



# Journal of Politics in Latin America

## Political Representation in Contemporary Chile

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Castiglioni, Rossana, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2016),  
Introduction. Challenges to Political Representation in Contemporary Chile, in:  
*Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 8, 3, 3–24.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-10025>

ISSN: 1868-4890 (online), ISSN: 1866-802X (print)

The online version of this article can be found at: [www.jpla.org](http://www.jpla.org)

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Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Latin American Studies  
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## Introduction

# Challenges to Political Representation in Contemporary Chile

Rossana Castiglioni and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

**Abstract:** Democratic representation seems to be increasingly under stress in various established democracies, such as Greece, Spain, and the USA. Chile is also following this trend, but there are a number of particularities that make the Chilean case distinctive. After all, Chile is widely regarded as one of the most consolidated democratic regimes in Latin America and as having solid economic performance. However, citizens have shown decreasing levels of satisfaction with democracy and representative institutions, and are turning to protest and social mobilization to express their discontent. The paradox that Chile is facing today lies in the mismatch between the attitudes of voters and the overall performance of the regime. In explaining this intriguing puzzle, most of the literature has emphasized the legacy of institutional arrangements inherited from military rule. We argue that institutions are necessary but insufficient for explaining the increasing challenges that democratic representation faces. Thus, we also claim that it is necessary to consider not only the expansion of critical citizens and middle income earners, but also the repoliticization of inequalities.

■ Manuscript received 9 November 2016; accepted 6 December 2016

**Keywords:** Chile, representation, institutions, critical citizens, middle sectors, politicization of inequalities.

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# 1 Introduction

During the last decade, Chile has faced serious challenges in the sphere of political representation.<sup>1</sup> Despite growing normative support for democracy, there is increasing dissatisfaction with the way in which democracy is operating in the country (PNUD 2014: 54–55). Moreover, Chilean political parties have severe problems winning the hearts and minds of voters. According to the national surveys conducted by Diego Portales University, 53 percent of the electorate did not identify with any political party in 2005, and that number rose to 81 percent in 2015. In addition, the country has seen the emergence of massive waves of protests and the appearance of strong social movements in the last few years (Donoso 2013; Donoso and von Bülow 2017).

At the same time, Chile is considered one of Latin America's most stable and democratic countries, as well as one of the strongest economies in the region. In 1990, 38.6 percent of the Chilean population was living under the poverty line; this number decreased to 7.8 percent in 2013 (CEPALSTAT 2016). Furthermore, Chile's current GDP per capita is similar to that of Portugal, the poorest country in Western Europe. It is also worth noting that although some outsiders with a populist discourse have been presidential candidates, they have never obtained a sizeable share of the vote. Not coincidentally, the comparative literature on Latin American politics usually considers Chile as one of the countries of the region with the most stable party systems and strongest political institutions (Weyland, Madrid, and Hunter 2010; Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Roberts 2015).

All in all, Chile's current political situation is quite puzzling. Despite being one of the most established democracies and richest countries in Latin America, the country's citizens show decreasing levels of satisfaction with democracy and representative institutions. The paradox that Chile faces today lies in the mismatch between the attitudes of voters and the overall performance of the regime. Whereas the former seem to be increasingly angry and mistrustful, the latter has been able to secure economic growth and political stability. The main aim of this special

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1 A previous version of this contribution was presented at a workshop organized by the Millennium Nucleus "Challenges to Political Representation" at the Universidad Diego Portales in Santiago de Chile on 31 March and 1 April 2016. The authors would like to thank all participants for their valuable feedback and particularly to Kenneth Roberts, who gave us detailed comments. All remaining errors are ours alone. The authors would also like to acknowledge support from the Chilean Millennium Science Initiative (project NS130008).

issue is to analyze this paradox in order not only to better understand the current political situation of the country and its prospects, but also to develop an analytical framework that helps explain Chile's challenges to political representation in a comparative perspective.

Although Chile is not currently on the brink of a crisis of democratic representation, the situation is cause for concern, particularly because recent corruption scandals related to campaign financing (Matamala 2014) have further diminished the legitimacy of the establishment. These corruption scandals have helped fuel growing doubts about the honesty of the Chilean establishment as a whole, since it has become clear that almost every political party has been involved in suspicious mechanisms of payments from private donors, whose money appears to have changed hands not out of altruism, but rather to obtain specific benefits in return. At the same time, political elites are undertaking significant reforms, such as a new electoral law and a reorganization of the education system, but it is not clear if these reforms will generate the expected outcomes in the mid and long terms. Moreover, one cannot rule out the potentially unexpected consequences of the ongoing reforms. Despite this grim scenario, Chile has an important advantage over many of its neighboring countries: relatively high degrees of stateness (Altman and Luna 2012). By this we mean that state agents and institutions generally have the capacity to exercise their fundamental functions. Not by chance, the public prosecution office is investigating the corruption scandals mentioned above and has already convicted some important people. The proper functioning of the judiciary per se will not strengthen the linkage between voters and politicians, but will at least provide incentives for the behavior of the elites to change and demonstrate to citizens that the rule of law exists.

