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**Política estadual, escopo do conflito político e escolha institucional:
reformando a gestão escolar no Brasil**

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State Government, the Scope of Political Conflict and Institutional choice: Reforming school governance in Brazil

Abstract

This paper analyses the political dynamics behind recent education reforms in Brazil. It seeks to explain variation in the institutional and policy choices that were made by state governments in the definition of school governance structures following the return to democracy. Whereas some state governments decided to institute the election of school principals by parents, students and teachers, others decided for the maintenance of opaque and discretionary practices which secured the distribution of school posts among mayors and parliamentarians who were allied with the state governor. The research relies on primary comparative evidence from three states – Bahia, Ceará and Minas Gerais – and additional secondary materials from the case of the Federal District to account for the factors that explain variation in institutional outcomes. It adopts a case-oriented, qualitative and historical approach that combines both within-case analysis and cross- case comparisons. The paper addresses an important gap in the literature on post-transition decentralisation, federalism and sub-national politics in Brazil and Latin America, evidenced by a lack of systematic and comparative analyses accounting for variation in mechanisms of political decision-making and institutional choices made at the state level.

The argument is that the institutional choices made by state governments were conditioned by heterogeneous patterns of political competition and organisation that emerged following the return to democracy. These sub-national political “regimes” varied with regard to the breadth of the scope of political conflict and the intensity of inter-elite conflict, and the latter dimensions shaped political decision-making and the related outcomes.

The paper contributes to the literature on federalism, state government and politics in Brazil by establishing a critical dialogue with previous research and developing a typology that accounts for the diversity of state-level political arenas. The study also demonstrates some of the limitations of conventional institutional analysis and socio-structural explanations of party and political behaviour when they are applied to the study of spatially uneven processes within the same country.

State Government, the Scope of Political Conflict and Institutional Choice: Reforming School Governance in Brazil*

André Borges

During the last twenty years, Brazil has been moving from a centralised and state-driven model of school control to a set of variants of school decentralisation and school empowerment. Since the transition to democracy in the early 1980s, new administrative practices designed to increase accountability and empower school communities proliferated all around the country. Reforms included the devolution of administrative and financial authority to school councils comprised of parents, students and teachers, the direct election of school principals by school communities and greater school autonomy in the definition of budgets and the management of personnel.

These transformations represented an important departure from previous traditions of poorly accountable and heavily politicised educational bureaucracies. Governments under both authoritarianism and democracy had routinely relied on the school system as a source of patronage resources that could be exchanged for votes. Administrative and financial centralisation at the top of the relevant bureaucratic structures allowed for the discretionary distribution of school works, jobs and appointive positions, serving politicians' short-term goals and feeding entrenched brokerage networks that connected local bosses, political appointees and civil servants.

The paper seeks to explain the variation in the institutional and policy choices that were made by Brazilian state governments in the definition of school governance structures following the return to democracy. Although sub-national authorities decided to devolve authority and resources to school communities in some cases, there were other instances in which wide political discretion and administrative centralisation persisted, and state officials maintained old-style methods of patronage distribution.

The paper looks at these broad differences in the outcomes of school governance reform to explore some oft-neglected questions in the study of the decentralisation government, sub-national institutions and public policy-making. As noted by Montero and Samuels (2004: 25-29), even though research in Latin American countries has revealed how political and financial decentralisation is sometimes accompanied by

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innovative and participatory policies at the sub-national level, much less has been said about the factors that explain why these innovations are implemented in some cases, but not in others. A number of related questions arise concerning within-country variation in the workings of democratic institutions and the nature of political decision-making. Neo-institutionalist analyses argue that similar political institutions will produce roughly similar outcomes across different contexts (Steinmo, et al., 1992; Weaver, et al., 1993), but the evidence on continental-sized and regionally heterogeneous federal countries demonstrates this is hardly the case (Fox, 1994; Heller, 2000). Given that sub-national governments will usually share the same institutional “infra-structure”, variation in policy outcomes and decision-making across sub-national units cannot be explained with reference to formal institutions, which implies one needs to account for the mechanisms that explain differences in the operation of institutional arrangements.

The paper takes advantage of the Brazilian experience of decentralised government and education policy-making to contribute to a better understanding of these issues. Due to Brazil’s tradition of sub-national control over the provision of basic education, school decentralisation was first initiated by state and local (as opposed to federal) authorities. In contrast to other Latin American federations, the country had always lacked a truly national, unified educational system under the control of the centre, as state and local governments had been given the responsibility for the provision of secondary and elementary schooling. The 1988 Constitution and the 1996 Federal Basic Education law, the LDB, reinforced this pattern, by allowing states and municipalities to exert substantial autonomy in the organisation of their respective school systems.(Almeida, 1995; Souza, 1993). Given this institutional structure, educational decentralisation during the greater part of the last decades was rather erratic and uneven across the country¹.

The analysis focuses on the variation in the policy decisions relative to the scope of popular participation in the choice of public school principals. Whereas some state governments decided to institute the election of school principals by parents, students and teachers, others decided for the maintenance of opaque and discretionary decision-making arrangements which secured the distribution of school posts among mayors and parliamentarians who were allied with the state governor.

¹ It also contributed for this pattern the fact that at least until 1997, the federal government showed little, if any, interest in inducing the adoption of school decentralisation by lower levels of government (Almeida, 1995; Arretche, 2000; Castro, et al., 2000).

The argument is that policy and institutional choices at the state level were conditioned by heterogeneous patterns of political competition and organisation that emerged following the return to democracy. These sub-national political “regimes” varied with regard to the openness and inclusiveness of the political arena and the intensity of inter-elite conflict, and the latter dimensions shaped political decision-making and the related outcomes.

The above argument is developed through the comparative analysis of primary and secondary evidence on the politics of school governance reform in four Brazilian states: Bahia, Ceará, the Federal District and Minas Gerais. The empirical analysis follows a case-oriented and historical approach that relies on both within-case analysis and cross-case comparisons, covering various developments in state politics and education policy from the early days of democratisation in the 1980s until up to the early 2000s.

1. Politics and School Governance Reform in Brazil: an overview

During the transition to democracy in the early 1980s, decentralisation and empowerment started to play an important role in the education policy debate in Brazil. Decentralised educational governance was defended by the opposition to the military and by the political left on the grounds that it would contribute to undermine elitist and authoritarian styles of school management, making the educational system truly responsive to the needs of the popular classes². Under the influence of Gramscian Marxism and Paulo Freire’s radical pedagogy, left-wing educationalists argued that decentralisation would not only improve the quality of schooling, but it would also contribute to deepen democracy, empowering the disadvantaged (Gadotti, 1988; Rodrigues, 1997; Wittman, 1986).

