

Power, Legitimacy, and Institutions in the October 2019 Uprising in Chile

by
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The 2019 uprising in Chile was the outcome of an erosion of political arrangements and the politicization of popular unrest that developed over three decades. Two explanations for it—the political mobilization of the groups that emerged from the neoliberal reforms (the “new people” approach) and the mismatch between institutions and society (the “decoupling” approach)—can be reconciled by emphasizing the connections between elite and popular politics. Analyzing the long-standing relationship between power, legitimacy, and political institutions provides a framework for understanding this and other events of massive unrest.

El levantamiento de 2019 en Chile resultó de una erosión de los acuerdos políticos y la politización del malestar popular desarrollado a lo largo de tres décadas. Podemos reconciliar dos de las explicaciones al respecto—la movilización política de los grupos surgidos de las reformas neoliberales (el enfoque de la “gente nueva”) y el desajuste entre las instituciones y la sociedad (el enfoque de “desacoplamiento”)—si enfatizamos las conexiones entre la élite y la política popular. El análisis de la relación de larga data entre el poder, la legitimidad y las instituciones políticas nos proporciona un marco posible para entender este y otros eventos de disturbios masivos.

Keywords: Chile, Uprising, Power, Legitimacy, Protest, Historical institutionalism

On October 18, 2019, thousands of Chilean citizens took to the streets to show their discontent with deep-rooted inequalities, a socioeconomic order perceived as leaning toward the interests of large corporations, and a political elite deemed unresponsive to social demands. Preceded by a series of protests led by secondary students against a hike in transportation fees, unrest escalated into massive demonstrations accompanied by riots, looting, and violent police repression that lasted for several weeks. The magnitude, intensity, and duration of this uprising exceeded those of previous episodes of massive protest (Caroca et al., 2020; Joignant et al., 2020). Previous significant massive protests in Chile (e.g., the 2011 student protests) reflected a less heterogeneous social base of a rather sectoral character and/or did not produce direct political outcomes. The 2019 uprising was cross-class and socially heterogeneous, involved a wide variety of groups and demands, and produced a direct political

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outcome, the launching of an institutional process to draft a new constitution. The milestones of this process include a referendum in October 2020, the election of the members of the convention that will draft the Magna Carta in May 2021, and an anticipated referendum to ratify the new constitution.

Three main explanations for the uprising can be distinguished: the “modernization crisis” (Peña, 2020a; 2020b), the “new-people” (Akram, 2020; Araujo, 2020; Ruiz, 2020), and the “decoupling” (Berger, 2019; Corvalán, 2019; Somma et al., 2020). In the modernization crisis approach, the uprising was the result of rising expectations of mobility and consumption that were not fulfilled by the economic system. In the new-people approach it stemmed from the political demands of the groups that emerged out of the neoliberal reforms of the preceding decades. In the decoupling approach it was a result of the mismatch between political institutions and the party system and society. These explanations focus on a limited set of factors and, more important, single out relevant sources of political instability but cannot explain a widespread, prolonged, and insurrection-like episode. This article contends that a historical institutionalist approach helps us to improve our understanding of the October uprising. First, it helps to bridge between the new-people and the decoupling argument. Second, it provides a more comprehensive explanation for this category of events. Finally, it may contribute to situating the Chilean case in the context of broader historical processes at both regional and global scales.

Elements of historical institutionalism have been used to analyze aspects of Chile’s contemporary history, but to date the approach has not been systematically employed to interpret the 2019 events. By historical institutionalism, I mean an approach (not a theory) that focuses on how institutions structure and shape political behavior and outcomes over the long term (Steinmo, 2008). In Latin America there was a strong scholarly tradition dating to the period of institutionalization of the social sciences (1950s, 1960s, and 1970s) that was concerned with the historical sources of underdevelopment, the party system, and populism (e.g., Cardoso and Faletto, 1990 [1969]; Graciarena, 1967; Quijano, 1968; for a summary see Giordano, 2014). In this tradition, power configurations at the domestic and international levels, class conflicts, imperialism, and unequal exchange were crucial factors undermining economic take-off and democratic consolidation in the region. The topics that interested its scholars and its theoretical approaches did not differ significantly from those that interested the historical institutionalists and historical sociologists based in North American universities.

