

(Re)Politicizing Inequality:

Movements, Parties, and Social Citizenship in Chile

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The politics of inequality have occupied a prominent place on Chile's political landscape for most of the past century, although they have played out in remarkably diverse and shifting ways. Managing social and economic inequalities has been a central concern of Chilean democratic governments since the 1920s, and distributive conflicts were at the heart of democratic breakdowns—and subsequent periods of authoritarian closure—in the 1920s and 1970s. Even by Latin American standards, the ebbs and flows of Chilean politics have been heavily conditioned by cyclical patterns of politicizing and depoliticizing inequalities, creating marked cohort and generational effects in the national body politic.

Such is the case with the eruption of widespread mass protests during the second decade of the 21st century. For 20 years following the 1989-90 democratic transition, Chilean politics was characterized by stable forms of party-based political representation, relatively low levels of social mobilization, and a technocratic consensus around a neoliberal development model that generated rapid and sustained—if highly unequal—patterns of economic growth. All three dimensions of this socio-political matrix were challenged, however, when hundreds of thousands of students and their supporters took to the streets in 2011 to protest against educational inequalities, while smaller numbers of protestors mobilized around a plethora of other labor, environmental, and indigenous rights claims (see von Bülow and Donoso, forthcoming). Breaking with a quarter-century of relative societal quiescence and institutionalized political competition, this new wave of social protest occurred in a context of growing detachment of Chilean citizens from political parties and other formal representative institutions. It also punctured the aura of inevitability and consensus that surrounded the highly-touted economic model. Although neither the activist networks nor the grievances they articulated were new to Chilean politics, their newfound capacity to mobilize large numbers of citizens to march, protest,

occupy public spaces, and disrupt everyday activities marked a sea change in the national political arena.

Indeed, the groundswell of popular protest signified the end of a post-transition political era in Chile and the dawning of a new one defined by the repoliticization of social and economic inequalities. Although inequalities were not entirely absent from the political agenda during the post-transition era, they were addressed in a highly technocratic fashion that de-emphasized distributive conflict as an axis of partisan competition and largely eliminated it as a focal point of social mobilization. This technocratic depoliticization changed abruptly when students rebelled *en masse* and forced Chile's partisan and representative institutions to open new debates around the social pillars of the neoliberal model, the reach of social citizenship rights, and even the very constitutional foundations of the post-1990 democratic order.

The Chilean case, then, is tailor-made for understanding how inequalities come to be politicized or depoliticized in different structural, institutional, and ideational contexts. Although politicization has structural underpinnings in extant patterns of social stratification, it is inevitably a historically-contingent, agency-centered political process that is driven forward by social and/or political actors. These actors are generally collective in nature and potentially located at a wide range of different structural positions. A politicization process can assume top-down or bottom-up forms, and is subject to myriad organizational expressions and institutional channels that mediate between these different levels.

This paper thus problematizes the process of politicizing inequalities, breaking with recent influential work that assumes the character and intensity of distributive conflicts can be deduced directly from underlying structures of inequality (see Boix 2002; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). Following a more constructivist logic, I trace the process by which inequalities

were first de-politicized and then re-politicized during Chile's contemporary democratic period, focusing on the interplay between institutional and societal actors. I then draw from public opinion survey data to analyze protest behavior at the micro-level and explore its demographic, political, and attitudinal correlates. The analysis demonstrates that the activation of concerns related to inequality and the social deficits that accompany it lie at the heart of recent cycles of contentious politics in Chile.

Conceptualizing the Politicization of Inequality

As scholarly interest in the politics of inequality has grown in recent years, the limitations of dominant theoretical approaches have become increasingly evident. Building on the pioneering formal model of Meltzer and Richard (1981), celebrated studies by Boix (2003) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) make two critical assumptions: (1) that democratic regimes respond to the policy preferences of the median voter, and (2) that these preferences naturally incline toward redistributive measures under conditions of inequality, since the income of the median voter is sure to be lower than the mean income in society. For all their game theoretic, micro-analytic rigor, such rationalist approaches ultimately rest on highly structuralist foundations, as regime and distributive outcomes are both derived from the aggregation of individual preferences based on structural locations in the hierarchy of income. Political institutions, then—whether democratic, authoritarian, or revolutionary—are a function of distributive conflict.

As in any structuralist approach, what's missing in these works is an appreciation for the relative autonomy of the political sphere and the role of political agency, including the ideational underpinnings of strategic behavior. When politics is factored in, both of the aforementioned

assumptions are rendered highly contingent and variable; democratic regimes may not respond to the policy preferences of the median voter, and popular majorities may not express preferences—much less mobilize politically—for redistributive outcomes. A wide array of institutional, behavioral, and ideational factors can cause democratic outcomes to deviate from structurally-derived rationalist assumptions. From above, these assumptions largely ignore the potential distortionary effects of concentrated wealth on democratic institutions and policymaking processes, since economic elites possess myriad forms of wealth-based political resources, access, and influence that can compensate for their limited numbers (Winters 2011; Gilens 2012). From below, these assumptions radically discount the political challenges of aggregating individual preferences behind a majoritarian collective project for redistributive outcomes. The latter, for example, is often undermined by patterns of patron-clientelism that induce low-income voters to prioritize particularistic benefits over broader redistributive measures, by political competition focused on widely-shared valence issues (such as economic growth, clean government, or law and order) rather than divisive positional issues (such as redistribution), or by the political salience of non-redistributive cultural issues and identities for many low-income citizens.