These theoretical developments were strongly associated with the “revival” of civil society during the democratic transition, as teachers’ unions and mushrooming urban social movements started to mobilise and press for the expansion of public schooling and greater participation in educational decisions. Schoolteachers and their left-controlled unions emerged as particularly vocal advocates of the “democratisation

² One must note that Brazilian educational system has been marked by a historical dualism between elite and middle-class education, provided by private schools, and popular education, delivered by lower-quality public schools (Havighurst and Moreira, 1965; Oliveira and Catani, 1993).

of school management”, as they sought to put an end to top-down, political and ideological controls imposed by the military regime on the school system (Paro, 1996; Ribeiro, 1995).

During the 1990s, as a consequence of the increasing involvement of international agencies in the setting of educational priorities, the left’s agenda of school decentralisation was reoriented according to a neo-liberal perspective. The previous emphasis on popular consciousness-raising and the radicalisation of democracy was replaced by matters of competitiveness, cost-reduction and human capital development (Cunha, 1995; De Tommasi, et al., 1998; Oliveira, 2000). The idea that decentralising educational decisions to the school community was the solution to a wide range of social and educational evils thus became increasingly ubiquitous in the rhetoric of educational authorities, elected officials and academics, despite the fact that deep ideological divergences continued to divide the proponents of school empowerment (Cunha, 1991; Gracindo, 1994; Oliveira, 2000).

1.1 – Electing School Principals

Among the decentralising reforms implemented in the last two decades, school-level elections gained prominence due to its potential to raise serious political controversy. Since the early 1980s, several Brazilian states have implemented changes to traditional methods of nomination, allowing for greater community participation in the appointment of school principals. Some states adopted the election of principals by teachers, parents and students, whereas others decided to combine a competitive exam and an electoral contest.

Traditionally, school jobs were distributed according to the “majority deputy rule” (*regra do deputado majoritário*): the state governor (or his party) allowed those deputies with the best electoral performance in a given municipality to make appointments to most school jobs in that locality. This implied that the selection of school principals often reflected party orientation or personal connections, rather than merit or leadership skills. State governors commonly relied on the distribution of thousands school posts to forge parliamentary coalitions, rewarding their allies and punishing dissenters. Once a party or coalition that was formerly in the opposition assumed power, the principals that had been appointed by the previous administration

were systematically fired and replaced by the appointees of the newly elected government.

Although school principals do not command significant resources, as compared to other local administrators, having control over school appointments offered great opportunities for political parties seeking to mobilise voters state-wide. These opportunities existed because of the territorial penetration of the educational system – one might find schools even in the poorest and more rural communities – and also due to the nature of the job of school principal: principals were in direct and constant contact with large numbers of parents and students, making them potential community leaders and vote-gatherers in election years.

School-level elections led to some significant changes both in the relations internal to schools and in the way in which civil society and governmental actors interact with and participate in schools³. In some respects, the results may seem disappointing in that new procedures for selecting principals did not promote the expected democratisation of school management. Although the evidence suggests that elected principals tend to be more accountable to school communities and less prone to authoritarian styles of leadership, there are signs that parental and student participation in school management did not increase as expected (Guedes, et al., 1997; Heeman, 1986; Paixão, 1994; Torres and Garske, 2000; Vieira, 1996; Werle, 1991).

Probably the most significant change brought about by this reform was the end of non-universalistic practices that were embodied in partisan control of school management. Once principals are selected by their communities, the links that once attached school management to the state government tend to become more tenuous. A general finding of research in several states that institutionalised school-level elections is that party politicians lost much of the power to interfere with school management (Heeman, 1986; Melo and Silva, 1994; Paro, 1996; Vieira, 1996).

The paper explores two specific questions concerning these institutional changes in Brazilian public education. First, it seeks to understand why the formal and informal rules that governed the selection of school principals in Brazil were set aside and replaced by procedures that opened the selection of principals to community participation in certain instances. Second, it investigates why participatory methods for

³ In this section, I rely on secondary evidence on the impact of school-level election in eight Brazilian states, including my four case studies: Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul, Federal District, Santa Catarina, Mato Grosso, Minas Gerais, Ceará and Mato Grosso do Sul. The main criterion for selecting these six states was that of availability of empirical research.

selecting principals became more firmly institutionalised in some cases, but not in others.

2 – The Cases and the Strategy of Comparison

The comparative analysis relied on primary and secondary evidence on the politics of school governance reform in four Brazilian states: two located in the relatively wealthy and developed Centre-South (Minas Gerais and the Federal District) and two in the poorer Northeast (Ceará and Bahia). Although this sample is certainly not representative of the Brazilian federation as a whole, it does reflect the wide inequalities in terms of social and economic development that divide Brazilian regions. Whereas the states of Bahia and Ceará represent the poorest and less urbanised region of the country, the North-East, the Centre-South states of Minas Gerais and the Federal District score relatively high in several indexes of social and economic development (see table below):

Table 1.1: Federal District, Minas Gerais, Ceará and Bahia: Selected Social and Economic Indicators (1991)

	GDP per capita (R\$ 1999)	Urban population (% of total)	Illiteracy (%)	Infant Mortality (per 1000)	Access to Internal Plumbing (%)
Federal District	10.935	94,7	11,1	27,4	86,9
Minas Gerais	5.239	74,9	21,9	35,4	77,5
Ceará	2.631	59	35,3	63,1	40
Bahia	3.206	59	37,8	70,9	45,4

Sources: Contas Regionais/IBGE; Atlas do Desenvolvimento Humano/PNUD

In the states of Ceará and Minas Gerais, school communities have been electing their principals for more than ten years to date: in Minas Gerais since 1991 and in Ceará since 1995. These two states are thus representative of a group of cases where school-level elections have been more firmly institutionalised, as electoral cycles did not lead to a policy reversal. Based on a number of secondary sources, I estimated that 11 out of the 18 Brazilian states that had experienced school-level elections to select principals at least once since 1983 had been holding elections for at least two gubernatorial terms (8 years) uninterruptedly in the year 2002 (Barros and Mendonça, 1998; Melo, 2003). In

the other remaining cases, democratic school management did not survive electoral cycles and partisan methods of appointment were soon reinstated⁴.

In contrast, the state of Bahia is representative of those few states – 9 out of 27 – where neither school-level elections nor civil service exams were implemented, not even once, between 1983 and 1998. Recent attempts at introducing a merit-based system for selecting principals, during the late 1990s, did not succeed. In summary, Bahia fits, more or less, the intuitive notion of what would count as a truly “negative” case of reform.

In addition to analysing primary research material on the states of Bahia, Ceará and Minas Gerais, the research took advantage of secondary sources on the politics of school governance reform in the Federal District, a small, Centre-Western state that is home to Brazil’s capital Brasília. This latter case permitted a widening of the range of variation in reform outcomes, given that it constituted a “borderline” case in which the persistence of traditional methods for selecting principals was punctuated by some episodic experiences with school-level elections.

