

Indigenous Voices and Votes: Assessing the Dynamics of Indigenous Politics in Chile's Constitutional Referendum of 2022

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Many analysts have tried to discern the reasons behind the Chilean Constitutional Convention's draft failure in the 2022 plebiscite. A significant explanation is the draft's inclusion of indigenous rights and its plurinationality principle (Bargsted and González 2022). Despite Chile being unique in Latin America in its lack of constitutional recognition for its indigenous population (Acevedo 2021), most voters in indigenous areas appeared to have opposed the draft (Pairican 2022).¹

What role did indigenous peoples and politics play in the rejection of the constitutional draft? The 2020–2022 constitution-making process was unique by Chilean standards in its inclusion of indigenous perspectives.² The Constitutional Convention reserved seats for indigenous groups, elected their representatives through a special ballot, and had mechanisms for their consultation. The final draft proposed a plurinational state with indigenous representation and autonomy. Although some militant Mapuche groups abstained, many indigenous organizations viewed it as an avenue for greater political representation (Bidegain and Tricot 2021, 8–13). It addressed the limited electoral influence and absence of indigenous parties (Tricot and Bidegain 2020) and historic socioeconomic exclusions (Valenzuela, Toro, and Rojo 2017) that have caused some groups to adopt violent resistance (Alberti et al. 2023).

This study identifies several claims about the role played by indigenous politics in the defeat of the constitutional draft and then contrasts them with district-level evidence. I describe indigenous leaders' explanations for the "Approve" option's defeat and use municipal data to examine voting patterns. Results reveal that most voters in indigenous districts opposed the draft but also suggest variation by ethnicity and stronger Approve sentiment in areas affected by violence and in rural, indigenous territories.

INDIGENOUS VOICES AND THE DEFEAT OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION

This section lists and groups different explanations related to indigenous affairs offered by indigenous personalities after the September 4, 2022, plebiscite. I include views expressed in the

press by the indigenous representatives elected to the reserved seats for the 10 legally recognized indigenous peoples in the Constitutional Convention,³ as well as statements by other indigenous public figures.

A prevalent explanation underscores the importance of the Mapuche conflict. Violence during the process symbolized resistance to institutional solutions, influencing some to vote against the draft (Pairican 2022). Hugo Alcamán, who campaigned for the "Reject" option, stated that "the Mapuche people is against violence, as it demonstrated in the plebiscite" (Soto 2022). Convention candidate Pedro Cayuqueo (2022) noted how the conflict caused disillusionment with political pathways among the Mapuche. Héctor Llaitul, leader of one of the main Mapuche militant organizations, criticized plurinationality for being "too statist and gradual" (Bauer 2022, 437). Representative Elisa Loncon pointed out that the Mapuche militant sector's refusal to dialogue favored rejection (Cooperativa 2022). Additionally, others believe that indigenous representatives did not adequately condemn violence, distancing voters (Millaleo 2022).

Another perspective highlights a disconnect between indigenous representatives and voters. The constitutional debate became elitist, using academic and technical language (Millaleo 2022). Some claimed that "Plurinationality and other demands would only be the ideas of a handful of disconnected Ñuñoa⁴ intellectuals who are out of touch with the real world" (Cayuqueo 2022). Alvarado Lincopi and Llancaman (2022) stressed the role played by "the lack of political instruments that link organizational and territorial processes with institutional and democratic political disputes." Luis Penchuleo, director of Corporación Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena (CONADI),⁵ emphasized the need for better political education and campaigning (Oviedo 2022). Ariel León Bacián (2022), former Quechua legislative advisor to the Convention, also highlighted lackluster campaigning in indigenous territories.