Furthermore, even where popular majorities do, in fact, prefer redistributive outcomes, such preferences are not automatically aggregated and channeled into institutional and policymaking arenas. Political organization is essential to translate the weight in numbers of lower class groups into a coherent political force, inevitably posing significant collective action problems to any redistributive project (Ansell and Samuels 2014: 41-42). Patterns of civic and partisan organization are thus crucial for determining whether and how the redistributive

interests of popular sectors achieve effective institutional representation (see Huber and Stephens 2012).

Nothing guarantees, then, that democratic competition will turn on distributive issues, or that social and economic inequalities will even be politically salient. Where lower classes are politically fragmented or disorganized, incorporated politically through elite-controlled clientelist networks, or mobilized through valence or cultural appeals that do not entail redistributive commitments, democratic institutions may very well reproduce or even accentuate structural inequalities. This conclusion is an analytical complement to recent work that challenges Boix and Acemoglu and Robinson by arguing that the origins of democracy can often be found in efforts to regulate and institutionalize elite competition, rather than in redistributive pressures from below (Haggard and Kaufman 2012; Ansell and Samuels 2014).

Whatever the origins of democracy, however, economic elites inevitably confront the challenge of safeguarding their minority interests in institutional settings of majority rule. The dominant strategy for elite actors is thus to depoliticize inequalities—that is, to preclude distributive issues from becoming a focal point of democratic contestation by popular majorities. Such de-politicization has two central components. First, it requires that partisan and electoral competition revolve around issues, or competitive axes, that lower the salience of distributive conflicts and do not cleave the electorate along class lines. Aforementioned patterns of clientelist, valence, or cultural competition that cut across class lines are thus likely to be favored by elite actors who seek to minimize redistributive pressures from below. Second, de-politicization requires the containment of social and civic mobilization outside the partisan/electoral arena by actors pursuing redistributive goals. Since democratic rights and liberties preclude a reliance on coercive instruments of demobilization, effective containment is

likely to rest on the political and organizational fragmentation of popular sectors and the collective action problems they face.

Such depoliticization, naturally, is hard to sustain in contexts of acute social and economic inequalities such as those found in Latin America. Both social and political actors are sure to try to politicize inequality by making distributive issues a focal point of democratic contestation. Politicization occurs when political parties or leaders are able to mobilize significant blocs of voters behind redistributive platforms and thus structure electoral competition around rival positions on distributive issues. Politicization can also occur when social movements acquire sufficient mobilizational capacity to influence national policymaking agendas or induce institutional actors to respond to their claims. Such effects are especially likely where social movements are capable of disrupting everyday activities through large-scale social protests, strikes, street blockades, or occupations of public or private sites.

As explained in a recent report by the *Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo* (UNDP 2015b: 15), politicization entails an attempt to incorporate an issue into the political field of collective decision-making. Absent politicization, issues are typically relegated to the private spheres of family or interpersonal relations, civic engagement, or market exchanges. They are not, in other words, subject to the regulatory intervention of collective decision-making procedures under democratic institutions. To politicize, therefore, inevitably involves conflict between societal actors who seek to keep an issue in the private domain and those who aim to inject it into the public sphere where it can be subjected to collective decision-making processes. Politicization is first and foremost a process of expanding the political sphere of collective decision-making and reshaping the policymaking agenda.

This conceptualization of politicization is especially instructive for understanding the politics of inequality in contemporary Chile. Chile's post-1990 democratic regime not only inherited a political landscape where parties, labor unions, and other social actors who traditionally politicized inequalities had been heavily repressed; it also inherited a highly privatized and commodified market economy that relegated a wide range of social outcomes to the private sphere, at least partially insulating technocratic rulers from popular democratic demands. Although all of Latin America adopted neoliberal macro-economic structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s (Edwards 1995; Lora 2001), Chile went the furthest in constructing the “social pillars” of Polanyi’s “market society” (Polanyi 1944) through the liberalization of labor markets and the large-scale privatization of health care, education, and social security. These social pillars—education in particular—have been at the forefront of recent efforts to re-politicize inequality in Chile, as leftist parties and social movements have sought to redefine basic services as universal social citizenship rights that are subject to collective decision-making processes, rather than private goods that are allocated unequally by the marketplace.