The comparative analysis followed a “most similar systems” strategy. Researchers relying on such comparative design select cases that are substantially similar in a number of social, institutional and economic aspects, but exhibit some variation on the outcome variable (see Peters, 1998). Thus, although Bahia and Ceará were very similar in that they were much poorer and less urbanised than the two Centre-South states in the sample, they had different experiences of reform. Conversely, Minas Gerais and the Federal District were characterised by roughly similar levels of social and economic development, at the same time they differed on the outcome variable.

3 – State Government and the Scope of Political Conflict: A typology

The article relies on a typological model that relates variation in mechanisms of policy-making and policy choices to variation in the inclusiveness of the political arena and the nature and intensity of inter-elite conflict. It starts with the assumption that democratisation was a spatially uneven process in what concerns the extent and the intensity of political competition. In some instances, powerful political bosses kept great leeway in controlling access to political office, narrowing the political arena and

⁴ What this estimate implies is that school-level elections often do not last for more than the four years of a “reformist” governor’s term.

restricting the number of meaningful participants of the democratic game. In other cases, contrastingly, democratisation produced a rapid and intense process of political fragmentation, with the incorporation of new political actors and organisations leading to the implosion of oligarchic structures of political competition.

To systematise these differences, the paper adopts the concept of “scope of political conflict”, which refers to the extent to which, in a given state, the return to democracy led to political incorporation of actors and organisations that were excluded during the authoritarian regime, increasing the number of participants in the political arena. This definition follows Schattschneider’s (1975) view that democratic government has the potential to break open conflicts that were previously concealed or pre-empted, due to the proliferation of autonomous and competing organisations (political parties, interest groups, civic associations, etc).

Where democratisation led to the consolidation of a restricted political arena, one should expect to find political systems characterised by the prevalence of centralising and hierarchical forms of political organisation, low levels of political fragmentation and lack of alternation in power. What characterises these states is the dominance of powerful political machines whose control over a wide range of material and specific inducements allow for a substantial centralisation of power in the hands of the machine bosses (Diniz, 1982; Scott, 1969).

Where a single political machine dominates, one should expect inter-elite conflict to revolve around personal and factional grievances of minor significance, easily subject to mediation and control by the machine bosses. The term “inter-elite conflict” is employed here to refer to the extent to which disagreements among political elites reduce the potential for collusion and bargaining among them. In some cases, conflict revolves around minor divergences, allowing for relatively smooth settlements. In other instances, in contrast, where conflict refers to broader political cleavages and factional divisions, then the latter tend to reduce the potential for collusion, affecting patterns of political competition and coalition-making. In summary, “dominant-machine” political systems are differentiated from other political systems in that they will always score low on the two dimensions just defined (see table 1.1, below)⁵:

⁵ The relationship between patterns of inter-elite conflict and the structure of decision-making at the state level was first noticed by Schneider (2001). Here I rely on some of his insights, but my classification of state-level political systems is substantially different from the one he has developed.

Table 1.1: A Typology of State-Level Political Systems

Inter-Elite Conflict	Scope of Political Conflict	
	Restricted	Broad
High	Restricted Pluralism	Conflictive Pluralism
Low	Dominant Machine	Coalescent Pluralism

Source: the author

I contrast dominant-machine systems, where the major political bosses have a gate-keeping effect upon political competition, with those political systems marked by substantial political fragmentation and intense electoral competition, classified as “pluralist”. “Pluralism” is defined as a situation where opportunities for forcefully limiting and controlling the scope of conflict are low, due to the proliferation of and competition among political organisations that are relatively autonomous from each other. Systematic alternation in power, elite fragmentation and relatively “weak” state Executives are main traits of these polities⁶.

I define two sub-types of pluralism, according to levels of inter-elite conflict. “Conflictive pluralism” is characterised by the organisation of political competition across reasonably clear ideological lines, and substantial political fragmentation. Alternation of power between sharply opposed ideological blocs is likely to be observed, reflecting the intensity of conflict among political elites.

Coalescent pluralism is differentiated from conflictive pluralism due to much lower levels of inter-elite conflict. Although these political systems also display a reasonable dispersion of power, elite behaviour is much more coalescent, leading to greater possibilities for bargaining and coalition-formation. To employ Sartori’s (1976) terminology, political competition is likely to be characterised by centripetal tendencies, as parties seek to occupy the centre of the ideological spectrum rather than appealing to extreme ideological positions.

The fourth and last type of sub-national political system is what I call “restricted pluralism”. This ideal-type of political organisation and competition is differentiated from dominant-machine systems as a consequence of higher levels of inter-elite conflict, whereas it does not fit the definition of pluralism proper due to restricted scope

⁶ By using the term “pluralism” I do not, in any sense, expect these states to conform to the views on pressure group politics and democracy expressed by pluralist theory in political science. Rather, I tend to agree with the elitist critique of pluralism in that organisational pluralism and systematic electoral competition are fully compatible with cumulative and systematic inequalities in access to economic and political resources (Domhoff, 1978; Schattschneider, 1975).

of political conflict. Political competition in these polities is likely to reflect fierce struggles for power within the restrictive boundaries set by the dominant actors, that is, the governor and his political group. Although this limited variant of pluralism may witness episodic and potentially de-stabilising outbursts of elite conflict and elite renovation, in contrast to a situation where a single political group consistently dominates the scene, it is still marked by hierarchical, vertical structures of decision-making.

I rely on the typology of state-level political systems presented above as a heuristic device that may be contrasted against the empirical evidence to identify differences in patterns of policy-making and institutional choices in education. As I demonstrate in the following section, the nature of inter-elite divisions and the scope of the political arena affected both the structure of political opportunities faced by the interests at stake and the extent and the intensity of conflicts over the setting of policy, shaping the policy process and the related outcomes.

4 – The Comparative Evidence

Following the typological classification presented above, I divided the cases in two broad groups: one group marked by “broad scope of political conflict” and another characterised by “restricted scope of political conflict”. As I demonstrate below, the cases of Bahia and Ceará fitted the latter category, whereas the states of Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso do Sul and the Federal District resembled more closely the former.

In the states of Bahia and Ceará the return to democracy was followed by the consolidation of a restricted political arena. These political systems were marked by the endurance of tightly-knit and centralised political machines and very low levels of political fragmentation and electoral competitiveness. State governors in Bahia and Ceará revealed substantial capacity to control key institutions and political processes, securing the perpetuation of their own political groups in power. The states of Minas Gerais and the Federal District differed from these two states in that they lacked dominant political bosses and state governors were forced to operate within a fragmented political arena.

These differences can be summarised in terms of an observed positive relationship between state governors’ capacity to elect their successors over time (here defined as the “electoral strength of governors”) and the average share of legislative seats detained

by the governor's party (the "parliamentary strength of governors"). The assumption behind this association is that where a single political group controls the Executive branch of government by extended periods of time, the dominant coalition's control over access to patronage reduces the possibility of successful opposition and counteracts the potential for fragmentation intrinsic to Brazil's PR electoral system. Conversely, where alternation in power occurs regularly and political elites are fragmented, the governor's party is more likely to have a minority of the seats and broad coalitions are necessary to assemble a majority⁷:

Table 1.3 - Electoral and Parliamentary Strength of State Governors, Selected States, 1982-1998⁸

	Average Seats by Governor's Party (%)	Index of Electoral Strength
Ceará	50,88	100
Goiás	45,69	60
Bahia	43,49	60
Santa Catarina	33,16	20
Pernambuco	31,86	20
Mato Grosso do Sul	29,38	20
Minas Gerais	26,88	20
Rio de Janeiro	23,43	0
Federal District*	17,23	0

Source: Dados Eleitorais do Brasil, IUPERJ Eletronic Database.