At the same time, given that Chile has relatively high degrees of stateness, citizens expect that the implementation of reforms should produce the desired outcomes, and politicians have spared no effort in raising expectations. However, previous reforms have shown that although the state can succeed in incorporating excluded sectors, this process of incorporation can trigger new demands that might require major transformations in the realm of public policy. There is probably no better example of this than the implementation of a state-guaranteed private loan system for higher education in 2006 (known by its Spanish acronym CAE). This policy innovation has focused on improving access to university education for new students, without paying sufficient attention to the difficulties associated with retaining underprivileged students in the higher education system. This loan system has also contributed to the

expansion of low-quality universities, which then provide degrees that have low value on the job market. As a consequence, a significant amount of underprivileged students, when they are actually able to graduate, are increasingly obtaining degrees that do not secure them enough money to both pay back their loans and have a decent quality of life. It is not a coincidence that massive student protests demanding free and high-quality education materialized six years after the implementation of this loan system, right after the first generation of underprivileged students who obtained university degrees realized that they were caught in a trap.

In this contribution, we show that Chilean democracy is indeed increasingly under stress and we review the arguments that have been advanced in the scholarly debate in order to understand the puzzling situation of the country. The remainder of the contribution is structured as follows. In the next section, we examine the challenges to political representation that Chile is currently facing and we offer some empirical illustrations of the current political situation. We then present the most common explanations for the paradox outlined above – the mismatch between the attitudes of voters and the overall performance of the regime – and then argue that it is necessary to incorporate two explanations to the existing institutionalist ones. The first explanation is the rise of critical citizens and new middle sectors, and the second is the politicization of inequalities. We conclude this contribution by summarizing the main ideas of this special issue.

## 2 Four Emerging Challenges to Democratic Representation in Chile

There is little doubt that Chile experienced a successful transition to democracy, which became possible due to the interaction between international factors and the political strategies of local actors (Altman, Piñeiro, and Toro 2013). However, there is an open debate about the type and quality of the regime that emerged after Pinochet's dictatorship. Although most scholars maintain that Chilean democracy became consolidated quite early – in the sense of carrying out free and fair elections and thus avoiding an authoritarian reversal – many have argued that the new democratic regime should be considered “incomplete” (Garretón and Garretón 2010), “stalked” (Portales 2010) or “semi-sovereign” (Huneus 2014). While each of these adjectives has been used to advance different theoretical approaches, all of these approaches share the view that Chilean democracy has several weaknesses, particularly when it comes to

fostering political participation and countering socioeconomic inequalities.

We agree with the general argument that democracy in Chile is far from perfect. Yet, we also know from the early work of Robert Dahl (1970, 1989) that every democracy falls short of the ideal and has room for improvement (see also Dunn 2005; Tilly 2007). To better understand the current political situation of the country and its prospects, it is necessary to devote less attention to the weaknesses of Chilean democracy and place more emphasis on the challenges to political representation that the country is experiencing today. In line with recent research in comparative politics, we maintain that political representation should be thought of as linkage mechanisms between voters and politicians (e.g., Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011; Kitschelt 2000; Mainwaring, Bejarano, and Leongómez 2006). The extent to which these linkage mechanisms are working properly is an empirical matter and studying them has important consequences for better understanding the health of the democratic system. After all, if voters have the impression that their interests are taken into account by the political establishment, one can expect relatively high levels of satisfaction with and support for democracy. By contrast, if citizens feel that their opinions are not considered by elected politicians, they will not only exhibit low confidence in democratic institutions, but also try to express their interests through other vehicles, such as civic organizations and social movements. Nevertheless, as Morgan and Meléndez rightly indicate in their contribution to this special issue, political parties are the primary agents when it comes to providing a bridge between society and the state since they are capable of both articulating broad interests and implementing public policies.