Dictatorship, Democracy, and Depoliticization in Chile

Chile has a long and storied tradition of politicizing inequality under democracy. Alone in the Western Hemisphere, Chile developed mass-based Socialist (PSCh) and Communist (PCCh) parties with strong ties to organized labor by the 1930s. These parties participated in three consecutive center-left Popular Front governments, until the Radical Party-led coalition dissolved and the PCCh was repressed as the Cold War spread to Latin America in the late 1940s. After a period of fragmentation and decline, a reorganized PSCh joined the PCCh in a

new leftist electoral coalition in the late 1950s, which eventually elected Salvador Allende to the presidency in 1970—the first elected Marxist head of state in the history of Latin America. Arguably the most radical experiment in democratic socialism the world has ever seen, the Allende government moved quickly to redistribute large landholdings, nationalize banks and basic industries, increase wages, and launch redistributive social programs. Allende’s reforms triggered widespread mobilization by labor and peasant unions and community organizations, along with a furious counter-mobilization by business interests—which declared a capital strike—and their middle and upper class allies (see Stallings 1978; Winn 1986). Chile under Allende thus represented an especially acute form of the class-based distributive conflicts theorized by Boix (2003) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), but rarely seen in real-world democratic settings.

The 1973 military coup that demolished Allende’s “democratic road to socialism” was intended not only to reverse his socialist reforms, but to employ overwhelming military force to repress the parties and unions that backed them, demobilize their grass-roots constituencies, and impose an authoritarian political order that was closed to societal claims (Remmer 1980). By 1975, the military regime had begun to impose the economic corollary to this coercive depoliticization: the most doctrinaire and comprehensive program of neoliberal structural adjustment that Latin America had ever seen. Implemented by University of Chicago-trained Chilean technocrats who were insulated from societal pressures by military rule, neoliberal reforms dismantled trade protections and price controls, privatized industries and social services, slashed public spending and employment, and liberalized labor and capital markets (Foxley 1983; Silva 1996).

With leftist parties banned and driven underground by Pinochet's secret police, and with peasant and labor unions in steep decline (Roberts 1998), Chile's veritable market revolution encountered little organized resistance during its initial phase of implementation. Massive resistance erupted in 1983, however, following the collapse of the liberalized financial system and the onset of a severe recession in the midst of the region-wide debt crisis. After a decade of coercive deactivation, Chilean society quickly re-mobilized as the economic crisis weakened the dictatorship, provoking internal dissention within the ranks of the military regime and its technocratic and business supporters (see Silva 1996). A call by the copper workers' federation for a day of national protest in May 1983 sparked a three-year uprising against the dictatorship and its economic model, with broad participation from a wide range of labor, women's, youth, human rights, and community organizations. Increasingly, however, shantytown youth comprised the core of the protest movement as political violence escalated, with intensified military repression and the emergence of a Communist-backed armed insurgency (Garretón 1989b).

This resurgence of social mobilization coincided with a revival of opposition parties, with the centrist Christian Democrats and a moderate faction of the deeply splintered Socialist Party spearheading an effort to negotiate a regime transition with civilian representatives of the dictatorship. Opposition forces were split, therefore, between those who believed that mass protest and a popular insurrection could drive the regime from power, and those who thought popular insurrection against a professional military was futile, making a negotiated transition the only potential exodus from the dictatorship. The turning point came in late 1986 and 1987, when the protest movement began to wane, the economy began a long-term recovery, and the dictatorship moved to implement plans for a 1988 plebiscite on Pinochet's rule under the terms

of the regime's 1980 constitution. With the regime opening spaces for parties to regain legal status and resume political activities, a 16-party coalition of centrist and moderate left opposition parties known as the *Concertación* poured its energies into the plebiscite campaign, hoping to defeat the dictatorship where it was weakest—in the polling booth. Unable to sustain the protest movement and its strategy of popular rebellion when institutional channels were beginning to open, the Communist party reluctantly and belatedly joined the plebiscite campaign, but it remained outside the *Concertación* alliance (see Roberts 1998).

Chile transitioned to democracy when the opposition coalition defeated Pinochet in the 1988 plebiscite, negotiated a package of constitutional reforms with the regime, and proceeded to win competitive presidential elections in December 1989. The logic of the regime transition, however, and the balance of power that undergirded it, erected formidable obstacles to the politicization of inequalities under the new democratic regime, along three critical dimensions. First, despite the negotiation of constitutional reforms, the military regime left behind a series of authoritarian enclaves and institutional restrictions on popular sovereignty that would limit political and economic reforms under the new government of the *Concertación*. Most prominently, the Constitution allowed Pinochet to appoint a bloc of senators who gave conservative forces an unelected majority in the upper house of Congress, while the electoral law established an ingeniously disproportional binomial system of representation that kept the Communist Party outside of Congress and overrepresented the country's second largest electoral bloc—the conservative alliance of *Renovación Nacional* (RN) and *Unión Demócrata Independiente* (UDI). The center-left governing coalition, therefore, could not adopt reforms on its own; no legislation could pass without the support of conservative members of Congress who were affiliated with parties that were staunch defenders of Pinochet's legacy. This conservative

legislative veto placed major constraints on institutional and socioeconomic reforms under the new democratic regime.