* Data for the Federal District refers only to the 1990, 1994 and 1998 elections, as the district did not have political autonomy before 1990.

As observed in the table above, the states of Bahia and Ceará exhibit the first and the third highest levels for the two indexes, respectively, in comparison with the other six states in the sample. In these two North-Eastern states political parties gravitated heavily around the state Executive and *governismo*, that is, politicians' tendency to

⁷ The index of electoral strength was calculated by dividing the amount of times the governor succeeded in electing a candidate from the same party by the number of elections held between 1982 and 1998. The interpretation is rather straightforward, as an index of 100 means that the governor succeeded all the times, whereas an index of 0 implies that the governor and his party were defeated in all elections. It is important to note that chief executives were not allowed to run for re-election before 1998.

⁸ In selecting five other states in addition to the four case studies, I expected to represent, to a reasonable degree, the wide variation in terms of political and socio-economic variables that characterise the Brazilian federation. Hence, this sample includes some of the wealthiest states (Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso do Sul, the Federal District and Rio de Janeiro) and some of the poorest (Ceará and Pernambuco). It also includes states where ideological polarisation and party fragmentation are extremely high (Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro and Federal District), and others where the opposite is true (Bahia, Ceará, Goiás and Santa Catarina).

support whoever is in power was widespread⁹. State assemblies were institutionally weak and overwhelmingly controlled, as a general rule, by the Executive. Because the governor's party usually obtained a large share of the seats and the ranks of the opposition could be co-opted very easily, these states closely resembled Abrucio's (1997) characterisation of "ultra-presidentialism", that is, a political system where the chief Executive is routinely able to circumvent regular checks and balances (Desposato, 2001; Moraes, 2001).

The states of Minas Gerais and the Federal District differed from Bahia and Ceará in that alternation in power was frequent and no single political leader or group could dominate the scene for too long. Higher levels of party fragmentation forced governors to forge broad, multi-party coalitions and both inter and intra-party competition reduced the potential for political continuity. Also, Executive-Legislative relations were more balanced and opposition parties were relatively stronger and less subject to co-optation by the Executive (Anastasia, 2001; Desposato, 2001).

Further systematic differences and similarities among these four states were also observed in political decision-making. The policy arena in Minas Gerais and the Federal District was more fragmented and organised interests were reasonably strong and autonomous from government. Contrastingly, decision-making was much more hierarchical and dominated by the governing elites in the North-eastern states of Bahia and Ceará. These latter aspects are fully explored in the section below, where I analyse the politics of school governance reform in comparative perspective.

4.1 – Politics and School Governance Reform: Minas Gerais and the Federal District

Minas Gerais

A large and populous state located in the Brazilian Southeast, Minas Gerais was home to some of Brazil's most enduring political families, and the latter achieved to

⁹ Here it is important to note that the index of electoral strength is not necessarily the same as the inverse of the proportion between actual and possible alternations in power. For the main variable here is the extent to which the governor and the state Executive have an impact upon electoral results, regardless of the fact that different political parties are occupying office over time. Given these aspects, the calculus of the index took account of those cases in which the incumbent governor switched parties before an election, creating incentives for massive party migration among his political allies and thus affecting electoral outcomes.

play an important role in national political life during most of the 20th century. A legacy of economic backwardness and the weakness of lower-class organisation substantially reduced the electoral potential of the left and sustained a pattern of political competition based on accommodation and power-sharing among the dominant political families, rather than ideological conflict (Dulci, 1997; Hagopian, 1996; Ramos, 1990).

The tradition of coalescent and non-ideological politics was maintained in the post-democratisation period, as two centre, “catch-all” parties – the PMDB and the PSDB – emerged as the major political organisations, following the fragmentation of the parliamentary opposition to the military¹⁰. Political alliances in Minas Gerais occurred within a vast and unspecified “centre” and ideological divisions played a relatively minor role in state politics, notwithstanding the growth of the political left throughout the 1990s.

Initial attempts at implementing school governance reform occurred in the early 1980s, following the victory of the PMDB in the 1982 gubernatorial elections. At the time, the major posts of the Secretariat of Education were occupied by left-wing militants and academics connected to the PMDB’s left. This reformist team achieved some limited success in involving parents, teachers and students in the discussion of education problems and devolving power and resources to school councils (Minas Gerais, 1983; Rodrigues, 1997). Nevertheless, due to the opposition of conservative forces entrenched within the legislative assembly and the bureaucracy, the PMDB educational administration was unable to provide an answer to school communities’ demand for the democratisation of school management.

Unwilling to wait for government action, the Minas Gerais State Education Worker’s Union (UTE) decided to organise the election of school principals, informally, all over the state, mobilising parents and students in the mid-1980s. Although it seems to be the case that the union was successful in only a very few cases, the process of contestation that led to some informal experiences of democratic school management was far from being irrelevant, as it laid bare the lack of legitimacy of partisan

¹⁰ As a 1979 federal law reinstated multi-partyism, formerly pro-military ARENA members joined the PDS, whereas the opposition MDB included the word “party” in its acronym to comply with electoral legislation, creating the PMDB. The national PSDB was founded by a dissidence of the PMDB in São Paulo, discontented with the loss of identity of the latter party. A similar split was observed in Minas Gerais, as the cadres of the PMDB’s left and historical “MDBistas” decided to organise themselves within a new party.

appointees, revealing the possibilities for change through the collective refusal to accept old-style methods employed in the selection of principals¹¹.

During the 1986-1990 gubernatorial administration of Newton Cardoso, ideas of democratic school management were abandoned and school councils were de-activated, as the governor resorted to centralised mechanisms of policy-making. A charismatic and centralising leader representing the more conservative factions of the PMDB, governor Cardoso submitted the secretariat of Education and its policies to the logic of party and electoral politics, as part of his machine-building strategies.

Notwithstanding governmental hostility, the UTE persisted in the struggle for the democratisation of school management relying on strikes and mass demonstrations. The union also took advantage of its connections to the Worker's Party (PT) to further its agenda within the legislative assembly¹². Erratic education policies and recurrent teacher striking led to the creation of the Minas Gerais Federation of Students and Parents Associations (FAPAEMG), a state-wide body representative of parents and their student offspring, in the year 1989. The FAPAEMG was mainly concerned about the poor quality of education provision and the lack of adequate representation of school users' interests, introducing a new element in a decision-making arena traditionally dominated by teachers and their unions and the state educational authorities. In the end, governor Cardoso's attempt to re-centralise educational management and weaken existing mechanisms of popular participation proved to be outdated in view of the mobilisation of parents, teachers and students, and poor educational policies added to the general perception that the his government was a fiasco (Cunha, 1991; Melo, et al., 1994; Rocha, 2000).