The article argues that to understand large-scale episodes of social conflict we must pay attention to the interplay between power, legitimacy, and political institutions. In particular, protracted legitimacy issues combined with mounting social unrest—actors mobilizing and representing grievances and demands—configure a situation of significant state vulnerability. Drawing on secondary data and previous research, the article portrays the uprising as the outcome of an erosion of political arrangements and a politicization of popular unrest over three decades. It does not play down economic issues such as inequality, unemployment, and neoliberalism but instead suggests that these are always filtered by politics. A focus on the long-term formation of political

institutions allows us to connect economic outcomes to political decisions, power configurations, and inertia inherited from past decisions. It examines the mechanisms that allowed the dictatorship's legacy to prevail over time and eroded the legitimacy of the system.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section summarizes the literature on the uprising and the following one the theoretical framework. The next explains why the last years of Pinochet's regime can be considered a critical juncture. The following two sections describe the mechanisms that allowed the reproduction of the legacy in the subsequent decades and the consequences of that legacy for politics and society. The concluding section summarizes the argument and discusses its implications.

THE LITERATURE ON THE UPRISING

The idea that the uprising can be explained by a mismatch between growing individual expectations of consumption and social mobility and the economy's capacity to keep pace with them focuses on the so-called paradoxes of capitalist modernization—that inequalities are most strongly felt when citizens have experienced improvement in their socioeconomic conditions, rapid individualization, and anomie (Peña, 2020a; 2020b). This idea dates back to the debates within the center-left coalition in the late 1990s, the Concertación, and beyond this to the theories of 1950–1960 about the causes of “disorder” and “backwardness” in developing countries. While the progressive faction of the Concertación (known as the “self-flagellant”) interpreted an emerging social dissatisfaction as the result of weak state involvement and lack of social protection, for the defenders of these governments (known as the “self-indulgent”) what people actually wanted was more autonomy and market integration (Brunner, 1998; Tironi, 1999). This latter approach has had a pervasive presence in liberal and centrist circles, but it is problematic for several reasons. First, it entails a psychologization of the conflict that blurs the social forces involved. Second, it tends to play down the institutional setting and the historical processes and milestones that explain it. Third, the concept of modernization conflates very different phenomena (e.g., preferences for redistribution, social mobility) and levels of analysis (individual expectations, group behavior, country-level trends).

A second explanation places greater importance on growing feelings of dissatisfaction and mistrust stemming from deep inequalities inherent in the economic system (Araujo, 2020; Mayol, 2019). It draws on sociological investigation of class politics under neoliberalism (Araujo, 2009; 2016; Ruiz and Boccardo, 2015) and the politicization of the emerging popular sectors (PNUD, 2015), suggesting that the failure of successive governments to tackle the causes of inequalities—broadly understood as economic, gender, social, and environmental—evolved into a malaise that resulted in the events of October 2019. Similarly, it is argued that decades of neoliberalism—with its effects on the class structure—have created a “new people” who are more inclined to demonstrate for their rights (Ruiz, 2020)—precarious and flexible workers, indebted first-generation college graduates, poor pensioners, women, and young people

not in school, employment, or training, those “left behind” by the economic model (Akram, 2020).

An interpretation focused on the decoupling of citizens from the political system caused both by unmet popular demands and by institutions that have deprived citizens of their capacity to influence political decisions in a substantive way (Berger, 2019; Corvalán, 2019; Somma et al., 2020) is rooted in the study of the evolving crisis of representation in Chile’s democracy (Joignant, Morales, and Fuentes, 2017a; Luna, 2016; Siavelis, 2016; Valenzuela, 2012). This tradition identifies a significant cause of this decoupling in the peculiarities of institutional design, thus coming closer to a historical institutionalist approach, but it focuses on formal institutions and behaviors rather than on informal or popular politics (Radnitz, 2011).

The historical institutionalist approach adopted in this article develops the connections between the literature inspired by the decoupling argument (which primarily studies politics as the fit between citizens and institutions) and the new-people argument (which focuses on the making of politics from below). This approach overcomes the limitations of these interpretations by providing a more comprehensive explanation of the uprising that integrates formal and popular forms of politics into a single framework.