By analyzing challenges to political representation, we can get a clearer picture of how the emergence of new actors and political processes are putting Chilean democracy under stress. As Peter Siavelis' article shows in detail, the very institutional design that permitted the consolidation of the democratic regime was created to generate governability, but not to process social conflicts and pressures from below. This means that part of the difficulties the country faces today are related to the institutionalization of a model of governance that helped Chile create political stability after the transition, but turned out to be increasingly counterproductive afterwards (Valenzuela and Dammert 2006). For instance, holding closed-door meetings with a small number of actors was probably useful to securing democracy when Pinochet was still alive, but after his death there is little reason to believe that this approach still offers anything. Therefore, the rise of social movements and waves of

protest not only questions the status quo, but also shows the increasing problems that actors and institutions have in representing the electorate adequately. As Kenneth Roberts maintains in his contribution to this special issue, it is now – for the time – an open question in Chile whether the existing political parties will change their practices and programs, as well as being able to establish alliances with those new actors who are politicizing many of the shortcomings of the post-transition model of governance.

Without intending to provide an exhaustive empirical analysis of the challenges to political representation in contemporary Chile, we claim that there are at least four empirical indicators one should consider: (a) decreasing identification with political parties, (b) declining trust in political institutions, (c) falling levels of electoral participation, and (d) the rise of protest. Whereas the first two indicators are related to citizens' perceptions and thus the attitudinal/subjective dimension of political representation, the latter two are linked to voters' conduct and, therefore, the behavioral/objective dimension of political representation (Mainwaring, Bejarano, and Leongómez 2006: 15). We discuss these four empirical indicators below.

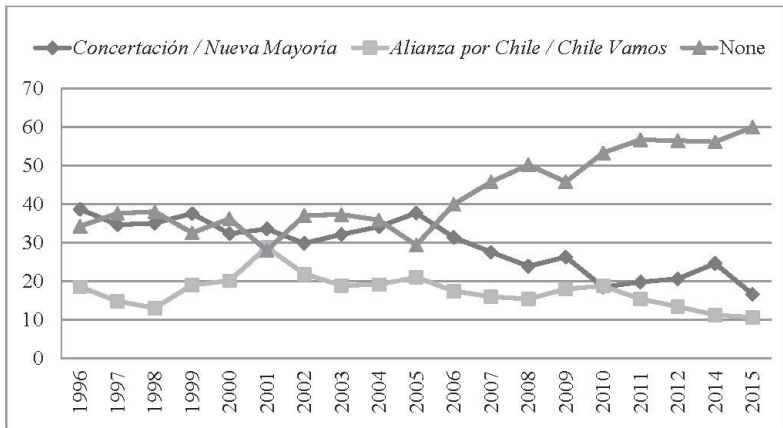
In contrast to many Latin American countries, Chile is characterized by a very stable party system, which is dominated by two political coalitions: the center-left alliance formerly called *Concertación* but more recently *Nueva Mayoría*, and the center-right alliance called *Alianza por Chile* and more recently *Chile Vamos*.<sup>2</sup> Since the transition to democracy in 1989, every elected president has belonged to one of these two political coalitions, which have been able to control almost every seat in Congress. Nevertheless, there are growing signs that the parties of these two coalitions are not only becoming increasingly detached from their social bases, but also have growing problems attracting voters (Altman and Luna 2011; Luna and Mardones 2010). As we indicated at the beginning of this

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2 The *Concertación* was the coalition that opposed Pinochet in the 1988 plebiscite and has remained relatively stable in subsequent elections. The main parties in the coalition are the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) and the Partido Socialista (PS). It also includes the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), a catch-all splinter party from the PS, and the smaller Partido Radical (PR). For the 2013 election the *Concertación* widened its alliance to include the Partido Comunista (PC), changing its name to *Nueva Mayoría*, but it is unclear if the current members of the coalition will campaign together for 2017 presidential and parliamentary election. In the case of the center-right, the *Alianza* coalition is composed of Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) and Renovación Nacional (RN), but two new parties (Evolución Política and Partido Regionalista Independiente) are part of the current center-right coalition named *Chile Vamos*.

contribution, national surveys conducted by Diego Portales University found that 53 percent of the electorate did not identify with any political party in 2005, and that number rose to 81 percent in 2015. Moreover, data provided by the Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP) demonstrates that whereas approximately 60 percent of the electorate sympathized with one of the two main existing political coalitions at the end of the 1990s, this number has dropped to almost 30 percent today. In addition, data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) reveals that Chile has one of the lowest levels of partisan sympathy in the Americas. By way of illustration, only 12 percent of the Chilean electorate sympathized with any political party in 2012 (PNUD 2014: 287).