In view of the experience of the previous administration, the new governor elected in 1990, Hélio Garcia, decided to prioritise education reform, bringing the agenda of school decentralisation and popular participation back in. The governor and his secretary of Education proposed the institution of school-level elections and school councils with power over personnel management and budgets. Matters of electoral strategy seem to have influenced these moves, as the major competitor of the PMDB, the centre PSDB, had implemented school-level elections in the state's capital, Belo

¹¹ Interviews: Luiz Carlos Carceroni, Edir Valladares and Magda Campbell / Belo Horizonte July-August 2003. Further evidence on informal elections was gathered by Rocha (2000) and Cunha (1991).

¹² Some of the founders of the UTE, such as Luiz Dulci and Luís Carlos Carceroni, had also been responsible for the creation of the PT in Minas Gerais. Former UTE leaders integrated PT administrations as well as the party's legislative delegations at the federal and state levels.

Horizonte, two years before. Because the PSDB might have used its educational policies as an electoral “trump card” in the following gubernatorial elections, governor Garcia had good reasons to mimic his opponents (Rocha, 2000: 241-242).

In April 1991, a bill on democratic school management was sent to the legislative assembly. It proposed a two stage process of selection: first a competitive public exam to pre-select the candidates, and then an electoral contest among those candidates approved in the exam, with the participation of parents, teachers and other school staff, students and parents. Under intense pressure from the state Executive and state teachers, who occupied the legislative assembly, state deputies approved the bill on June 26, after almost three months of negotiations¹³.

Although the law on democratic school management was subsequently contested in the courts, school-level elections persisted as an informal procedure sanctioned by the state Executive¹⁴. Hélio Garcia and the governors elected in 1994, 1998 and 2002 decided to respect community choices, appointing the best-voted candidate in each school (Grindle, 2004; Rocha, 2000). This is understandable given that the parties that have been victorious in gubernatorial elections since 1994 – the PMDB and the PSDB – adopted very similar educational agendas. Arguably, due to the consistently “centrist” character of Minas Gerais’ politics, there was greater potential for supra-partisan consensus being reached on policy reform, as parties had no incentive to defend extreme positions, and this allowed for policy continuity.

Federal District

Secondary evidence on the politics of school governance reform in the Federal District provides further support to the latter arguments. Different from the case of Minas Gerais, in the Federal District the implementation of school governance reform was not followed by institutionalisation and electoral cycles were associated with policy instability.

¹³ Records of the Minas Gerais state legislative assembly, June 26, 1991.

¹⁴ Based on the provisions of the federal constitution, the Minas Gerais State Association of School Principals, the ADEOMG, decided to propose a Direct Mandate of Unconstitutionality (ADIN) against the law 10.484/91, which was later accepted by the Federal High Court. The legal basis of the court’s decision was an article of the federal constitution (Art. 37, VIII) stating that occupants of certain bureaucratic posts (*cargos em comissão*) might be only appointed and dismissed by the chief executive.

The Federal District is home to Brazil's capital, Brasília¹⁵. It is the smallest and most urbanised of all twenty-seven units of the federation. Brasília was built from scratch during the 1950s, to replace Rio de Janeiro as Brazil's federal capital¹⁶. Its inauguration in 1960 fulfilled a century-old dream, as the first plans to move the federal capital to the centre of the country had been made in early XIX century, following independence from Portugal. Strictly speaking, the Federal District is neither a state nor a municipality: within the district there are no municipalities and the district government provides both municipal and state services. The district legislative assembly, which is called "legislative chamber", deals with both strictly municipal issues (e.g., raising local property taxes), and state issues such as the organisation of secondary schooling.

High levels of urbanisation and a relatively recent foundation gave politics in the Federal District unique features within the Brazilian federation. Due to high levels of education, income and political awareness, as well as the lack of previously established ties between citizens and political parties, politicians had to work hard to win votes, appealing to corporative groups – such as public sector unions – or seeking to fill specific ideological niches. Electoral contests were marked by high levels of ideological polarisation and gubernatorial elections usually opposed the political left to a right-wing or centre-right party coalition, running as the major contenders.

The Federal District had one of the earliest experiences of democratic school management nation-wide, following the nomination of a PMDB state governor in 1985¹⁷. At the time, the highly well organised and politically vocal state teachers' union, the SINPRO-DF, achieved to further its demands through the public bureaucracy and institute the election of principals, following the nomination of two union officials to high-ranking posts within the secretariat of Education (Mendonça, 1987: 51). High rates of turn-out and mobilisation of teachers, parents and students marked elections held in the 413 district schools in November 1985 (Freitas, 1996: 56).

¹⁵ From this point on, I employ the terms "Brasília" and "Federal District" interchangeably.

¹⁶ The construction of Brasília was justified at the time in terms of its potential to promote regional integration and foster the development and occupation of the country's vast and sparsely populated Centre-West region.

¹⁷ Different from the rest of Brazilian states, the Federal District only regained full political autonomy in 1990. Before that, state governors were appointed by the president and a senate committee acted as a surrogate legislative.

Notwithstanding the popularity of school-level elections among school communities, right-wing forces never fully accepted this reform, as they feared that the political left and the left-controlled teachers' union would rely on it to take over state schools, submitting the latter to a process of "politicisation". Thus, as the Federal District regained political autonomy in 1990, right-wing governor Joaquim Roriz decided to cancel school-level elections immediately after he took office, determining a return to the previous system of partisan appointments (Silva, 2004: 43).

With to the election of PT governor Cristovam Buarque in 1994, the agenda of participation and decentralisation was brought back in. After a short negotiation involving the SINPRO-DF, state deputies and the district educational authorities, a bill on school devolution and school-level elections was sent to the legislative chamber and approved on October 1995.

The victory of the left proved to be only ephemeral, as governor Buarque was defeated in his bid for re-election and the centre-right returned to power through the hands of ex-governor Joaquim Roriz in 1998. The leader of conservative forces did not lend deaf ears to their concerns about the "colonisation" of schools by the left and the teachers' union, and the election of school principals was once more cancelled in early 1999 (Silva, 2004: 71-75). Although a merit-based system for selecting school principals was proposed in September 1999, it was poorly institutionalised and educational authorities continued to retain substantial discretion in appointments (Mendonça, 2001).

Comparing Minas Gerais and the Federal District

Comparison between the cases of Brasília and Minas Gerais suggests that increased political competition and societal mobilisation may create incentives for the adoption of school governance reform at certain points in time and space. Nevertheless, these factors do not necessarily lead to the institutionalisation of participatory practices, as it was clear in the case of Brasília. The key difference between the two cases lay in the intensity of inter-elite conflict. Because elite divisions in Minas Gerais did not occur across ideological lines there was greater space for consensus on school reform, whereas in Brasília the consolidation of a strongly polarised arena prevented policy convergence and led the political right to block the left's reformist efforts.

