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Politicization and Social Mobilization in Twenty-First-Century Chile

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Synonyms

[Activism](#); [Chile](#); [Democracy](#); [Social movements](#)

Introduction

This chapter looks at current Chilean politicization and social mobilization. Questioning the traditional divide between authorities and social movements (see e.g., Tarrow 2011), a set of publications devoted to this issue in Latin America has explained grassroots collective action as a coconstruction between movements and political institutions. Political phenomena in Latin America hardly function in isolation, these scholars argue (Alvarez et al. 2017; Helmke and Levitsky 2006). Instead, they suggest that political processes interconnect to produce outcomes that may or may not be democratic. Tarlau (2013) has studied, for example, how the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil coproduces activism with political parties in rural schools through clientelism. By showing how Chilean social movements have increasingly detached

from political institutions, this chapter will outline the Chilean case as a regional exception. In fact, often, disengagement from institutional politics among Chilean social movements has proven more effective in effecting policy change.

The chapter firstly explains the conditions by which Chilean society became de-politicized during its democratic transition in the 1990s. Civil society deactivated and people grew increasingly disconnected from institutional politics. Secondly, this work pays attention to Chile's reactivation of social mobilization in the 2000s. Finally, the chapter explains the tactics by which movements have built policy change despite their relative disconnection from political institutions.

Dictatorship and Demobilization

Unlike most other countries in the region, Chile enjoyed a representative party system as well as stable institutions for most of the twentieth century. Additionally, Chilean society evolved through a strong politicization. Until the 1970s, political party membership was very prevalent in Chile and permeated economic, social, and cultural life. Chilean party politics and social movements were closely interconnected. Nevertheless, this stability and political developments were to be abruptly interrupted (Garretón 1989).

Elected in 1970, President Salvador Allende implemented an intensive socialist reform that included nationalizing large-scale companies,

intensifying land reform, and creating a unified social security scheme funded through tax reform. Increasing polarization and international pressures diminished the country's stability. On September 11, 1973, General Pinochet's military coup d'état overthrew Allende's government. The 17-year-long dictatorship (1973–1990) that followed had a profound impact on Chilean society.

Pinochet's dictatorship suppressed freedom of speech and repressed political dissent – i.e., it persecuted, tortured, killed, and exiled those people in opposing movements. Consequently, it undermined people's disposition to participate in collective action and protests. Nevertheless, despite these barriers, civil society called for the restoration of democracy. Mobilization occurred in direct connection with supportive political institutions during the dictatorship. Center and left wing political parties – especially the Socialists, the Communists, and the Christian Democrats – worked clandestinely coordinating resistance across the country. The Vicariate of Solidarity – an office created by progressive Catholic priests to protect victims of state terrorism – also supported resistance initiatives. Similarly, local NGOs – funded by international agencies – backed and assisted activists. Between 1983 and 1986 Chile experienced massive national protests that challenged the authoritarian regime and gave the struggle against human rights violations international visibility (Bastías Saavedra 2013). Citizen organizations of all sorts – labor unions, students, transportation workers, human rights defenders, social housing committees, and many others – united in protest.

After talks with center and left-wing politicians, the military government agreed on carrying out a constitutional national referendum in 1988 to decide on the continuation of the dictatorship. Massive referendum campaigns, again, brought together political parties and grassroots organizations. Famously, the “NO campaign” was victorious in rejecting dictatorial rule. This campaign boosted electoral turnout by engaging many thousands of people with little or no political experience in grassroots electoral activism.

In 1990, the country formally regained a civilian democratic government. Arguably, a new window of political opportunity opened for social mobilization to flourish further. Reportedly, however, Chilean people became depoliticized and civil society strongly deactivated during the 1990s. This unlikely trend resulted from a twofold effect. On the one hand, the democratic transition brought a set of contingent events. International agencies withdrew their supportive funds from grassroots initiatives, the Vatican imposed increasingly conservative policies to its sections diminishing the Chilean Catholic Church's support for local activism, and many leaders abandoned civil society to take government positions (Bastías Saavedra 2013; Delamaza 2015).

On the other hand, the political system de-incentivized social mobilization. The political system inherited from the dictatorship made it extremely difficult to carry out substantial reforms that could undermine Chile's highly elitist society. Several “organic” laws fostering the commodification of social rights and boosting inequality required “supermajorities” to be modified in congress. Also, by electorally benefiting the two largest coalitions – the Concertación (center and left-wing) and the Chilean Alliance (right-wing) – the binominal electoral system gave overrepresentation to right-wing politicians in the parliament and electorally excluded independent groups that threatened the entrenched political class. This political deadlock eroded the credibility of the political system imposing a powerful barrier to movements seeking to effect policy modifications (Luna 2008; Ortega Frei 2003).