Figure 1. Identification with Political Coalitions in Chile (in Percentage, Yearly Average)



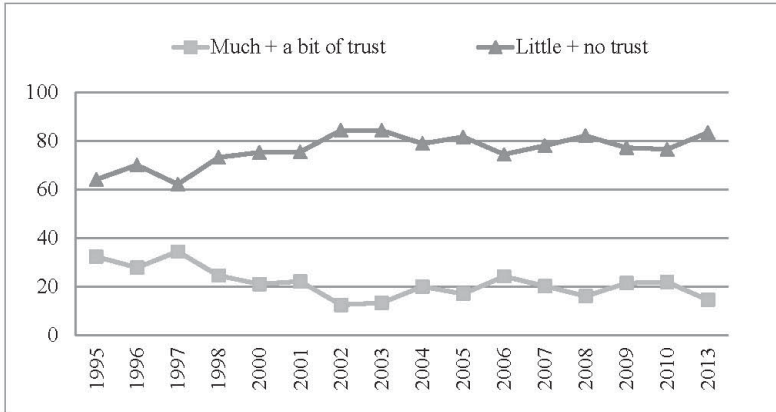
Source: Centro de Estudios Públicos.

Trust in political institutions is the second notable indicator of citizens’ perceptions about democracy. As Russell Dalton (2004: 1) has indicated, we should be concerned about the fact that people “have grown distrustful of politicians, skeptical about democratic institutions, and disillusioned about how the democratic process functions.” If we consider the data provided by Latinobarómetro, the levels of trust in political institutions of Chilean citizens are not that different from those of the majority of Latin American citizens. Nevertheless, the region exhibits much lower levels of trust in political institutions than Eastern Europe, East Asia, and Western Europe (PNUD 2014: 288). Moreover, the country has seen an important decline in trust in Congress and political parties since



the end of the 1990s. According to the surveys conducted by *Latinobarómetro*, one-third of the population trusted political parties in 1995, but this number declined to 15 percent in 2013.

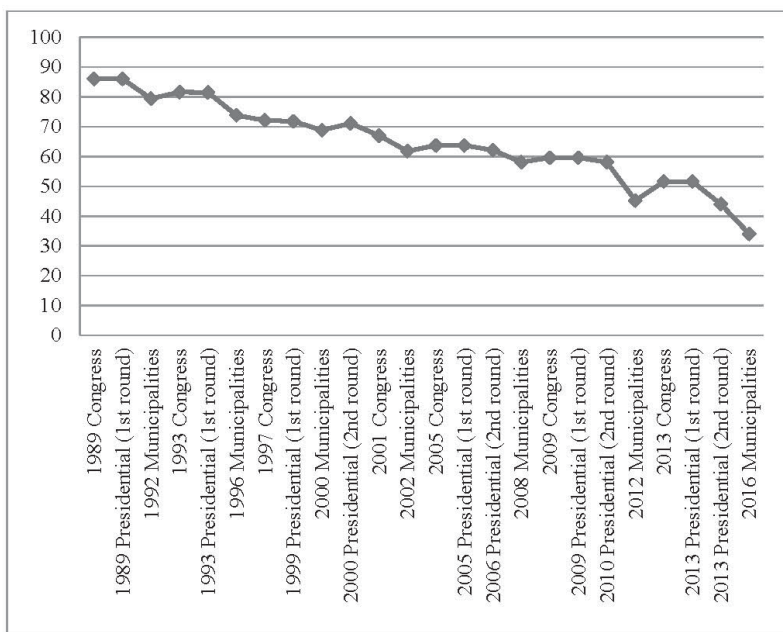
Figure 2. Trust in Political Parties in Chile (in Percentage)



Source: *Latinobarómetro*.

When it comes to examining voters’ conduct, one of the most important indicators is political participation. After all, given that the periodic holding of free and fair elections is the most distinctive feature of a democratic regime, the turnout level in those elections tells us something about the health of the democratic system. As Peter Mair (2013: 17) has pointed out, decreasing levels of political participation indicate popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics. In this regard, the data for Chile is quite alarming because turnout in elections has been declining steadily (PNUD 2014: 34). In the last municipal elections, which took place at the end of 2016, 35 percent of voters participated. By contrast, approximately 85 percent of the electorate voted in the presidential elections of 1989; that is, the elections that marked the end of Pinochet’s dictatorship. This means that since the return to democracy 25 years ago, the turnout level has dropped by 50 percentage points.

