

**Changing Ethnic Boundaries:  
Politics and Identity in Bolivia, 2000–2010**

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## Abstract

The politicization of ethnic diversity has long been regarded as perilous to ethnic peace and national unity, its detrimental impact memorably illustrated in Northern Ireland, former Yugoslavia or Rwanda. The process of indigenous mobilization followed by regional mobilizations in Bolivia over the past decade has hence been seen with some concern by observers in policy and academia alike. Yet these assessments are based on assumptions as to the nature of the causal mechanisms between politicization and ethnic tensions; few studies have examined them directly. This thesis systematically analyzes the impact of ethnic mobilizations in Bolivia: to what extent did they affect ethnic identification, ethnic relations, and national unity? I answer this question through a time-series analysis of indigenous and regional identification in political discourse and citizens' attitudes in Bolivia and its department of Santa Cruz from 2000 to 2010. Bringing together literature on ethnicity from across the social sciences, my thesis first develops a framework for the analysis of ethnic change, arguing that changes in the attributes, meanings, and actions associated with an ethnic category need to be analyzed separately, as do changes in dynamics within an in-group and towards an out-group and supra-group, the nation. Based on this framework, it examines the development of the two discourses through a qualitative analysis of anthropological accounts, news reports, and expert interviews. In both discourses, the unity of the respective in-group is increasingly stressed, before diverging conceptions become ever more prominent. Finally, my thesis quantitatively examines changes in in-group identification, out-group perception, and national unity, using survey data collected by the Latin American Public Opinion Project over the decade. It finds changes in identification that can be clearly linked to political mobilization. More citizens identify as indigenous and *Cruceño*, respectively, and do so more strongly than before. Yet identification then decreases again, concomitant with the growing divisions in discourse. Moreover, the rise in identification is not associated with a rise in out-group antagonism or a drop in national unity. On the contrary, the latter has increased steadily among all Bolivians. Besides shedding light on ethnic relations in Bolivia, this analysis thus also contributes to the wider debate on the effects of ethnic politics. It shows that identifications do indeed change in response to mobilizations, that they do so more quickly than expected and not necessarily in the manner as expected, demonstrating that it is necessary to carefully distinguish different elements of ethnicity.

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