Others believe that the content of the constitutional draft did not align with indigenous voters' preferences. Yaghan representative Lidia González suggested that the negotiation process resulted in the inclusion of provisions that did not represent the people (La Prensa Austral 2022). Loncon discussed the influence of Western thought within indigenous communities, which

Figure 1

Reject Vote by Percentage of Indigenous Population

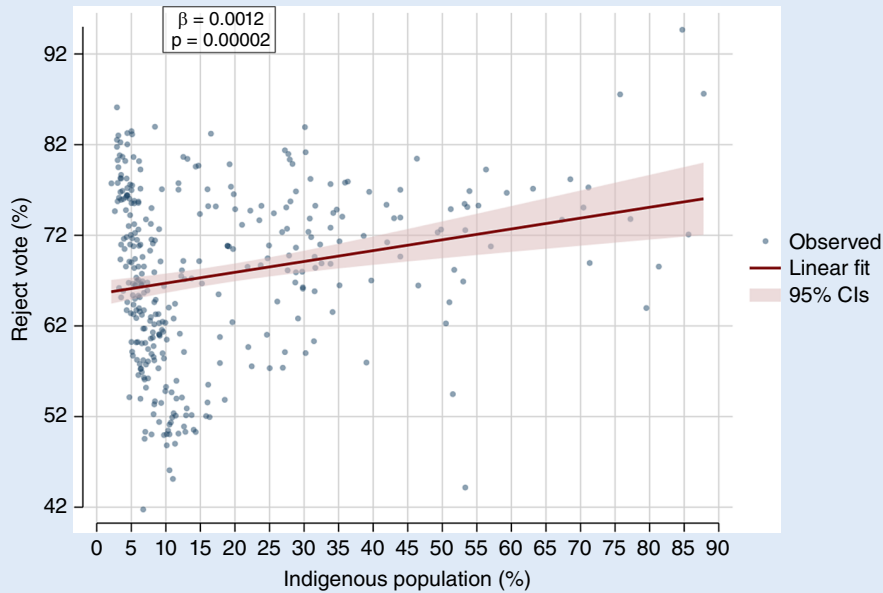
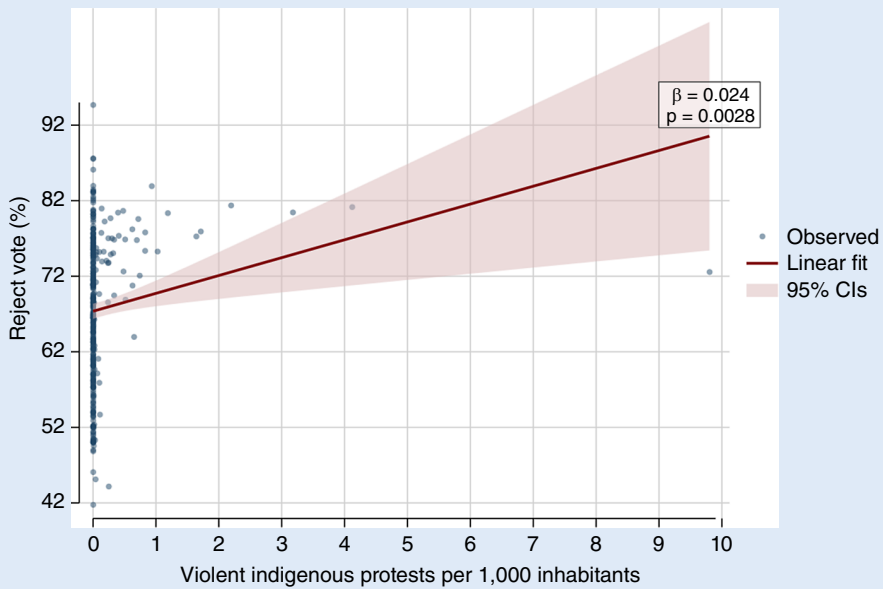