Second, although the center-left parties that comprised the *Concertación* had been bitter opponents of the “Chicago Boys” neoliberal model and its attendant inequalities for most of the authoritarian period, they cautiously backed away from this critical stance during the period of regime transition. In part, this reflected the evident signs of dynamism in the Chilean economy by the second half of the 1980s, including the rapid development of new agricultural and natural resource-based export sectors. It also reflected a shift within the regime to a less doctrinaire and more pragmatic technocratic leadership team following the financial collapse of 1982-83 (Silva 1996). At a time when neighboring countries in Latin America were still mired in debt and inflationary crises and embracing versions of Chile’s free market reforms to stabilize their own economies, accelerating growth with price stability in Chile helped to reinforced business support for Pinochet and his neoliberal model. Indeed, it ensured that much of the business sector would vigorously oppose any regime transition that threatened continuity with the neoliberal model.

Recognizing that business cooperation would be vital to political and economic stability under a new democratic regime, the *Concertación* parties tempered their criticisms of neoliberalism, acknowledged the new dynamism in the Chilean economy, and sought to reassure business elites that their interests would be protected in any process of regime transition. They backed away from the protest movement of the mid-1980s, and the Socialists (PSCh) moved toward the center to align with the Christian Democrats (PDC), making a definitive break with their historic allies from the Communist Party and its stridently anti-neoliberal, quasi-insurrectionary line (Garretón 1989a). In the process, the parties of the *Concertación* channeled

activists from social spheres into more institutionalized electoral activities that did not require sustained popular mobilization (Oxhorn 1995). They pledged to address social needs, but to do so within the parameters of the neoliberal model itself, avoiding a return to the class and ideological polarization of the Allende period. Once in office, they adopted a technocratic approach to social policy, increasing spending on targeted poverty relief programs without politicizing class inequalities, promising major redistributive measures in election campaigns, or mobilizing popular constituencies outside the electoral arena as a counterweight to elite interests (see Torcal and Mainwaring 2003).

Third, this depoliticization of inequalities from above, in the partisan sphere, was complemented by social demobilization from below. The combination of political repression, economic crisis, and market restructuring had decimated the ranks of the labor and peasant movements at the core of Allende's experiment, while Pinochet's labor law placed on-going restrictions on unionization and collective bargaining (Roberts 1998; Kurtz 2004). Likewise, the shantytown youth and other pro-democratic social movements behind the 1983-86 protest cycle largely demobilized as traditional parties reemerged and "contentious politics" (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001) gave way to institutionalized forms of partisan and electoral competition (Oxhorn 1995). With the dictatorship removed as a focal point for varied forms of opposition protest, institutionalized channels of representation opening, and the dominant parties prioritizing political pacts and economic stability, the restoration of democratic civil and political liberties after 17 years of dictatorship did not spawn of surge of social mobilization around redistributive claims. As O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) theorized, the "resurrection of civil society" occurred before the regime transition itself—indeed, it was indispensable to drive the transition

process forward—but it quickly subsided once institutional actors and channels had been restored.

When inequalities were finally re-politicized in Chile—some 20 years later—it would occur along this third dimension of social mobilization from below, and largely in opposition to the first two dimensions of regime and partisan institutions. It is to that process that I now turn.

Social Protest and Re-Politicization

The socio-political and institutional landscape that congealed during Chile’s democratic transition proved to be highly resilient, especially in comparison to the political turmoil and institutional fluidity found in much of the rest of Latin America. Elsewhere in the region, democratic regimes and party systems, rather than a military dictatorship, assumed responsibility for imposing structural adjustment policies during the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s, and these institutions bore the attendant political costs. These costs were especially severe in countries where labor-based populist or leftist parties had taken the lead in the adoption of market reforms that violated their traditional statist and redistributive platforms. In countries like Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, such patterns of “bait-and-switch” liberalization de-aligned party systems programmatically and left them without institutionalized channels for dissent from market orthodoxy. This dissent was eventually channeled into mass-based, anti-systemic forms of social and electoral protest in the late 1990s and early 2000s, culminating in a series of presidential resignations, the partial or complete breakdown of traditional party systems, and the election of populist outsiders or new “movement parties” from outside the political establishment (see Silva 2009; Roberts 2014).

Chile, it appeared, had escaped such a fate. Alone in the region, Chile consolidated a comprehensive program of market reforms under a military dictatorship, insulating parties from the direct political costs of managing structural adjustment. When the parties returned to office in 1990, the country was in the early stages of a long-term cycle of rapid, market-driven growth, which allowed the *Concertación* to put new energy and resources into social programs without running the risks of major redistributive efforts. After the election of the Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin in 1990, the *Concertación* was able to negotiate a modest increase in the income tax with conservative actors in Congress, allowing for a gradual rise in social spending on housing, health, and family allowance programs (Weyland 1997). Although Congress blocked efforts by the government to adopt significant reforms to the labor law that would have expanded collective bargaining and encouraged unionization, the booming economy allowed wages to increase and employment to expand. Poverty rates fell sharply after 1990, therefore, even if the Gini index of income inequality stayed flat.