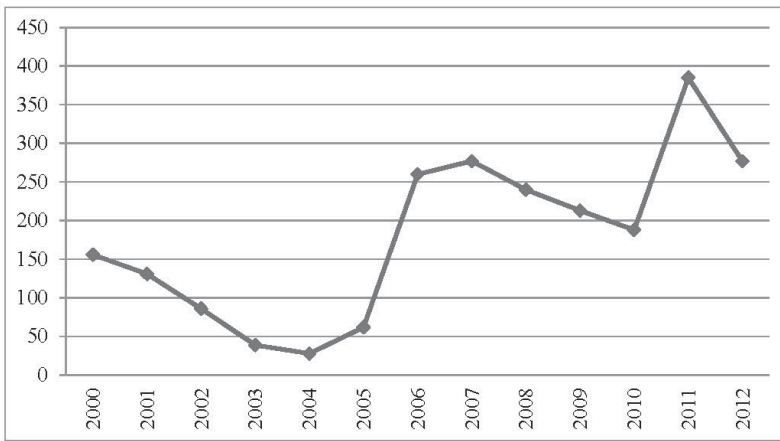
Figure 3. Electoral Participation in Post-Transition Chile (in Percentage)



Source: Servicio Electoral.

While it is true that participation in elections has been declining steadily, another form of political engagement that has been becoming increasingly common is protest. Social movements have been gaining both organizational strength and political influence in the last few years (Donoso and von Bülow 2017). Part of the reason for this new development lies in the increasing detachment between civil society and the political parties of the center-left coalition, which after the transition to democracy sought political demobilization to reduce pressure from below that allegedly could have risked the consolidation of democracy (Oxhorn 1995; Silva 2009). Based on Nicolás Somma’s database of protest events taking place in Chile between January 2000 and August 2012, it is quite clear that protests have been growing steadily, particularly from 2005 onwards (Somma and Medel 2017). Moreover, there is little doubt that the student movement has increasing political power, to the point that four leaders of the 2011 student protests have been members of the chamber of deputies since 2014 and the current Bachelet government is trying to undertake a major reform of the education system.

Figure 4. Protest Events in Chile between January 2000 and August 2012



Source: Database generated by Nicolás Somma.<sup>3</sup>

In summary, we have presented four indicators – decreasing identification with political parties, declining trust in political institutions, falling levels of electoral participation, and the rise of protest – to show that Chilean democracy is increasingly under stress. This raises the following question: To what extent should these challenges to political representation be seen as signs of an unfolding crisis that could eventually lead to growing political instability and massive support for political outsiders and populist leaders, who could in turn provoke a collapse of the party system? This question has been increasingly raised by academics and pundits alike, particularly after the corruption scandals that came to light last year in relation to campaign financing of presidential and parliamentary elections as well as instances of influence peddling involving Bachelet's family and other politicians. There is no doubt that these corruption scandals have weakened not only the approval ratings and credibility of Bachelet's administration, but also citizens' confidence in Congress, political parties, and the business community. Because this process is still evolving, it is too early to offer a conclusive answer to this question. What we know with certainty is that the country is facing growing challenges to political representation. The extent to which these challenges can be addressed in a proper way by old and new political actors will

<sup>3</sup> The authors would like to thank Nicolás Somma for sharing his database and allowing us to put this figure in our contribution. For more details on the operationalization of this database, see Somma and Medel (2017).

determine whether Chile will be able to enter an era of political stability and material progress or an era of electoral volatility and economic decay.

### 3 Explanations

As we indicated above, this special issue seeks to address a clear empirical paradox. How is it possible that one of the most stable and consolidated democracies in the Latin American region has such low levels of satisfaction with representative institutions? This special issue proposes to examine this paradox using elements of the literature on comparative politics to encourage reflection on Chile's current situation and offer an analytical framework to assess the increasing challenges to political representation that the country is facing. There has been increasing interest in addressing this question in the Chilean academic milieu. Most of the literature on this topic has emphasized the relevance of institutional factors to explain why democratic representation has been increasingly challenged.

Like most scholars working on this topic, we believe that institutions matter. However, we also consider institutions a necessary but insufficient condition in explaining this puzzle. As a result, we argue that the combined effect of three explanatory factors should be considered: the country's institutional design, the emergence of critical citizens in a context of middle-income earners' expansion, and the increasing processes of politicization of inequalities. Although we spell out each of these explanatory factors individually below, we believe that the strength of this analytical framework lies in the combined effect of each of its components.