Figure 2

Reject Vote by Number of Violent Protests with Indigenous Claims per 1,000 Inhabitants (2008–2021)



distanced them from the draft's principles (Biobio Chile 2023). For some indigenous citizens, voting Reject might have been a way to assert their Chileanness (Cayuqueo 2022), which Loncon

mentioned as potential “indigenous whitening” (Huenchumil 2022). These testimonies align with survey data from Southern Chile (Centro de Estudios Públicos 2022), which indicates that

Figure 3

Weighted Least Squares and WGLM Regressions of Reject Vote by Violent Protests with Indigenous Claims (2008–2021) and Percentage of Indigenous Peoples, with 95% Confidence Intervals

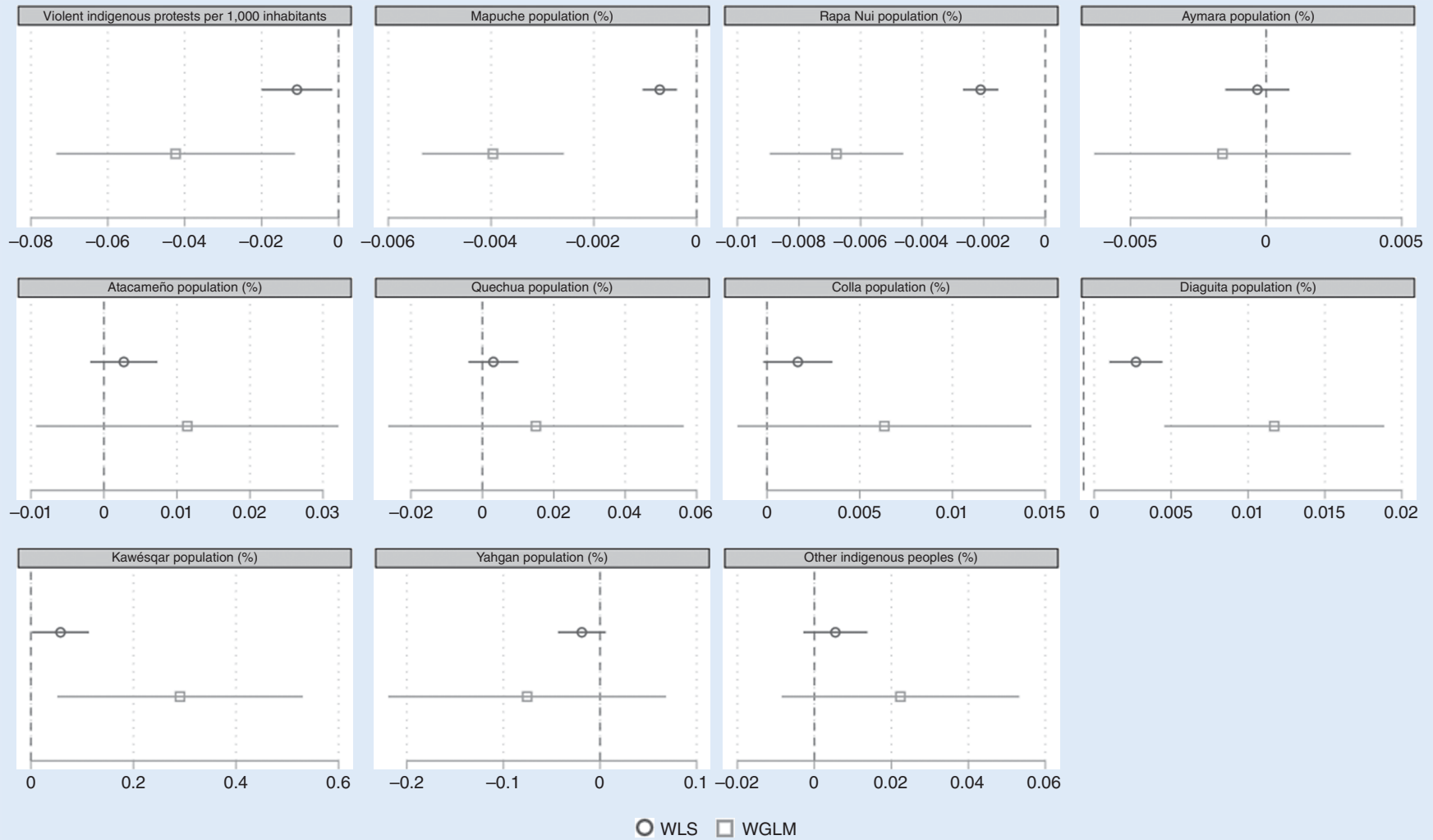
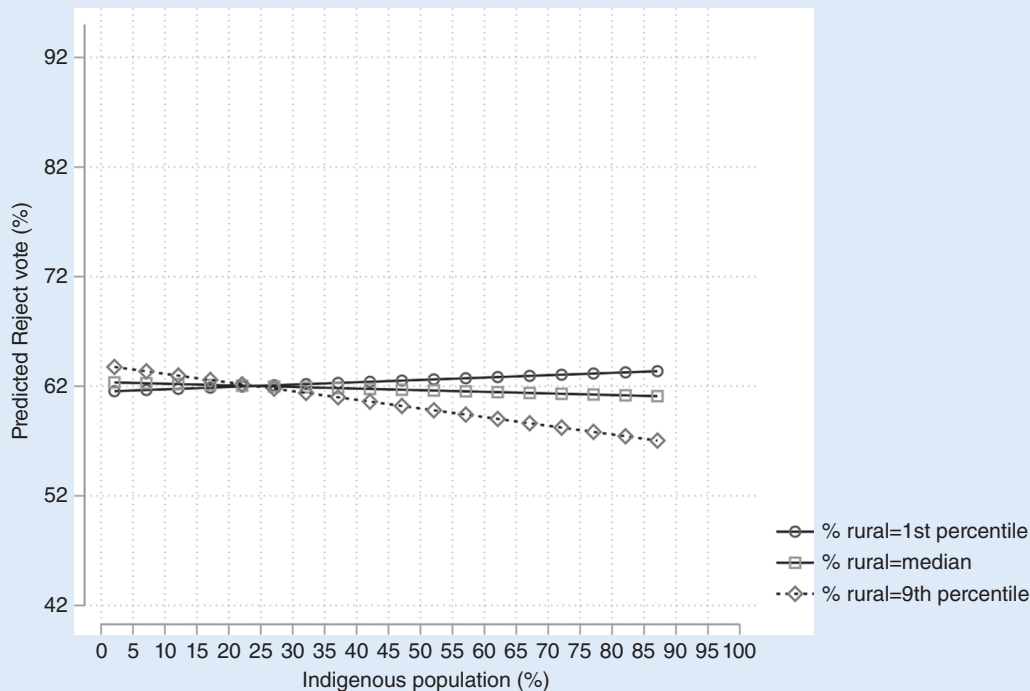