LEGITIMACY, POWER, AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

The argument draws on the notion that, while legitimacy is essential for the stability of political institutions (Mahoney, 2000; Thelen, 1999), breaches of legitimacy signal points of vulnerability but do not necessarily lead to political conflict or large-scale social turmoil. These will be more likely when legitimacy issues have become persistent and challengers emerge and organize. A situation of high vulnerability is marked by the combination of protracted legitimacy issues with actors capable of mobilizing and representing grievances. To understand these dynamics, we must study the sources of legitimacy, the mechanisms by which legitimacy is achieved and updated (or not), and the way actors emerge in response to them. Legitimacy, critical junctures, and power distribution are crucial concepts for this purpose.

The concept of legitimacy links the sources of power and authority (Mann, 1986) with the outcomes that the political order produces. In its most fundamental form, a legitimate power is one that is acknowledged as rightful (Beetham, 2013), but in addition to its ideational side there is a material component that is often overlooked. Legitimacy can take two forms: input and output legitimacy (Scharpf, 2006; Schmidt, 2013). Input legitimacy refers to the participants in political decisions (legitimacy through participation), and it assumes that the more citizens are involved in the decision-making process, the greater the legitimacy of the system. Output legitimacy refers to what citizens accomplish by abiding by the political order (legitimacy through performance). Institutions must produce outcomes against which citizens assess their allegiance, including public order and the security of citizens (which allows social life to flow predictably) and the vast array of policies that shape individuals’ lives.

Critical junctures are relatively short periods of time in which relevant actors shape the outcome of interest (whether a political regime or an institution) in a substantial way (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). Therefore, they are qualitatively different from normal historical times, when processes of path-dependence (re)produce systemic outcomes in a relatively predictable, repetitive manner. During critical junctures, decisions are made that signal the future of these societies, sending “countries along broadly different developmental paths” (Thelen, 1999: 387). Critical junctures differ in their capacity to produce stable systems. Some carry the seeds of their own fragility (Collier and Collier, 2002). To explain (in)stability, we must study the mechanisms of production of the legacy (which occur *during* the juncture), the mechanisms of reproduction of the legacy, and the stability of the core attributes of the legacy (both of which occur *after* the juncture has ended) (Collier and Collier, 2002: 30–31).

The most powerful actors can use their advantage to create rules that consistently favor them, thus engendering the same uneven distribution over time. These differences are crucial for understanding elite preferences for certain public policies and the outcomes they produce (Collier and Collier, 2002). Ways of tilting the playing field may be explicit (installed in constitutions or laws) or implicit (manifested as informal practices of political exchange based on unwritten rules). The explicit ones are usually referred to in the political science literature as the “rules of the game” (Price and Bell, 1970), referring to those norms—mainly constitutions—that establish the role and functions of governments, political parties, and other relevant actors. Crucial forms of power distribution with lasting effects on society include electoral systems (Boix, 1999; Wills-Otero, 2009), industrial relations systems (Collier and Collier, 2002), and the norms that regulate the interface between state and society (Fourcade and Schofer, 2016). The unwritten rules that can be observed in less formal settings nonetheless prompt political actors to behave in certain ways (Radnitz, 2011). They can be identified in negative agenda control (issues systematically excluded from policy agendas and political debates), the anticipated reactions of actors who choose to adapt to avoid being defeated, a retreat from politics, alterations to political and social discourse, and other forms of inducement of preference-changing investment (Pierson, 2015).

Researchers on contentious politics have found that the institutional characteristics of political systems can engender social contestation. Elements such as closed institutions, power concentration, limited points of access to the state, and lack of responsiveness of public institutions are associated with instability (Kriesi, 1995; Meyer, 2004). Unconventional forms of political expression thrive when the formal channels have no impact on relevant outcomes (Kriesi, 2012).