In the short term, rising living standards undoubtedly helped Chile avoid the kinds of social mobilization and mass protest that other countries in the region experienced at the turn of the century. Likewise, electoral stability was encouraged by the deep socio-political cleavage between pro- and anti-Pinochet blocs that structured competition and “sorted” the electorate under the new democratic regime (Valenzuela, Somma, and Scully, forthcoming). This cleavage had both regime and economic components, as it divided authoritarians from democrats as well as supporters from opponents of the neoliberal model. To be sure, the economic component of this cleavage “softened” as the Socialist Party broke with Communists, moved into alliance with the Christian Democrats, and grudgingly accepted the macroeconomic tenets of the neoliberal model. The cleavage was never erased, however, as the left-wing of the *Concertación* continued

to advocate labor and social policy reforms that diverged from the neoliberal orthodoxy of conservative parties, the UDI in particular.

Indeed, following two Christian Democratic presidents in the 1990s, the leadership of the *Concertación* shifted leftward in the second democratic decade with the election of Socialist presidents Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet. Reforms under Lagos eliminated the institution of designated senators and introduced a new program of universal coverage for basic health care needs, while Bachelet adopted a new public pension plan to expand social security to sectors of society that were excluded from or inadequately covered in the private pension system. Both Socialist presidents, therefore, reformed one of the privatized and commodified social pillars of the neoliberal model, pushing public policy in the direction of universal social citizenship rights. These reforms, however, maintained the technocratic logic of public policymaking in Chile, as they provided little impetus for social mobilization from below.

This socio-political landscape of institutional stability, gradual technocratic social reform, and ongoing social demobilization began to show strains over the course of Bachelet's term in office, however (2006-2010). At the institutional level, the stability of partisan and electoral competition contrasted with growing signs of societal detachment from established parties and representative institutions, especially among young people who had come of age politically since the regime transition. This could be seen in declining levels of partisan identification and participation in election campaigns, both ranking near the bottom in the Latin American region. Paradoxically, given the country's electoral stability, in the 2010 surveys of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), Chile ranked last in the region with a mere 11.6 percent of respondents sympathizing with a political party (Luna, Zechmeister and Seligson 2010: 170). Voter registration and turnout plummeted after the democratic transition, especially among

youth, with the percentage of the voting age population turning out to vote steadily falling from 86 percent in 1989 to 59.6 percent in 2009 (UNDP 2015a: 34). By the end of Bachelet's first administration, Chileans ranked last in Latin America in the percentage of survey respondents expressing an interest in politics—28.6 percent—and second lowest in the percentage who said they had attended a meeting of their municipal government or council, a mere 4 percent (Luna, Zechmeister and Seligson 2010: 135, 143).

This growing detachment from established representative institutions, however, did not necessarily indicate a withdrawal from politics altogether. To the contrary, it was a prelude to a reactivation of civil society around a series of issues and social claims that mainstream parties had largely neglected. As documented by Somma and Medel (forthcoming), social protest activity steadily increased after 2003-04, culminating in the surge of educational and environmental protests in 2011-12. Students, sub-contract workers, indigenous groups, and environmental activists were at the forefront of this social mobilization, which expanded the range of policymaking debate and forced inequalities back onto the national political agenda in a way that was unprecedented under the new democratic regime. Social and economic inequalities, therefore, were re-politicized outside the party system—in sharp contrast to Chile's pre-1973 democratic experience—and increasingly in opposition to traditional parties altogether.

Although detachment from mainstream parties took place across the political spectrum, the re-politicization of inequalities essentially outflanked the party system on the left. Detachment and outflanking are thus related but distinct phenomena. Outflanking to the left had two principal dimensions—one programmatic, and the other organizational. First, on the programmatic front, it signified the articulation of claims that were substantially more challenging to market orthodoxy than those supported by the Socialist Party and its allied

offshoot, the Party for Democracy (PPD), within the *Concertación*. For example, the copper mining *contratistas* movement of sub-contract workers launched the longest labor strike in the democratic period in 2007, pressing claims for bonuses and collective bargaining rights that challenged the “entire legal framework” undergirding Chile’s neoliberal model of “flexibilized” labor relations (Donoso 2013b: 2-3). Similarly, the “Patagonia Without Dams” environmental movement that sparked major protests against hydroelectric projects in 2011 criticized the subordination of environmental concerns to economic development goals and the profit motives of private energy companies, both domestic and transnational (Schaefer, forthcoming).