Figure 4

Adjusted Predictions of Reject Vote by Indigenous and Rural Populations



the majority of Mapuche respondents identify either exclusively as Chilean or as both Chilean and Mapuche. Moreover, most express a preference for a multicultural state or one without distinctions among peoples rather than a plurinational state.

Other explanations revolve around the characteristics of indigenous communities. Javier García, the Aymara mayor of Colchane, noted that issues affecting his community (e.g., migration) were not addressed in the process (Mayorga 2022). Aymara representative Luis Jiménez highlighted the Aymara’s conservative nature, preferring gradual change (Miranda 2022). Former governor Richard Caifal (2022) also stated that the Mapuche favor less disruptive changes. Likewise, historian Sergio Caniuqueo argued that Mapuche society is socially conservative, which collided with the progressive constitutional text—particularly among Mapuche evangelicals (Miranda 2022). The presence of long-standing patron–client relationships with political parties in the Reject camp also could have had a decisive impact on the indigenous electorate (Cayuqueo 2022). By contrast, in the case of Rapa Nui, the Convention’s text recognized it as a special territory⁶ and acknowledged the Agreement of Wills with the Chilean State (1888), which was considered “dignifying” by Pedro Edmunds Paoa, the island’s mayor (Gálvez, Canales, and Mayorga 2022).