#### 3.1 Institutions

Many studies have emphasized that formal institutions, particularly those associated with the constitutional order and the electoral system, as well as some informal rules and features of the Chilean political system, undermine the capacity of political parties and the executive and legislative branches of government to promote policy changes needed to strengthen representation. Given that the Chilean institutional setting has been designed to generate governability rather than to process conflicts, the system has found it increasingly difficult to deal with growing social unrest and the waves of protest that the country has seen in recent years. For good reason, current political debate has been marked by discussion

of institutional reforms to improve the link between citizenry and those agents that execute functions of political representation. However, in order for policy change to occur, decision makers must deal with existing institutions. Whether ongoing institutional reforms might help to solve some of the challenges to democratic representation that Chile experiences today is an open question that Peter Siavelis addresses in this special issue.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that formal institutional design and informal rules explain a significant part of the problems of political representation that the country is currently exhibiting. Among the most relevant traits are (a) laws that require qualified majorities, (b) the legacy of an electoral system that, for a long time, underrepresented smaller political forces and overrepresented the larger political groups, (c) the balance of power within the *Concertación* according to partisan affiliation (*cuoteo*), (d) the existence of a democratic pact that incorporates policy objectives from the right-wing opposition (*democracia de los acuerdos*), and (e) the autonomy of the institutions in charge of economic policymaking. We briefly explain each of these traits below.

While Chilean presidents enjoy strong constitutional powers, a series of formal and informal institutions and partisan features have greatly diluted governmental authority. A strategy of policy change in Chile usually requires “super majorities” that allow reform proposals to be enacted into law. The existence of qualified quorums and “super majorities” mean that any significant change to the status quo requires the support of the opposition in both chambers (Couso and Coddou 2009). Furthermore, the electoral system introduced by the military government (the so-called binominal system), which was in place until the 2015 parliamentary elections, sought to over-represent the right, undermine the salience of small political groups, and obstruct the entrance of new players into the political system. In addition, the binominal electoral design discouraged electoral participation, particularly among younger voters (Navia 2011). All of these features of the institutional system tend to perpetuate the status quo and impose strong barriers to policy change.

Additionally, as Peter Siavelis shows convincingly in his article, other informal institutions, such as the *cuoteo* and the *democracia de los acuerdos*, are important informal institutions that shape Chilean democracy. *Cuoteo* is crucial to maintaining the balance of power within the *Concertación*. In turn, “by systematically engaging in a game of ‘democracia de los acuerdos,’ presidents [have] assured business elites and parties of the right that their fundamental interests [are] taken into account” (Siavelis 2006: 50). In this way, “the model of ‘democracia de los acuerdos’ [has] allowed

presidents to advance their legislative agendas while consistently assuaging the fears of a potentially reactionary right” (48). As a result, policy change tends to be rather moderate and structural changes are unlikely to occur.

Two additional legacies of the previous military regime are important. On the one hand, the 1980 constitution expanded “the prerogatives and autonomy of several state agencies (most importantly, the Constitutional Tribunal, the Central Bank, the Comptroller General, the National Security Council, and the Armed Forces)” (Barrett 1999: 19). By securing the autonomy and the insulation of these institutions, one of the more pervasive legacies of the dictatorship has been to constrain the ability of elected officials to modify the main features of the existing political system. Concurrently, the main principles of the military government’s economic and political model gained constitutional rank. Thus, the constitution greatly binds the policy options available for policy makers (Fuentes 2013).

Finally, during the past few decades, politics in Chile has been characterized by a marked technocratization of policy making (Silva 2009). The reliance on a vast network of professionals “whose personal identities were subordinated to the preservation of policy cohesion and stability” came to be known as the “transversal party” (Montecinos 1998: 135). This group of technocrats has been highly cohesive and relatively insulated from party pressure since the country’s return to democracy. One of the crucial functions of technocrats is to grant the rational administration of resources and the perpetuation of the socio-economic development model (Silva 2009). While the technocratic teams of the *Concertación* had a great deal of freedom to negotiate policy proposals informally with key actors, their activities were coordinated and its decisions were highly controlled by the presidency, particularly when presidential leadership was strong (Fuentes 1999: 204–208). Due to this process of technocratization, policy making in the past few decades has been designed from above and in accordance with the economic development model at large and subordinated to macroeconomic performance (Silva 2009). This has also perpetuated the status quo.