Programmatic outflanking to the left was most dramatic, however, in the education sector, a social pillar of the neoliberal model that the *Concertación*’s cautious technocratic reforms had left largely intact. Although successive governments of the *Concertación* had launched new programs of targeted spending on schools in low-income districts and subsidized an expansion of the school day, “there was never any attempt to alter the general structure of the education sector” (Pribble 2013: 97). Education had been decentralized and partially privatized by the military regime in the early 1980s, and the process of privatization deepened following the democratic transition; the percentage of elementary and middle school students in public schools decreased from nearly 80 percent in 1980 to less than 60 percent in 1990, and continued to fall under the *Concertación* to around 40 percent in 2010 (Bidegain Ponte 2015: 193). Students in poor municipalities typically remained in low-quality public schools, while middle class families struggled to cover tuition charges at publicly-subsidized private schools with selective admissions requirements. Although the percentage of students pursuing post-secondary education increased sharply as for-profit private universities, vocational schools, and technical institutes proliferated—offering widely varying qualities of education—government subsidies

and scholarship programs were unable to equalize access to higher education or prevent tuition debt burdens from rising. As the OECD (2004: 254-255) reported, Chile's education system "was consciously class-structured" and "highly stratified" in its access to quality education at all levels of instruction; students from lower-income families and public school backgrounds were largely excluded from leading institutions of higher education by the combination of steep tuition fees and competitive admissions standards.

The student rebellion took direct aim at the privatized, market-based logic of this education system, which both reflected and reproduced class inequalities in Chilean society. In April 2006, small-scale protests by high school students angered by the collapse of a public school roof and delays in the delivery of school transport passes quickly swelled into a much larger series of demonstrations against educational inequalities. Marches associated with a national student strike culminated in violent clashes with the police and over a thousand arrests in early May. When newly-elected President Bachelet criticized the unrest, student organizations responded with a wave of sit-ins that paralyzed hundreds of schools and mobilized over 130,000 secondary students (Donoso 2013b: 10-11). Although Bachelet quieted the so-called "*Pinguino* rebellion"—named for the students' black-and-white uniforms—by creating an advisory commission to dialogue with student and teacher representatives and develop a proposal for education reforms, the package of reforms that finally worked its way through Congress in 2009 was so watered down that it left intact the basic structure of the privatized education system (Pribble 2013: 104-105). Widely interpreted as a betrayal by the student movement (Bidegain Ponte 2015: 252-255), the stage was set for the 2011-12 explosion of protests by university students against Bachelet's conservative successor, Sebastian Piñera, the largest and most sustained cycle of social mobilization the country had seen since the mid-1980s. Hundreds of

universities and secondary schools were closed by student occupations, and over 900 demonstrations occurred across the country on a national day of protest in August 2011 (Guzman-Concha 2012: 410).

With support from teachers' unions, professors, and the national labor confederation, the student movement called for an end to for-profit education and demanded free universal public education at all levels of instruction. These demands clearly outflanked the party system on the left programmatically, as they demanded structural reform of the highly privatized education system, and not merely new forms of government spending or quality improvements like the *Concertación* had offered. This politicization of inequality also outflanked the party system to the left organizationally, as political leadership of both secondary and university student organizations moved progressively leftward over time. Following the democratic transition, student activists from the Christian Democratic and Socialist parties assumed leadership roles in the major student federations, but by the latter part of the 1990s and early 2000s Communist Party student leaders and independent radical left networks known as "social collectives" were moving into the forefront. With their staunch criticisms of the education system, their emphasis on organization through popular assemblies, and their preference for confrontational forms of protest over negotiations with the government, Communist and independent left networks controlled two-thirds of the university student federations represented in the powerful Confederation of Chilean Students (CONFECH) by 2005 (Bidegain Ponte 2015: 235), and they played central roles in the 2006 and 2011 student uprisings (Donoso 2013a: 6-7). Indeed, even the Communist Party lost ground to independent left groups in the student movement as it joined a reconfigured center-left alliance with the old parties of the *Concertación* in advance of the 2013 elections that returned Bachelet to the presidency.

As such, the politicization of inequality in Chile was embedded within a complex, highly contradictory process of societal detachment from established parties and representative institutions. For some Chileans, institutional detachment undoubtedly reflected an apolitical withdrawal from public affairs of any sort. For others, however, it reflected an alienation from institutions that had largely ceased to offer meaningful alternatives on issues of major importance to their daily lives—in particular, issues related to social needs and inequalities. This latter subgroup was, in fact, highly political—or, at least, potentially available for oppositional forms of political mobilization around these social claims. Other citizens, moreover, continued to identify with established parties, but nonetheless supported protest activities that pressured these parties to respond more aggressively to social claims.

These tendencies are evident in the 2015 national survey of Chilean citizens by the Universidad Diego Portales, which included questions on political attitudes and participation, including participation in protest activities.¹ In the survey, 12.1 percent of respondents claimed to have participated in at least one of five different types of protest activity in the previous year: strikes, demonstrations, street blockades, property damage, or the occupation of a building. As seen in Table 1, over a third of protest participants—36.9 percent—identified with a political party, more than double the rate of party identifiers (17.6 percent) among non-protestors. Citizens who protested, therefore, were *more*, not less, likely to identify with political parties, and were engaged in protest activity to articulate claims that remained poorly represented or to pressure established institutions to be more responsive.