From the perspective summarized here, massive episodes of social unrest are moments of highly visible political conflict, intensified popular involvement, and rapid politicization. These episodes can inaugurate a critical juncture to the extent that they can alter the prevailing balance of power, bringing uncertainty about the expected outcomes of the political process among power holders and/or introducing fractures in the dominant temporalities.

Two caveats are in order. First, as some theorists have suggested, neoliberalism could well be seen as an all-encompassing societal project that marries

political and economic institutions (Harvey, 2007), and this assertion would be particularly appropriate for describing the Chilean case. Paying attention to the different dimensions of legitimacy and how they are built and contested over time may increase our understanding of the specific ways in which politics and the economy interact and shape each other. Second, the argument developed here describes a slow-moving causal process that covers more than three decades, initiated by remote factors that act concurrently and cumulatively. Their outcomes (legitimacy flaws, dislocation between politics and society, lack of cohesion), in turn, build up a state of affairs that makes massive episodes of social unrest more likely. A detailed understanding of the ways in which remote and proximate factors combine to this effect is required.

TRANSITION AS A CRITICAL JUNCTURE: TILTING THE PLAYING FIELD

The changes introduced by the dictatorship in constitutional norms, the electoral system, and the industrial relations system are crucial pieces of the skewed configuration of power that emerged from this period. The reshaping of political institutions by the dictatorship meant a redistribution of political resources that deprived opposition forces of significant leverage in the subsequent political process. The resulting system has been called “democracy under guardianship” (Portales, 2000) or “semi-sovereign democracy” (Hunneus, 2014) with numerous “authoritarian enclaves” (Garretón and Garretón, 2010) or “authoritarian nodes” (Moulian, 1994). Although the norms included in the 1980 constitution proposed a timetable and the conditions for the military to leave power, this and other crucial pieces of legislation (e.g., the electoral laws) were accepted by the opposition only after 1986. The Communist Party objected to the pacts that allowed the transition, but it would later call on its supporters to vote no on the 1988 referendum and support the candidate of the Christian Democratic Party, Patricio Aylwin, in 1989. Therefore, the military regime can well be considered as refoundational, given the range and depth of the transformations that it inaugurated (Moulian, 2002), and its period can be seen as a critical juncture (Collier and Collier, 2002: 29).

One of the main aims of Pinochet’s regime was to draft a new constitution. To this end, only a few days after the coup d’état in 1973 it established an ad-hoc commission (the Comisión Ortúzar) made up of several conservative legal experts. Facing the opposition of the center and left-wing parties under conditions that did not guarantee a fair election, it organized a referendum in 1980 that predictably approved the new constitution (Fuentes, 2012; 2013; Heiss, 2016; 2017). Thus, since its inception the 1980 constitution has exhibited a serious lack of legitimacy. In terms of doctrine, it galvanized a conservative, reactionary thinking that reflected the fears of the elite of being dispossessed of its properties and deprived of its privileges (Cristi, 2012; Cristi and Ruiz-Tagle, 2014). Furthermore, notions of social rights and the active participation of citizens were intentionally excluded (Lovera, 2010).

Constitutional amendments were permitted with majorities of two-thirds in both chambers of the legislature. Several public policy issues came to be

regulated by constitutional organic laws that required qualified majorities of four-sevenths in both chambers. These issues included education, mining concessions, the central bank, and public administration, among others. Interestingly, the constitution did not contemplate a mechanism for its being rewritten. In fact, such a mechanism was first introduced in November 2019, amid the uprising, after tense negotiations resulting in a congressional agreement that launched the process of constitutional revision. The constitutional court was given ample authority to revise laws approved by Congress and to preemptively check the legality of reforms to constitutional organic laws. In practice, the constitutional court was transformed into a countermajoritarian institution that can act against the will of Congress, becoming a “third chamber of the legislative power” (Atria, 2013; Wilenmann von Bernath, Muñoz, and Lemaitre, 2020). Experts have agreed on the inadequacy of the role played by the constitutional court, including its role in the control of legality, composition, and internal quorums (Grupo de Estudio de Reforma al Tribunal Constitucional, 2019).