Thus, in terms of the typology of state political systems presented previously in the article, Brasília corresponded to the definition of “conflictive pluralism”: it was characterised by broad scope of political conflict and high levels of inter-elite conflict. In contrast, Minas Gerais fitted better the definition of “coalescent pluralism” (see below):

Table 1.4: Classifying the cases (I)

Inter-Elite Conflict	Scope of Political Conflict	
	Restricted	Broad
High	Restricted Pluralism (?)	Conflictive Pluralism (Brasília)
Low	Dominant Machine (?)	Coalescent Pluralism (Minas Gerais)

4.2 – Bahia and Ceará

Bahia

In Bahia the former supporters of the authoritarian regime succeeded in constructing a powerful political machine, which revealed enormous capacity to survive to democratic times. Ex-governor Antônio Carlos Magalhães (ACM) managed to unify local conservative forces under his centralising and charismatic leadership and secure their survival after the return to democracy. ACM used his two gubernatorial terms under authoritarian rule (1971-1974 and 1979-1982) to become the single and major leader of a quasi-invincible political machine. Thanks to federal support in the form of major development projects and state patronage, ACM’s group achieved to defeat the state’s old political foxes and dominate the political scene (Dantas Neto, 2004; Souza, 1997).

As direct elections for governor were reintroduced in 1982, ACM had no effective challengers within the pro-military PDS (Social Democratic Party), and he revealed his political strength by securing the election as governor of an obscure and uncharismatic politician with over 60% of the turnout, after the sudden death of the candidate previously appointed. Between 1982 and 2002, right-wing parties led by ACM elected all state governors, with the exception of a brief experience of centre-left government (1986-1990). Relying on the centralised and discretionary allocation of bureaucratic jobs and financial resources, ACM and his lieutenants co-opted centre forces and

extended vertical, hierarchical controls over key institutions and processes, reducing the potential for meaningful opposition (Carvalho, 2000).

During the democratic transition, ACM-backed governor João Durval (1983-1986) submitted education policies to the logic of party and electoral politics to an unparalleled degree, creating enduring and resilient “coalitions for patronage”. Following the end of the Durval administration, in 1987, it was found that over 50% of a total of 76.000 civil servants employed by the secretariat of Education had been admitted in the seven-year period between 1980 and 1987, a rate of more than 5.000 new employees per year. The same report observed that the majority of teachers and administrative staff recruited in the period had gone through a simplified process of selection, which opened room for political interference (Bahia, 1990: 37).

The reinforcement of patronage politics and the consequent strengthening of parochial and conservative interests put serious constraints on attempts at school governance reform during the 1986-1990 centre-left administration, which marked the only defeat ever suffered by ACM’s group in a gubernatorial election. Given the resilience and pervasiveness of right-wing forces, PMDB governor Waldir Pires had no choice but make concessions to the same elites that had once supported both ACM and the authoritarian regime. Facing fierce opposition from state deputies and mayors loyal to the governor and yet having to deal with the difficulties involved in taking hold of an educational bureaucracy that remained under control of hostile, pro-ACM groups, reformers within the state secretariat of Education soon abandoned the proposal of democratic school management, which was considered unfeasible¹⁸.

Following the victory of the ACM-led PFL (Liberal Party) in the 1990 elections, autocratic and non-universalistic practices returned with full force. To curb the power of the state teachers’ union, ACM and his lieutenants put civil service striking in illegality (Decree 4.264/95) and they relied on temporary, non-tenured contracts to hire schoolteachers, allowing for political interference in recruitment.¹⁹ Ideas of democratic school management were viewed by the PFL right-wing leadership with hostility and suspicion, and traditional methods for selecting principals persisted unchallenged.

¹⁸ Bahia (1990) and testimonies provided by Mariaugusta Rosa Rocha, Jacy Menezes, Vandilson Costa and Amábilíia Almeida (Salvador-Ba/ April-May 2003).

¹⁹ The 2002 report of the State Court of Accounts noted the existence of serious irregularities in teachers’ recruitment, but the majority of the court’s pro-ACM councillors ignored this and other irregularities and voted in favour of approving the state government accounts.

In recent years, as the state government signed a loan agreement with the World Bank in support of a major program of education reform (World Bank, 2000), Bahia's dominant elites started to recognise the detrimental effects of patronage politics on educational quality and performance and state the necessity of reforming the school system. In 1999, educational authorities proposed, with the support of the World Bank, a "principal certification system": candidates to the post of principal were to be selected according to the scores obtained in a competitive exam. Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of World Bank officials and state technocrats involved in the Bahia Education Project, this new system remained very weakly institutionalised and subject to politician's interference²⁰.

Ceará

Ceará's recent political history can be divided roughly in two periods or eras. In the first period, ranging from the early 1970s to the democratic transition, an oligarchic agreement among the state's three major political bosses guaranteed the absolute and almost unchallenged dominance of their political groups. Former army colonels Vírgilio Távora, Aduino Bezerra and César Cals based their domination on the tight control of local political machines and on the helpful support of military rulers in Brasília (Bonfim, 1999; Mota, 1992). Different from the case of Bahia, where former governor ACM succeeded in unifying conservative forces and subjecting them to his centralising and autocratic leadership, in Ceará the political machine created by pro-military forces was irremediably divided among more or less equally strong political factions. None of the three colonels had the power to submit the two others to their rule, although each of them expected to eventually become hegemonic. These internal divisions soon put Ceará's oligarchic triumvirate into serious difficulties, as factional rivalries re-emerged with full force during the democratic transition.

²⁰ A World Bank report released in 2003 stated that the principal certification system still needed further improvement and that further steps were required to institutionalise it via legislation. The same document observed that of a total of 360 principals appointed in 2002, only 16% (65) had passed the certification exam (World Bank, 2003: 4). Politicians and government officials I interviewed in Bahia made clear in their statements that political interference continued to play a role in the selection of principals. (Testimonies provided by Domingos Barbosa Neto, Ilana Mattos and Antônio Rodrigues, Salvador/BA/ April-May 2003).

The second stage of post-democratisation politics in Ceará started in the mid-1980s, as the fragmentation of conservative forces opened an opportunity for the election of Tasso Jereissati, an influential businessman and formerly the president of the Industrial Centre of Ceará (CIC) in the year 1986²¹. From that time on, Jereissati and his loyal group of business leaders would smash right-wing forces organised around the three colonels and co-opt part of the left-wing opposition, dominating the political scene. In spite of their “modernising” agenda, the so-called “young-businessmen” only dismantled the political machine of the colonels to create their own, relying on renovated mechanisms of political control to avoid the growth of the opposition at any cost.