* * * Table 1 about here * * *

¹ The survey is available at <http://encuesta.udp.cl/>. Calculations reported in this paper are based on the author's analysis of the survey data. See the Appendix for a description of variables.

Indeed, statistical analysis of the survey results demonstrates that protestors in Chile tended to be highly engaged in civic life, left-leaning politically, and deeply concerned with the so-called “social deficits” of the neoliberal model. Table 2 presents results from a series of logistic regression models of protest participation, testing for the effects of various social and political factors while controlling for demographic influences. As would be expected in a context of widespread student mobilization, age is negatively correlated with social protest, indicating that young people are more likely to take to the streets. Although gender has no statistically significant effect on protest, education has a strong and consistent relationship: protest is more common among citizens with higher levels of education, which likely serves as a facilitator of political engagement. Once education is controlled for, however, socioeconomic status has a negative association with protest participation that reaches statistical significance in two of the four regression models and falls just short of significance in the other two models. The widespread perception that Chile’s contemporary social movements are predominantly middle class in character thus appears to be somewhat misleading; the findings reported here suggest that better-educated working and lower-middle class youth are the most active protest participants. These social groups are likely to have strong aspirations for upward mobility, and they look to the government to address social problems that hold them back. Indeed, protest participants manifest a strong belief that social needs are the most important problems facing the country. A dummy variable identifying respondents who named a specific social need or service—education, health care, pensions, housing, the environment, transportation, or public works—as the principal problem facing the country is positively related to protest behavior and statistically significant at the .01 level.² Respondents who identified corruption or crime as the

² Interestingly, these concrete social needs that are closely tied to specific government policies—or the lack thereof—weighed more heavily on protest participation than broader or more abstract economic

most important problem, on the other hand, were less likely to protest, although the regression coefficients for these indicators are not statistically significant.

* * * Table 2 about here * * *

The statistical analysis also suggests that protest behavior is often an extension of other forms of civic engagement, and not simply an expression of alienation or discontent. Protest participants have higher levels of political interest, and they are more likely to self-locate politically on the left, despite the presence of a Socialist president at the time the survey was conducted.³ They are also more also more likely to belong to diverse, non-religious civil and political society organizations such as unions, parties, professional associations, neighborhood councils, charitable associations, and sports or cultural groups. Likewise, protestors are more likely to have participated in democratic institutional channels like party meetings or convincing others to vote. Interestingly, protestors are not more inclined to express dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy, but their participatory ethos is marked by populist tendencies: they have a strong faith in the political subjectivity of “the people,” and skepticism toward a professionalized political establishment that claims to speak and act on behalf of the people. Protest participation is thus positively related to an index of populist attitudes in the regression models.

In many respects, these statistical results reflect the manifest contradictions of the contemporary Chilean political context—one in which representative institutions are (to date) politically stable but increasingly shallow in their social roots; a highly activated and politicized subset of the population operates within an overarching context of political withdrawal or

concerns with poverty, inequality, and employment, where outcomes are heavily conditioned by macroeconomic forces beyond the government’s control.

³ Virtually identical results are obtained if an indicator for identification with Bachelet’s Nueva Mayoría coalition replaces leftist identity in the regression models. Protestors, in short, are more likely to identify with the governing coalition than citizens who do not protest.

detachment; and at least part of this activated subsector retains linkages to established parties while pressuring them to deepen redistributive social reforms and expand social citizenship rights. Consequently, although much of the social mobilization and protest has occurred outside and against the dominant parties of the post-1990 democratic regime, it has yet to spawn an electorally competitive new “movement party” such as the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) in Bolivia, much less a populist outsider such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Rafael Correa in Ecuador.

Instead, social mobilization pulled the established center-left coalition back to the left programmatically, at least partially reactivating the left-right policy cleavage that had progressively faded over the course of the democratic period. Bachelet’s “New Majority” expanded the old *Concertación* by incorporating the Communist Party into its electoral and governing alliance and competing in 2013 elections on a platform that embraced much of the student movement’s demands. The second Bachelet administration proceeded to implement a major tax reform to help fund social programs, replace the binomial electoral system with a more proportional system of representation, and propose a rewriting of the military’s constitution. By early 2016, it had pushed through Congress a major education reform designed to eliminate fees and selective admissions requirements in state-subsidized schools and provide free university education to some 165,000 low-income students. Although other parts of the government’s education reform package remain pending—including the renationalization of municipal schools—the third of the four “social pillars” of the neoliberal model is clearly in transition, with the market-based logic of privatized education losing ground to a more universalistic conception of education as a right of social citizenship.