Additionally, political parties in power sought to purposively deactivate contentious collective action. Concertación politicians, for example, saw social movements as a destabilizing force for the newly established democratic regime (Hipsler 1996; Paley 2001). In addition, a deepening of the dictatorship's neoliberal policies by the new democratic governments reinforced an increasingly individualistic culture that had been forming since the 1980s. Used to behave as consumers, people became increasingly accustomed

to think of their success only in personal – and not collective – terms. This new prevailing identity undermined all sorts of collective action (Silva 2004). It would take a while for social movements to challenge this national political configuration.

The Return of Politicization and Mobilization

After a period of transitional social acquiescence, Chilean society began reactivating. In the early 2000s, reports show, people used the readiness and availability of consumption to draw a more positive future. Chile's per capita GDP had doubled in the past decade and the center left coalition in government since 1990, the Concertación, had managed to progressively increase investment on social welfare programs. As a result, Chile's Human Development Index was the highest in the region. These conditions progressively inspired people to seek higher life standards as well as new social horizons. Simultaneously, however, the Chilean economic model grew sharply inegalitarian. Inequality became increasingly evident in multiple areas. Highly commoditized, Chile's educational system diminished public schools and became increasingly segregated. Similarly, inequality undermined most other social services such as health, housing, and pensions (UNDP 1998).

In April 2006 Chile saw the reawakening of its social mobilization. While small numbers of activists had persistently mobilized over labor, housing, environmental, and indigenous rights claims, in April of that year secondary students initiated a set of protests that took the political establishment by surprise. At first, what became known as the Pingüino Revolution – due to their black-and-white uniform – demanded the improvement of educational infrastructure and the prompt delivery of school transport passes. However, the movement soon grew and staged large demonstrations that clashed with the police and had more than a thousand students arrested in early May. Their demands then included a wide range of issues, from freezing transportation costs

and food allowances to the most vulnerable students, to structurally reformulating the educational system to strengthen public schools and battle inequality. Facing the government's inaction, more than 130,000 secondary students paralyzed hundreds of schools through a wave of sit-ins. Although Bachelet's government initiated a set of consultations with student and teacher organizations, the resulting package of reforms presented to the parliament in 2009 did not address their main concerns.

Arguably, however, the Pingüino Movement represented a new, incipient process of politicization in Chile. Learning how to strategically lease with authorities and building a more inclusive internal organizational structure, secondary students managed to obtain widespread support from the public opinion (Donoso 2013). Thereafter, protests grew persistently in every section of society, both in frequency and in participants (Somma and Medel 2017, p. 35). Perhaps more importantly, however, secondary students displayed two traits that would qualitatively define the legitimization and effectiveness of movements in the mobilizations of the following decade: a disengagement from institutional politics and the use of tactics to effectively pursue policy change.

While much of the traditional social movement theory has argued that protests thrive in closer connection with polity members (see e.g., McAdam 1982) the Chilean case shows that distance from political institutions can also enhance mobilization (Von Büllow and Donoso 2017).

In fact, several high school secondary student leaders in 2006 were closely connected with the Socialist and the Christian Democratic parties. However, they kept their organizational autonomy despite parties' efforts of movement cooptation.

When the student movement took to the streets again, in 2011, leaders excluded political parties from their work. With its peak in July–August 2011, this new wave of protest incorporated higher education students, attracted many more protestors from other grassroots organizations, and had a larger impact in Chilean public opinion.

Twenty-three massive protests were held in Santiago and other major cities throughout the country between May 2011 and September 2013.

Most of the main leaders did not belong to political parties. Reportedly, those leaders who belonged to parties either quit their party membership or actively rejected party directives. The connection with political parties became a deterrent for group legitimation within the movement (von Bülow and Bidegain Ponte 2015).

This cultural shift affected activists in most other Chilean social movements. In fact, movements have increasingly avoided obtaining resources from political parties. Environmental and LGBT movements get most of their funding from international organizations and foreign governments. Exceptionally, they receive money from individual private donors. Smaller, environmental organizations obtain their human resources and funds from the local community and, exceptionally, from local governments. In the core of student activism, University federations receive most of their funds from their universities (Somma and Medel 2017). Most neighborhood organizations in underprivileged areas obtain a percentage of their funds from their local government participatory funds. Most of their resources, however, come from fundraising events that boost their local identity and sense of community (Koppelman 2016).