During the return to democracy, the fragmentation of the PDS machine created some limited, albeit relevant opportunities for policy change. Governor Gonzaga Mota (1983-1986) took advantage of factional rivalries within his party to gain autonomy from the old political bosses and create his own political group, within the opposition PMDB. In an attempt to benefit from popular discontentment with the military regime, Mota and his secretary of Education sought incorporate the educational agendas of the opposition. During this period there were some incipient moves to decentralise power and resources to school communities, paralleled by the persistence of old-style clientelistic practices.

Following the election of Tasso Jereissati in 1986, with the support of governor Mota and the regional PMDB, Ceará’s political scene was radically transformed. The governor and the other “young businessmen” soon raised fierce opposition among the old political elite by adopting an overly technocratic style of governance, which excluded mayors and parliamentarians from access to government decisions. Rather than seeking to accommodate the various competing forces that divided space within the PMDB, governor Jereissati and his lieutenants sought to displace the state’s major political bosses and construct their own party machine, now within the PSDB.

The conflict between emerging and old political forces affected education policy-making and policy choices in so far as it induced state elites to seek the support of civil society actors as part of their efforts to weaken their opponents and legitimise and

²¹ Founded in 1919, the Industrial Centre of Ceará (CIC) was a typical corporative organisation representative of industrialists and it served mostly as an auxiliary branch of the FIEC (Ceará State Federation of Industries) until 1978. From that time on, the CIC was dominated by a group of young businessmen who opposed both authoritarianism and state interventionism and disliked the corporative positions of the FIEC. These “Young Turks” turned the CIC into an embryo party that paved the road for Tasso Jereissati’s gubernatorial candidacy in 1986 (Mota, 1992; Parente, 2000).

sustain government policies more effectively. As the first Jereissati government faced the massive opposition of the old “political class”, the CIC group realised it had to establish more direct bridges between government and society, bypassing traditional mechanisms of political intermediation (Abu-El-Haj, 2002; Mota, 1992). Thus, in areas such as health reform and anti-drought policy the PSDB innovated by creating local representative councils with control over the allocation of resources and involving local communities in the implementation and oversight of policy, at the same time all care was taken to reduce the political clout of local elites (Abu-El-Haj, 2002; Tandler, 1997).

A similar story was observed in education, as the government proposed a major program of school devolution in 1995, which included the institution of school-level elections. The education plan presented at the time – All for Quality Education for All – devised the mobilisation of private and public institutions, as well as civic organisations, to collaborate with the expansion of access to education and the reduction of school failure (Ceará, 1996: 97).

In contrast to the case of Minas Gerais, where a wide and intense process of societal mobilisation preceded the decision to introduce school-level elections, in Ceará the major advocates of the proposal – education workers and their union representation – did not have the bargaining resources necessary to put the issue in the political agenda. The major teachers’ union, the APEOC, was a weak and bureaucratised organisation, whose leaders had always benefited from alignment to the state Executive. The union’s capacity to mobilise and put pressure on government was near zero and it is probable that the union leadership had no intention to press too hard for reform in any case²².

In view of these aspects, school devolution depended first and foremost on party and bureaucratic elites’ willingness and capacity to implement reform “from above”, defeating resilient “coalitions for patronage”. State elites’ decision to implement school empowerment followed the consolidation of a dominant party machine under control of the CIC leadership in the early 1990s. The existence of such centralised and hierarchical structure of political organisation favoured reformists within the state Executive, as it allowed for a relatively tranquil negotiation of school-level elections in the legislative assembly. The draft law on democratic school management proposed by educational

²² It is symptomatic of the close association between the APEOC and the government that then president of the union, Jayme Alencar, was affiliated to the PSDB and he ran for local councillor in the party ticket in the 1996 elections in Fortaleza. According to a union official, Alencar was a close friend of former PSDB governor Ciro Gomes (Testimony provided by Anízio Melo, Fortaleza, April 2003).

authorities was approved unanimously after a short voting session on the 4th of May 1995, counting on the support of the obedient PSDB majority²³.

The fact that the PSDB maintained its position as the dominant party in state politics in the years that followed created a context favourable to the institutionalisation of this reform. Political continuity led to administrative and policy stability, and state governors maintained democratic procedures for selecting principals.

Comparing Bahia and Ceará

As already seen, Bahia and Ceará were marked by the consolidation of restricted political arenas following the return to democracy. The cases differed, however, in that higher levels of inter-elite conflict produced a political dynamic that favoured the implementation of school governance reform in Ceará, different from the case of Bahia.

The state of Bahia was characterised by the reproduction of a closed and cohesive elite during and after the transition to democracy, whereas Ceará witnessed substantial elite renovation and circulation. In the latter case, the emergence of a business-led and “centrist” political machine was preceded by the disruption of traditional mechanisms of elite accommodation and the new governing elite saw an advantage in mobilising civil society so as to confront the “political class”. In contrast, Bahia was marked by political continuity from authoritarian to civilian rule and the survival and cohesiveness of its dominant elite depended on the persistence of centralised mechanisms of patronage distribution. The lack of elite renovation and circulation implied that there existed few incentives for institutional change, and school governance reform was unlikely to succeed.

The case of Bahia corresponded well to the characterisation of dominant-machine political systems: elite accommodation rather than open conflict was the rule, and the political arena was severely restricted. Ceará fitted the classification of restricted pluralism, due to the combination of higher levels of inter-elite conflict and restricted scope of conflict:

²³ Records of the Ceará state legislative assembly, May 4, 1995.

Table 1.5: Classifying the Cases (II)

Inter-Elite Conflict	Scope of Political Conflict	
	Restricted	Broad
High	Restricted Pluralism (Ceará)	Conflictive Pluralism (Brasília)
Low	Dominant Machine (Bahia)	Coalescent Pluralism (Minas Gerais)

4.4 – Minas Gerais and Ceará

The comparative evidence has revealed that the degree of inclusiveness of the political arena and the nature of inter-elite conflict interacted to produce variegated mechanisms of policy-making and policy outcomes. Whereas some interactions between these factors led to the implementation and subsequent institutionalisation of school governance reform, others led to policy instability and reform failure. A summary of the empirical findings is presented in the table below:

Table 1.6: A Summary of the Results

Inter-Elite Conflict	Scope of Political Conflict	
	Restricted	Broad
High	Institutionalisation (Ceará)	Policy Instability (Federal District)
Low	Reform Failure (Bahia)	Institutionalisation (Minas Gerais)

Questions on the explanatory scope of this typological theory may arise in view of the lack of common invariant relationships between the hypothesized causes and the institutionalisation of reform. Although Minas Gerais and Ceará were placed in different quadrants in the typology, the result of school governance reform was the same in both instances. A straightforward application of the method of agreement to the cases at hand may thus lead one to conclude that there is no clear causal connection between the relevant patterns of political competition and reform outcomes.