As a result, institutions are increasingly unable to deal with social dissatisfaction (Joignant 2012). Although formal and informal institutional arrangements are important, we believe they represent an insufficient explanation for this phenomenon. After all, these institutional arrangements have been in place since the return of democracy, but the four challenges to democratic representation that we outlined above have only become salient in the last few years. This is why we incorpo-

rate two additional factors: the rise of critical citizens in a context of expansion of the middle sectors and the politicization of inequalities.

### 3.2 Critical Citizens and the Expansion of Middle-Income Groups

The growing mistrust in representative institutions might also be related to the rise of critical citizens. According to Norris (1999), critical citizens express democratic values and support democracy as a form of government, but at the same time find the functioning of democracy wanting. This trend is also related to the fact that “growing numbers of citizens have become increasingly critical of the major institutions of representative government” (Norris 1999: 26). Critical citizens hold that democracies can improve and demand changes that permit the development and further strengthening of the actual functioning of democracy. For this reason, we believe that it is important to assess citizens’ attitudes towards the political system.

In Chile, as in other parts of the world, such citizens have exhibited relatively high levels of support for democracy (that is, they are not seeking to replace or overthrow the existing political system), but have a poor opinion of the actual performance of institutions and the authorities (Norris 2011). Empirical data from *Encuesta Nacional UDP* shows that, in 2010, 57 percent of respondents believed that democracy is preferable to any other form of government; in 2015 this figure remained relatively high, around 52 percent. However, data from this same public opinion poll also shows a dramatic increase, in a short period of time, in the proportion of people who are not satisfied with the functioning of democracy in Chile. In 2010, 23 percent of respondents were not very satisfied and completely dissatisfied with democracy. Five years later, this figured climbed to a remarkable 78 percent.

The emergence of critical citizens in Chile is also associated with socio-structural changes related to economic modernization that gave rise to the gradual formation of a new kind of electorate and actors who no longer feel represented by existing political parties. This occurs in a context in which there has been an expansion of middle-income earners and a gradual process of socioeconomic inclusion has been taking place. In fact, Chile has, similar to most South American countries, made clear progress in the realm of market and social incorporation (Martínez-Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea 2014). However, as Filguera et al. (2012) argued, market-oriented policies in Latin America failed to structure political incorporation and to introduce policies that are able to

couple collective expectations to individual needs. As a result, these emerging middle sectors exert increasing pressure on the political system as they demand new or better benefits and services.

Nevertheless, the relationship between emerging middle sectors and democracy is not straightforward. As Barozet and Espinoza argue in their contribution to this special issue, middle sectors in Chile should not be seen as a homogenous group, but rather as heterogeneous constituencies with different ideas and interests. This certainly makes the exercise of political representation more difficult as it is almost impossible to find a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to trying to articulate and stand for these middle-income groups. While some of these middle-income groups are involved in the political process and participate in protests to make their voices heard, others are much more apathetic, not very interested in politics, and more concerned about keeping their socio-economic status than improving democratic representation channels (PNUD 2015).

### 3.3 Politicization of Inequalities

One of the most important legacies of military rule was a sharp pattern of demobilization and social atomization. Indeed, Chilean politics has been characterized by moderation of political discourses, the depoliticization of distributive issues, and a broad compromise among the political elite to uphold market-oriented economic policy. Part of this moderation can be explained by the lessons that the political elite has learned from the polarizing experience of Allende in the early 1970s, as well as their broad acceptance of the policies of the so-called Washington Consensus. In the past decade, however, Chile has experienced a cycle of social protest, marked by the rise of new social actors of a collective nature. Beyond their particular agendas, these new social actors share a common thread: they all seek to politicize different forms of inequality.

There is no doubt that inequality has been a structural problem in Latin America, which despite recent advances in social protection remains the world's most unequal region. In the case of Chile, in spite of a marked reduction in poverty since the return of democracy, income inequality has remained high, making the country the third most unequal in South America (World Bank 2013). In parallel, the sense that inequality in Chile is at unacceptable levels has taken hold. In effect, only 5 percent of Chileans believe that wealth distribution is fair – the lowest in the region (Latinobarómetro 2015). The new social actors aim not only to reduce the income gap, but also to redress differential access to goods



and quality public services; inequalities in economic, social, and cultural rights; territorial inequality; discrimination by gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity; and the entry barriers to the justice system. Thus, the emergence of new social actors has fueled the politicization of inequality in the wider sense.