Movements' rhetoric strategies have also reacted to and rejected political parties. A myriad of movements – i.e., environmentalists, workers, students, the Mapuche people, and others – have highlighted Chile's persistent inequality as well as politicians' role in promoting profit-oriented policies. These elements function as explanatory factors boosting a large neoliberal machinery that curtails people's access to social and cultural rights. Criticizing these policies as anchored in the dictatorship's authoritarian neoliberal project has proved highly effective for politicizing larger sections of society. This diagnostic conceives political institutions as key protagonists of a model fostering privilege over right. In consequence, movements tend to only instrumentally connect with political parties securing their autonomy to define goals and tactics (Donoso and Von Bülow 2017).

Thanks to their tactical approach Chilean social movements have been effective in pursuing policy change despite their distance from political institutions. The student movement has successfully pushed for policy modifications in different opportunities. Largely, its effectiveness can be attributed to their competence to convince public opinion of the urgent need for educational reform. Although the new General Law of Education (LGE) implemented in response to the student mobilizations in 2006 did not address many of their demands, it advanced toward a more inclusive and regulated school system. Student protests in 2011–2013 saw Piñera's government increasing funding for education and lowering state student loans interest rates considerably, from 6% to 2%. Later, in 2016, Bachelet's second government passed through congress a comprehensive national educational reform addressing many of the movement's requests.

Taking advantage of the window of opportunity that Bachelet's pro-women rights government opened, feminist organizations used recent massive rallies over gender violence to insist on their demands against Chile's abortion ban. As a result, a bill legalizing abortion in some cases passed congress this year and will soon be implemented. Similarly, after several years of mobilizing and lobbying, the LGBT movement built awareness on gender identity rights among politicians and the general public. Only a few months ago, the senate began discussing a revised gender identity bill, initially drafted by civil society organizations, which will recognize transgender people and will regulate gender reassignments. In July 2016, massive protests across the country demanded reforming the highly privatized national pension system. The movement stressed the deep crisis of the pension system and sought to exclude private companies from managing people's funds. The government reacted by introducing a bill to congress meant to create a new mixed system that will address several of the movement's demands. Although some more successfully than others, most movements have been making strides in defining Chile's political agenda.

Somma and Medel (2017, pp. 48–50), in fact, identify four features shaping Chilean movements’ public approval, thus defining their ability to pursue policy change despite their distance from political institutions. They found that politicians associate the *massiveness of protests* with higher levels of popular discontent. Supporting protesters in those cases, hence, is seen as electorally profitable. Movements are also more effective when their protests are more *publicly visible*. When they occur in cities, for example, demonstrations are more likely to be covered by the mass media, thus reaching a considerably larger audience. In these cases, police violence tends to erode the legitimacy of authorities in the eyes of the general public. Also, the Chilean government has shown to prefer negotiating or accepting movements’ demands when they carry out disruptive protests in public, visible places – e.g., blocking streets or occupying central state buildings. Conversely, when disruptive mobilization occurs in more isolated and less visible areas, authorities tend to quickly oppress and deactivate those initiatives. Finally, less violent protests tend to face less repression and obtain more government concessions than violent ones.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of how politicization and mobilization has developed in recent Chile. A historical perspective shows that civil society development in Chile has not been linear. Social mobilization grew highly politicized and in direct connection with political parties throughout most of the twentieth century. People endured protest even during Pinochet’s highly repressive military dictatorship. The transition after democratic restoration in 1990 saw the deactivation of social movements and the de-politicization of Chilean society. Disaffection and distrust toward political institutions increased steadily throughout the 1990s.

Unlike in most other countries in Latin America, the reactivation of mobilization in the early 2000s involved a progressive detachment from political institutions – especially political

parties. This is particularly noticeable in the case of the student protests of 2011. Research has shown that this distance from political parties provides movements with credibility and effectiveness in building policy change.

In recent years, several student leaders have entered the Chilean political establishment pushing forward progressive legislation as congress members. Arguably, by using the popularity provided by the movement’s momentum, these leaders expanded its impact in the political arena. Now, associated in a coalition of several movements and small parties, these leaders have sought to increase their representation by bringing more, highly competitive young candidates to the next congressional and presidential elections. The success of this movement’s institutionalization in keeping a direct connection with the civil society’s agenda in the future is to be seen.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Civil Rights](#)
- ▶ [Civil Society Organizations](#)
- ▶ [Conceptual Perspective in the Making of Indigenous Policy in Latin America](#)
- ▶ [Dictatorships and Nonprofit Organizations](#)
- ▶ [Global Civil Society or Networked Globality](#)
- ▶ [Leadership and Social Justice](#)

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