Given the limitations of nominal methods of comparison this move would be unwise, however. Mill's methods of difference and agreement cannot account for multiple causation, that is, a situation in which the relevant causes are neither sufficient nor necessary and different combinations of causes produce similar outcomes (Ragin,

2000). Cross-case and within-case analysis did indeed suggest the existence of interaction effects and causal complexity. Because the scope of conflict was restricted in the states of Bahia and Ceará, the policy-making process was dominated from above and party competition and societal pressures could not provide sufficient incentives for reform. Policy outcomes depended mostly on the dynamics of (restricted) inter-elite conflict and the related patterns of political continuity and change.

In the “pluralist” states, in contrast, political competition and societal mobilisation played a much greater role in the policy process, affecting the strategies pursued by state elites. The broadening of the political arena contributed to put old-style practices in education under strain, as it led to the incorporation of interests and agendas that had been previously excluded. At the same time, due to higher levels of political fragmentation, inter-elite conflict was much more likely to reduce the potential for policy consensus. Thus, where the scope of political conflict was broad, policy institutionalisation tended to occur in those instances marked by coalescent rather than conflictive patterns of elite behaviour²⁴.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored some oft-neglected questions in the study of the decentralisation of government and sub-national public policy-making in Latin America. Although research in Latin American countries has revealed how political and financial decentralisation is sometimes accompanied by innovative and participatory policies at the sub-national level, much less has been said about the factors which explain policy variation across a country’s territory (Montero, et al., 2004: 25-29). The paper has presented a typology of sub-national political systems that provides some conceptual tools to understand differences in patterns of policy-making and policy outcomes within the same federation. It has highlighted the impact of distinct sub-national structures of political competition and organisation upon the formation of policy arenas.

²⁴ More quantitative-oriented researchers tend to deal with problems of multiple causation by “climbing up” the ladder of generality and developing a highly abstract and parsimonious theory that sidesteps the issue of causal complexity by ignoring variation among the causal mechanisms at work (in accordance with the assumption of causal homogeneity). That is surely not my intention, as I am more concerned with the creation of a heuristic conceptual scheme that allows one to identify the relevant configurations of causes, giving due weight to the differences in the operation of the explanatory factors.

Where political competition was restricted and dominant political machines had a quasi-monopoly of access to political office, the policy process was easily controlled from the top by party and bureaucratic elites. Conversely, where political elites were fragmented and competition was intense, policy-making was more pluralistic. These differences were in turn associated with heterogeneous paths to participatory institutional change in education. Whereas in the case of Minas Gerais school governance reform owed a great deal to “bottom-up” pressures and the ensuing elite strategies, in the case of Ceará reform was mostly “elitist” and “top down”.

To some extent, the conclusions obtained from this analysis were only relevant to the Brazilian case and to the study of educational policy. Still, it is possible to argue that the emphasis on the identification of sub-national patterns of political competition and organisation makes sense from a broader comparative perspective. Indeed, recent research on federalism and state politics in another large and internally differentiated post-transition federation – Mexico – has identified the emergence of a myriad of sub-national political “regimes” coexisting within the same constitutional framework. Jonathan Fox (1994) and Richard Snyder (1999) noted the persistence of sub-national authoritarian enclaves parallel to the rise of “pluralist” regions.

Interestingly enough, the Mexican sub-national authoritarian enclaves described by Fox and Snyder closely resembled the dominant political machines identified by my research. In both cases, the survival of the elites and structures of political organisation of the previous regime – in Brazil the sub-national ARENA machines and in Mexico the PRI-dominated party system – was an important constraint on the expansion of the scope of political conflict. Those political forces that had benefited from semi-authoritarian rule in Mexico showed no less aversion to open political competition than their Brazilian counterparts and they took advantage of their previous connections to national and local structures of power to slow down the pace of political liberalisation and maintain a firm grip over state political institutions.

Fox’s (1994) research analysed the impact of these sub-national political regimes upon policy, addressing the question of why some state governments were more willing to devolve power and resources to poor peasants’ organisations, whereas others maintained old-style practices of patronage distribution. The strength of peasants’ organisations was an important factor, but not the determinant one, in explaining these differences. Fox argued that divisions at the elite level, which were in turn an attribute of sub-national political regime, created conditions for an alliance between reformist

state officials and the peasants' movement, facilitating institutional and policy change towards more pluralistic patterns of state-society articulation. In contrast, where "autocratic" elites formed a single, homogeneous bloc, reformist efforts were likely to be pre-empted.

The conclusions of the above analysis support the view that legacies from authoritarianism and state-level patterns of inter-elite conflict and competition matter for sub-national policy-making in recently democratised federations. In Mexico, as in Brazil, the survival of "autocratic" elites and their political machines at the sub-national level contributed to prevent or, at least, to slow down, processes of institutional change that created opportunities for the participation of civil society actors in public decision-making. Although the case analysed by Fox was made more complicated due to the ambiguous role played by the Mexican national government, still the political dynamic that emerged in the analysis was not dissimilar from the observed in this study, in that inter-elite divisions in the wake of political liberalisation eventually opened space for the representation of actors and organisations that had been previously excluded, leading to policy change.

The comparative evidence has also revealed some of the limitations of institutional explanations of party behaviour and policy-making. According to rational choice institutionalism, Brazil's combination of open-list proportional representation and a presidential system government is likely to create serious difficulties for the implementation of universalistic reform. These institutions were blamed for weak party institutionalisation, which in turn produced a pattern of coalition-making based on the distribution of patronage by the chief Executive (Ames, 2001; Geddes, 1994; Mainwaring, 1999). Nevertheless, even though Brazilian state governments all operated within the same institutional environment, sharing the formal political rules that might have been blamed for the politicisation of educational bureaucracies – namely separation of powers and open-list PR –, there were significant differences in governments' ability and willingness to implement reforms that reduced patronage resources available for distribution.

In revealing the limitations of some variants of neo-institutionalism, the comparative analysis has raised the old issue of how to "measure" the impact of formal institutional rules upon political processes and outcomes. That is, if it is indeed the case that institutions matter, then one must define when, how and to what extent they do so. A possible answer to these questions is to argue that institutions interact with social

structures to produce different results. In regionally unequal countries such as Brazil, this might be a particularly attractive strategy. The comparative evidence on school governance reform has revealed, nevertheless, that such explanations are useful only to a limited extent.

Although socio-economic factors did seem to relate to important political differences across state-level political systems – politics was more competitive and fragmented in the more developed Centre-South states –, there was no one-to-one relationship between social and economic development and reform outcomes. In fact, there was at least one case of successful reform in a very poor and underdeveloped state, where one would expect to find the prevalence of individualistic modes of political intermediation as opposed to collective action (Ceará), and another case of non-institutionalised reform in a state characterised by high levels of income and education (Brasília). Even though the paper did not intend to find final answers to questions on the articulation of institutional, political and socio-structural variables, it has suggested a possible strategy of analysis, arguing that strictly “political” variables”, such as the existing structure of political competition and the nature of inter-elite divisions hold the key to explanation.

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