As Mainwaring (1999: 51) maintained, sociologically salient cleavages become politically relevant when parties and politicians decide to prioritize them. In this way, the politicization of inequalities depends on the emergence of political agents that seek to activate this issue, generating meaningful results when the more vulnerable sectors gain political salience (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014; Piñeiro, Rhodes-Purdy, and Rosenblatt 2016). Additionally, as Roberts (2015) argued, “variation in the politicization of inequalities differentiates national party systems, and it has played a central role in the critical junctures that marked the transition from one political era to another” (21). In this regard, the transition to democracy was followed by a conscious effort by *Concertación* (and some opposition) leaders to avoid both reviving the extreme polarization of politics that contributed to democratic breakdown and the rugged transitional experiences of Chile’s neighboring countries that resulted in a fear of the possible adverse effects of mobilization “from below.” The problem in Chile is that the re-politicization of inequalities clashes with an institutional framework designed to maintain the status quo, not to channel a processes of transformation aimed at altering it significantly. This means that when new actors politicize inequality, they might be forced search for extra-institutional mechanisms, such as social protest, to advance their agendas. By doing so, they challenge the dominant institutional framework and, thus, the established mechanisms of political representation. In the extreme, this process may have a disruptive political effect.

In his contribution to this special issue, Kenneth Roberts argues that the process of politicization of inequalities that Chile is experiencing has mixed effects on the dynamics of political representation. On the one hand, the emergence of collective actors is fostering the adaptation of existing political parties to some of the demands being put forward by social movements, which could potentially lead to the formation of new political alliances and help restore the existing linkages between voters and elites. On the other hand, the country has seen the emergence of various new political leaders and parties, which are trying to give a voice to those who do not feel represented. However, they maintain a difficult relationship with the existing political parties as they compete with them

for the articulation and mobilization of large swaths of the population that can be decisive for winning elections.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

“Political parties need to rethink themselves.” These words, from President Michelle Bachelet in an interview with the Spanish newspaper *El País* (Bachelet 2016), reflect to a certain extent what is happening in Chile today. Political parties have not remained paralyzed because of the increasing challenges of democratic representation that the country is facing. In contrast, they have been trying to respond to the demands of voters in general and of social movements in particular. For instance, while the administration of Sebastián Piñera (2010–2014) decreased the interest rate of the state-guaranteed private loan system for university education from 5.8 to 2.0 percent, the current Bachelet government (2014–2018) is pushing to implement a major education reform that would allegedly lead to the establishment of a free and high quality university system. At the same time, recent corruption scandals related to campaign financing have forced the parliament to approve new legislation that advances public financing of political parties and fosters better regulation of their obligations and practices. In addition, new political parties across the ideological spectrum are emerging and some of them will probably enter parliament due to a new electoral system that will be implemented starting in 2017.

Does this mean that Chile will master the challenges to political representation discussed here in an appropriate way and thus avoid the emergence of a crisis of democratic representation as such? While we do not have a crystal ball, the contributions of this special issue offer valuable perspectives on the evolution of the country. By looking at the current state of political parties (Morgan and Meléndez), the institutional design and its transformations (Siavelis), the expansion of middle sectors with different demands (Barozet and Espinoza), and the process of politicization of inequalities that the country is experiencing (Roberts), we have four entry points to better understand why Chilean democracy is increasingly under stress and reflect on how ongoing developments will influence the political dynamics of the country.

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## Introducción

### Desafíos a la representación democrática en el Chile actual

**Resumen:** La representación democrática parece estar bajo estrés hoy en día en varias democracias establecidas, tales como Grecia, España y los Estados Unidos. Chile también está siguiendo esta tendencia, pero hay una serie de particularidades que hacen el caso chileno distintivo. Después de todo, Chile es usualmente considerado como una de las democracias más consolidadas de América Latina y con un desempeño económico sólido. Sin embargo, los ciudadanos muestran decrecientes nive-

les de satisfacción con la democracia y las instituciones representativas, y hacen creciente uso de la protesta y la movilización social para expresar su descontento. La paradoja que Chile está experimentando hoy día radica en el desajuste entre las actitudes de los votantes y el desempeño del régimen político. Para explicar esta paradoja, la gran mayoría de la literatura académica enfatiza el legado institucional heredado de la dictadura. Nosotros planteamos que las instituciones son necesarias pero insuficientes para explicar los desafíos que experimenta la representación democrática. En consecuencia, argumentamos que a su vez es necesario considerar no solo la expansión de ciudadanos críticos y sectores medios, sino que también la repolitización de las desigualdades.

**Palabras clave:** Chile, representación, instituciones, ciudadanos críticos, sectores medios, politización de las desigualdades