A DISTRICT-LEVEL ANALYSIS OF THE REJECT VOTE

To understand the link between indigenous peoples and Chile’s 2022 plebiscite results, I analyzed data from Chile’s 345 municipalities (*comunas*) using official sources (Instituto Nacional

Electoral 2018; Servicio Electoral 2022) and protest-event data (Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social 2020). This analysis sheds light on the indigenous dynamics in the outcome of the constitutional proposal (Disi Pavlic 2023b).

The bivariate analysis indicates that indigenous regions primarily rejected the constitutional draft (figure 1). The highest rejections occurred in Colchane, Camiña, and General Lagos, the three northern municipalities with significant Aymara populations (Disi Pavlic 2023a). A simple linear regression confirms this correlation’s statistical significance.

The analysis supports indigenous leaders’ claims that indigenous-related conflicts influenced the plebiscite. Districts with the most conflicts—Ercilla, Contulmo, and Lumaco—showed Reject rates of 72.6%, 81.2%, and 80.5%, respectively (figure 2). However, other variables should be considered. Given the intersection of ethnicity with variables such as poverty (Agostini, Brown, and Roman 2010) and electoral preferences (Fuentes, De Cea, and Teitelboim 2019), controls are crucial.

I used weighted linear (WLS) and generalized linear models (WGLM) with robust standard errors to evaluate the relationship between indigenous variables and plebiscite voting.⁷ Indigenous populations were disaggregated by the 2017 census categories (i.e., Mapuche, Rapa Nui, Aymara, Atacameño, Quechua, Colla, Diaguita, Kawésqar, Yahgan, and Others⁸), acknowledging differing political inclinations across communities. The controls used were local mean years of schooling, population size, poverty and rural population rates, and share

of votes for right-wing candidate Jose Antonio Kast in 2021, which reflected partisan stability in preexisting preferences in referendums (Leduc 2002). A measure of protests during the 2019 “social outburst” (Sáez-Vergara, Godoy, and Disi Pavlic 2022) also is considered due to its association with preferences in the plebiscite (Disi Pavlic 2023a, 112). Figure 3 illustrates the regression coefficients of the indigenous variables in the WLS and WGLM models.

Regression results counter the bivariate analysis and the testimonies of indigenous figures, which suggests a negative link between indigenous violence and the Reject vote. Each additional violent event corresponds to an approximate

their involvement in the process. Statements from indigenous public figures highlighted four reasons for this rejection: the Mapuche conflict, a disconnect between indigenous representatives and their electorate, resistance to the draft’s indigenous content, and distinct ethnic-group dynamics.

Data from Chile’s 345 municipalities were used to evaluate and challenge these explanations. The results reveal that the Approve option was unpopular in almost all of the indigenous municipalities, underscoring the draft’s perceived inadequacy. Contrary to the expectations of the indigenous leaders, however, higher local violence correlated with decreased rejection of the draft. This suggests that in communities more affected

Contrary to the expectations of the indigenous leaders, however, higher local violence correlated with decreased rejection of the draft. This suggests that in communities more affected by violence, some voters viewed the Approve option as a path toward conflict resolution.

1.1-percentage-point decrease in Reject votes. Individually assessing indigenous groups also adds complexity: a negative association between indigenous populations and Reject support was evident for both the Mapuche and the Rapa Nui.⁹ This suggests, as some indigenous personalities noted, that factors beyond indigenous identity—such as preexisting political preferences, community size, and education—may have influenced indigenous districts against the draft. However, the positive correlation among the Diaguita and Kawésqar indicates that some indigenous groups opposed the draft, giving credence—for at least some groups—to the argument that the constitutional draft was not valued or understood by indigenous voters.