The military assumed tutelage of the system through its reserved seats in the Senate and a special constitutional status that gave it a vote on the Consejo de Seguridad Nacional (National Security Council—COSENA) and significant autonomy from the executive. The constitution established that the COSENA could appoint four seats in the Senate to the former commander in chief of the armed forces and police, and Pinochet was given a seat as senator for life that he was to assume after stepping down as commander in chief in 1998. Another three unelected senators were chosen by the Supreme Court from among its former members, and the president could appoint two senators from among former government ministers and former university chancellors. Approximately 20 percent of the Senate was unelected, and this forced the democratic governments to negotiate most reforms with them. (A constitutional reform approved in 2006 eliminated unelected senators and reduced the functions of the COSENA.)

Proportional representation (in use up to 1973) had been considered a major cause of polarization by the conservative forces (Cristi, 2012; Cristi and Ruiz-Tagle, 2014). Accordingly, the dictatorship established a binomial system by which the candidates from the two most-voted electoral lists were elected in each district. The system tended to favor the second majority, since the most-voted list could elect the two seats in competition only if it doubled the vote of the second. Thus, the most likely scenario was that each of these majorities received one seat per district. The main goals of the binomial electoral system were to prevent a landslide majority that could have acted against the legacy of the dictatorship, equalize the representation of the two main electoral blocs, and exclude and penalize forces outside the two main blocs.

The effects of the binomial electoral system, the unelected senators, and the special majorities were straightforward. Right-wing parties noticeably benefited from the “subsidies” of the binomial system and the unelected senators, especially in the 1990s. A study by the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO, 2006) found that while the binomial system favored both second and first majorities in the lower chamber in terms of transforming votes to seats, it clearly improved the seats of the right in the Senate. Another study

showed that under the binomial system the right-wing coalition obtained more seats than with any other electoral system (Navia, 2005). In addition to overrepresenting the two main blocs and subsidizing the second majority, the system made intrabloc competition more important, thus enhancing the role of the party elites who effectively selected the candidates and making elections uninteresting for citizens (Alvarado, 2015; FLACSO, 2006; Nohlen, 2006). (The binomial electoral system was replaced by proportional representation in 2017.)

Unions were a significant force in the pre-1973 political system because of their close ties with left parties, their growing membership (aided by the unionization of agrarian workers spurred by the land reforms of the 1960s [Castillo and Lehmann, 1982]), and their militant profile. The military and the business elite considered that workers had a disproportionate influence on economics and politics. Consequently, reforms of the industrial relations system pointed at limiting the expressions of workers' power through four main changes: collective bargaining limited to the single-employer level, limitations on the right to strike, ending the monopoly of unions in workers' representation, and prohibiting union leaders from participating in politics (e.g., as candidates in local or national elections) (Mizala and Romaguera, 2001; Rojas, 2007; Sehnbruch, 2006).

AFTER 1990: THE REPRODUCTION OF THE LEGACY

The legal and constitutional provisions just described signaled the limits of the successive governments. Nonetheless, informal practices such as the "politics of consensus," ideological convergence, and state capture helped to consolidate the skewed configuration of power even after important legal provisions were modified. Thus, a classic historical institutionalist "critical juncture + legacy" reasoning can be applied here. "Politics of consensus" or "democracy of agreements" designates a form of exchange and collaboration between left and right. Given the required special majorities, the center-left Concertación needed the votes of right-wing legislators to pass its projects. Therefore, substantive changes had to be preceded by an agreement between the two major blocs. In practice, this meant that right-wing parties, while in the minority, had veto power over sensitive policy issues.

Two major factors shaped the strategic thinking of the center-left in the 1990s: fear of an authoritarian reversal and fear of the business sector's withholding investment (Winn, 2004). The implicit threat of a capital strike configured an additional layer of constraints that interacted with institutions purposely designed to be weak with respect to the large business groups. The Concertación perceived that it needed to appease two major actors, the military (headed by Pinochet himself until 1998) and the business elite. Therefore, attempts to pass substantial reforms were rapidly tempered (Fazio, 1996; Garretón, 2013) while networks of collaboration between policy makers and businesses were strengthened (Montero, 1993; Silva, 2019), giving the economic elite privileged access to decision making (Teichman, 2003).

