0.380)	-0.649*** (0.244)	-18.29 (1543.7)	-2.085*** (0.393)	-1.061*** (0.275)	-2.959*** (0.632)
Observations	238			239		

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$ **Table 8. OLS Regression for Full Municipal Autonomy (Municipal= 1)**

	Project Formulation	Project Implementation	Both
Project type (1 = Classrooms)	0.00991 (0.0643)	0.0985* (0.0591)	0.0417 (0.0664)
Migrants have local relatives (1 = Yes)	-0.000500 (0.0643)	-0.0146 (0.0591)	-0.0587 (0.0664)
Constant	0.584*** (0.0546)	0.679*** (0.0497)	0.498*** (0.0562)
Observations	238	232	229

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$ **Table 9. OLS Regression for National Delegation (National = 1)**

	Project Formulation	Project Implementation	Both
Project type (1 = Classrooms)	0.0480 (0.0610)	-0.0928* (0.0496)	-0.0356 (0.0396)
Migrants have local relatives (1 = Yes)	-0.0108 (0.0610)	-0.0289 (0.0496)	-0.0778* (0.0396)
Constant	0.305*** (0.0518)	0.232*** (0.0417)	0.157*** (0.0335)
Observations	238	232	229

Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

FIGURES**Figure 1. Municipalities included in the survey experiment (in red)**

APPENDIX

Table A1. Multinomial Logit Regression for Delegation of Project Implementation including covariates – Base choice: Municipal

	Department	National	Other
Project type (1 = Classrooms)	-0.277 (0.501)	-0.764** (0.385)	1.737 (1.692)
Migrants have local relatives (1 = Yes)	0.207 (0.478)	-0.191 (0.379)	-2.852 (2.012)
Mayors' Education (years)	0.0447 (0.118)	-0.0170 (0.0878)	-0.536 (0.441)
Female Mayor	-0.126 (0.642)	-1.397* (0.770)	-15.92 (972.0)
Mayors' Age (years)	-0.000258 (0.0268)	0.00571 (0.0217)	-0.108 (0.0944)
Municipal population (thousands)	0.0265*** (0.00984)	0.00981 (0.00999)	-0.142 (0.136)
Existing migrants (% of total population)	-11.44 (13.93)	-5.061 (8.557)	23.08 (38.95)
Municipal revenue per capita (Millions of COP)	0.000480 (0.000363)	0.000207 (0.000281)	-0.00284 (0.00186)
Departamento border with Venezuela	-0.00720 (1.139)	-0.151 (0.951)	2.724 (3.381)
Lineal distance to departamento capital	0.00217 (0.00389)	-0.00168 (0.00342)	0.0203 (0.0147)
Lineal distance to Bogotá	-0.000794 (0.00159)	0.00116 (0.00130)	0.00549 (0.00721)
Vote share for gubernatorial winner	-0.474 (1.926)	-1.822 (1.517)	-8.330 (11.80)
Mayor from Liberal Party	0.231 (0.995)	0.0484 (0.726)	-1.852 (1.763)
Mayor from Conservative Party	0.125	0.204	-17.08

	(1.017)	(0.708)	(2218.2)
Mayor from Radical Change Party	0.176 (1.023)	-0.0571 (0.744)	-20.86 (1764.1)
Mayor from Social Unity Party	0.851 (0.953)	-0.326 (0.784)	-19.10 (1570.2)
Mayor from Democratic Center Party	-17.30 (5712.3)	-1.364 (1.217)	0.634 (2.025)
Mayor from Green Alliance Party	2.014* (1.220)	0.684 (1.087)	-2.018 (4.235)
Mayor from Citizen Option Party	1.573 (1.119)	-0.584 (1.257)	-14.82 (1002.3)
Mayor from Social Indpt Alliance	0.462 (1.368)	-0.0784 (1.027)	-0.0727 (2.099)
Constant	-4.082 (3.164)	-0.706 (2.342)	16.28 (11.97)
Observations	233		

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table A2. OLS Regression for National Delegation (National = 1) with covariates

	Project Formulation	Project Implementation	Both
Project type (1 = Classrooms)	0.0472 (0.0650)	-0.106** (0.0533)	-0.0370 (0.0421)
Migrants have local relatives (1 = Yes)	0.00494 (0.0643)	-0.0315 (0.0523)	-0.0762* (0.0414)
Mayors' Education (years)	-0.0119 (0.0153)	-0.00299 (0.0126)	-0.0145 (0.00996)
Female Mayor	-0.135 (0.0900)	-0.135* (0.0731)	-0.0824 (0.0577)
Mayors' Age (years)	-0.00449 (0.00368)	0.00121 (0.00300)	-0.00251 (0.00237)
Municipal population (thousands)	0.000756 (0.00157)	0.000604 (0.00128)	0.000259 (0.00100)
Migrants (% of total population)	-1.503 (1.185)	-0.499 (0.976)	-0.173 (0.775)
Municipal revenue per capita (Millions of COP)	0.0000246 (0.0000502)	0.0000188 (0.0000405)	0.00000436 (0.0000320)
Department border with Venezuela	0.155 (0.153)	-0.0266 (0.124)	0.0495 (0.100)
Linear distance to department capital	0.0000570 (0.000555)	-0.000282 (0.000456)	-0.0000761 (0.000362)
Linear distance to Bogotá	0.0000925 (0.000215)	0.000159 (0.000175)	0.0000687 (0.000138)
Vote share for gubernatorial winner	0.124 (0.264)	-0.267 (0.215)	-0.214 (0.169)
Mayor from Liberal Party	-0.109 (0.123)	0.00430 (0.103)	-0.0264 (0.0816)
Mayor from Conservative Party	-0.0806	0.0330	0.0384

	(0.123)	(0.102)	(0.0811)
Mayor from Radical Change Party	-0.0827 (0.124)	-0.00670 (0.104)	-0.0645 (0.0827)
Mayor from Social Unity Party	-0.0862 (0.125)	-0.0505 (0.104)	-0.118 (0.0827)
Mayor from Democratic Center Party	-0.0321 (0.168)	-0.163 (0.141)	-0.113 (0.112)
Mayor from Green Alliance Party	-0.233 (0.191)	0.0552 (0.163)	-0.0288 (0.129)
Mayor from Citizen Option Party	-0.169 (0.171)	-0.0738 (0.138)	-0.131 (0.111)
Mayor from Social Indpt Alliance	-0.234 (0.176)	-0.0101 (0.149)	-0.147 (0.118)
Constant	0.697* (0.394)	0.323 (0.324)	0.634** (0.256)
Observations	232	226	223

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