Most indigenous people reside in urban zones, but their presence in rural areas also is significant. The implications of this divide are politically consequential (Aravena 2003; González 2021). The split also is important in economic terms because the socioeconomic exclusion of indigenous peoples is explained partly by rural residence (Valenzuela, Toro, and Rojo 2017). A WLS model was used with an interaction term between the shares of the indigenous and rural populations. The predicted Reject-vote values were estimated across the observed ranges of indigenous population and for selected percentages of rural population (figure 4).¹⁰ The results show how the Reject vote’s association with the indigenous population depends on rurality. The association was negative in rural areas but slightly positive in highly urban municipalities, which suggests that the constitutional draft resonated more with some indigenous voters in traditional settings than with the majority residing in cities. This result indicates that the claim that indigenous voters did not approve of the draft has more support in urban areas.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines the relationship between indigenous affairs and the Reject-vote outcome in Chile’s 2022 constitutional plebiscite. Indigenous districts predominantly rejected the draft, despite its robust indigenous rights provisions and

by violence, some voters viewed the Approve option as a path toward conflict resolution. This aligns with findings from Colombia’s peace agreement referendum that communities struck by conflict often lean toward compromise (Botero 2017; Branton et al. 2019; Tellez 2019). Likewise, the negative correlation with more episodes of conflict dovetails with the finding that the Mapuche conflict persists in communities with a stronger preexisting common identity and organization (Alberti et al. 2023).

Different indigenous groups showed varied voting tendencies in the plebiscite. Higher Mapuche concentrations were negatively correlated with Reject voting, suggesting that some Mapuche voters favor options that reflect their ethnicity rather than inherently leaning conservative (Toro and Jaramillo-Brun 2014). The same is true for the Rapa Nui, who—as mentioned previously—positively perceived the draft due to specific articles tailored to their needs. However, for most ethnic groups, there was no clear association—which highlights broader reasons for the draft’s rejection.

Finally, the Approve option’s weaker performance among urban indigenous people suggests a disconnect between indigenous representatives and indigenous city dwellers. This is consistent with higher turnout in rural, indigenous districts in the 2021 elections for the reserved seats (Becerra and Morales 2022), and it challenges previous notions about the urban Mapuche’s priorities regarding constitutional recognition (Aravena et al. 2019, 19). Instead, it implies that urban indigenous voters had distinct preferences and they may have perceived the constitutional draft as more pertinent to their rural counterparts, particularly on issues such as land rights. These findings provide valuable insights for future processes and elections as indigenous peoples in Chile and elsewhere continue to seek political recognition.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Z972VT>.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000872>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. The municipality of Rapa Nui was the only exception—it was one of only eight districts in which the Approve option won.
2. It also may be considered, however, as the latest example of the wave of “multicultural constitutionalism” that has taken place in Latin America since 1991 (Van Cott 2010).
3. These are the Mapuche, Rapa Nui, Aymara, Atacameño, Quechua, Colla, Diaguita, Kawésqar, Yahgan, and Chango peoples.
4. Ñuñoa is a municipality in Santiago noted for its progressive politics, learning institutions, and upper-middle-class residents (Radovic 2021).
5. CONADI is the government agency responsible for promoting and coordinating indigenous policy in the country.
6. The Juan Fernández Archipelago was the only other location elevated to special-territory status.
7. I used the total number of votes to weight the observations because municipalities have substantial differences in population size (Contreras and Morales 2015).
8. Changos were recognized after 2017 and, therefore, were not a separate category in the census. This people, as well as groups including the Huilliche and Pehuenche (which usually are categorized as Mapuche), were counted in the “Others” category.
9. The results for the Rapa Nui, therefore, resonate with the way that the constitutional draft was perceived by that group.
10. The remainder of the covariates are held at their mean values. A Wald test shows that the interaction term is statistically significant.

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