Whereas the pension and health care pillars of neoliberalism were reformed by state technocrats in the absence of significant social mobilization, the education pillar became the focal point of a new politicization of inequality in Chilean society to which democratic institutions were slow to respond. Although mass protest activity has tapered off from its peak in 2011-12, inequality has clearly returned to the forefront of the political agenda; indeed, in the most recent *Latinobarómetro* survey, only 5 percent of Chileans said that the distribution of income in their society was just, the lowest percentage in the region (*Latinobarómetro* 2015: 67). Chile's partisan and governing institutions have demonstrated a renewed responsiveness to these societal concerns, but it is yet to be determined whether this belated response is sufficient to reverse the steady erosion of their capacity to articulate and represent societal interests. The fraying of the socio-political matrix implanted during the 1989-90 regime transition has left the country in uncharted political waters; the churning of these waters by the politicization of inequality is sure to be a driving force in the years ahead.

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Table 1: Social Protest and Party Identification

	Protest Participants	Non-Protestors
Party Identifiers	58 (36.9)	201 (17.6)
Non-Partisans	99 (63.1)	944 (82.4)
Total	157 (100.0)	1145 (100.0)

Source: *Encuesta Nacional UDP 2015* (<http://encuesta.udp.cl/>). Calculations by the author; see Appendix for a description of variables.

Table 2: Social and Political Correlates of Protest Participation
(Logistic Regression Analysis)

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Demographic Indicators				
Age	-.0371*** (.0070)	-.0379*** (.0070)	-.0383*** (.0070)	-.0372*** (.0071)
Education	.2335*** (.0603)	.2302*** (.0605)	.2332*** (.0600)	.2277*** (.0599)
Gender	-.1259 (.2119)	-.0872 (.2129)	-.0508 (.2110)	-.0656 (.2116)
Socioeconomic Status	-.3071* (.1516)	-.2934 (.1518)	-.3008* (.1508)	-.2900 (.1505)
Main Problem				
Social Needs	.6920** (.2210)	.6711** (.2217)	---	---
Corruption	---	---	-.1272 (.3403)	---
Crime	---	---	---	-.3560 (.2362)
Political Engagement				
Political Interest	.7106** (.2546)	.7363** (.2549)	.7387** (.2542)	.7315** (.2543)
Left Identity	.8442*** (.2497)	.8254*** (.2509)	.8334*** (.2503)	.8095*** (.2518)
Civil Society Participation	1.017*** (.2187)	.9800*** (.2194)	.9362*** (.2169)	.9339*** (.2167)
Institutional Participation	2.106*** (.2487)	2.122*** (.2503)	2.124*** (.2489)	2.099*** (.2488)
Democratic Dissatisfaction	-.0534 .2506	---	---	---
Populist Attitudes	---	.1884* (.0827)	.2005* (.0822)	.1897* (.0821)
Pseudo R-squared	0.3271	0.3326	0.3234	0.3257
Prob > chi2	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
N	1302	1302	1302	1302

* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$ (standard errors in parentheses)

Source: *Encuesta Nacional UDP 2015* (<http://encuesta.udp.cl/>). See Appendix for a description of variables in the regression analysis.

Appendix

Variables included in Table 1 and Table 2:

Age: Continuous variable for the age of the respondent on their last birthday (P54).

Civil Society Participation: Dummy variable indicating that the respondent belongs to any of the non-religious civil society organizations included in P14.

Corruption: Dummy variable indicating respondents who identified corruption as the most important problem facing the country (P10).

Crime: Dummy variable indicating respondents who identified crime as the most important problem facing the country (P10).

Democratic Dissatisfaction: Dummy variable for respondents who indicated they are “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied” with the functioning of democracy in Chile (P13).

Education: A 0-9 scale indicating the level of education achieved by the respondent (P59).

Gender: Dummy variable for the respondent’s gender (P53; female = 1).

Institutional Participation: Dummy variable indicating that the respondent has participated in a party meeting or tried to convince others to vote (P16A & B).

Left Identity: Dummy variable for respondents who indicated that they identified or sympathized with the political positions of the left (P23).

Party Identification: Dummy variable indicating whether or not a respondent identified a political party that “best represents your interests, beliefs, and values” (P21).

Political Interest: Dummy variable for respondents who indicated that they are “somewhat interested” or “very interested” in politics (P15).

Populist Attitudes: An index (0-4) constructed by summing the dummy variables from four questions on populist attitudes. Respondents received a “1” on each question if they said they agreed or strongly agreed that “politicians in congress have to follow the will of the people” (P41A), that “the most important decisions should be taken by the people and not by politicians” (P41B), that “the political differences between the elite and the people are greater than the differences that exist among the people” (P41C), and that they “would prefer to be represented by a common citizen rather than by an experienced politician” (P41D).

Protest Participation: Dummy variable indicating whether the respondent participated in at least one of the following types of protest activity in the past year: a demonstration (P16C), property

destruction or looting (P16D), occupation of a building (P16E), blocking a street (P16F), or a strike (P16G).

Social Needs: Dummy variable indicating whether the respondent named one of the following social needs or public services as the most important problem facing the country: education, health care, pensions, housing, the environment, public works, or public transportation (P10).

Socioeconomic Status: A 1-5 scale indicating the respondent's material well-being based on household and living conditions (P73, with the scale inverted so that higher scores reflect a higher socioeconomic status).