There was also a strong normative dimension to the politics of consensus, which was presented as a principle of good governance and a condition for

sound public policy (see, e.g., Boeninger, 1997; Tironi, 1999). The peaceful and orderly transition from authoritarianism to democracy—which was regarded as a success—was attributed to the consensus reached between the old foes of the past. The components of this consensus were to be found in notions of economic liberalization, openness, and market reforms that paved the way for the country’s success in reducing poverty and unemployment (Cortázar, 2018; Tironi, 1999). The social agenda of the center-left was subordinated to an orthodox handling of the economy to avoid the populist trap seen in other Latin American countries in the past (Weyland, 1997). Therefore, this unwritten rule of the political process expressed a deep convergence on economic policy between the right and the center-left. Recent research has documented the ideological convergence between the two blocs reflected in their programmatic manifestos and strategies of moderation (Bargsted and Somma, 2016; Madariaga and Rovira, 2020).

The collaboration between political blocs enabled by the politics of consensus was reinforced by mechanisms of co-optation and state capture. Researchers have shed light on the revolving doors between public and private sectors (Maillet, González-Bustamante, and Olivares, 2019; Salvaj and Couyoumdjian, 2016). Furthermore, the public has learned about the connections between business interests and political parties through journalism and inquiries by the public prosecutor and the tax authority, especially since 2010. For example, on February 15 the weekly *Qué Pasa* published a report on an influence-peddling case that presumably involved President Michelle Bachelet’s son and daughter-in-law. This case would soon be known as *Caso Caval*. Undoubtedly this event undermined President Bachelet’s popularity, compromising the reformist impetus of her administration. Similarly, the online news platform CIPER published extensively on other cases such as Penta and SQM, which showed illegal financing of political campaigns involving top-level party and business leaders.¹ These investigations have shown an extensive area of illegal and grey practices in the funding of political parties and campaigns involving both left- and right-wing parties. This is evidence of the relevance and extent of the informal practices of exchange and collaboration between political and economic elites, revealing the material base of a convergence that lent stability to the political system “from above” in the 1990s and 2000s.

The ideological consensus between the center-left coalition, the right-wing parties, and the business sector was something that the Concertación would not openly admit, since this would have jeopardized its electoral support (Boeninger, 1997). In turn, the left of the governing coalition (the Socialist Party) embraced the “third way” ideology, aligning itself with a business-friendly approach promoted by leaders of the new social democracy such as Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder. Ideological convergence was reinforced by a broader global consensus on the benefits of free markets and deregulation that culminated in the 1990s. Thus, major reforms of the 1990s and 2000s—the tax reform of the Aylwin administration (1990–1994), the privatization of public services under Frei Ruiz-Tagle (1994–2000) and Lagos (2000–2006), and the education reform of Bachelet’s first term (2006–2010)—were outcomes of broad intercoalitional agreements. These reforms were presented as examples of the benefits of

the politics of consensus (Taylor, 2006; Teichman, 2003). Meanwhile, substantive political reforms that were not endorsed by the business sector or the right encountered the insurmountable obstacles posed by the special majorities in Congress or the veto of the right-wing parties.

EROSION OF THE LEGITIMACY OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

From a historical institutionalist perspective, the decoupling and the new-people arguments find connections. The dictatorship (critical juncture) left a legacy that was reproduced successfully in the years following the transition thanks to formal (countermajoritarian provisions, electoral rules, the industrial relations system) and informal (politics of consensus, ideological convergence, state capture) arrangements. These arrangements created an environment that allowed an unprecedented expansion of the private sector in the subsequent decades. They also produced political stability (from above) by significantly reducing interelite conflict despite the radicalism of the reforms of the dictatorship and the unilaterality (and violence) of its methods. However, this system generated consequences beneath the surface of the visible political struggle—the progressive decoupling of citizens and institutions (as reflected in indicators such as turnout, party membership, and ideological identification) and the politicization of categories that originated in the economic transformation of the past decades, with the increasing relevance of extrainstitutional means of political expression.

As previously explained, the electoral system heightened the role of the partisan elites and made elections uninteresting for citizens. The percentage of citizens who cast a vote in elections as a proportion of the voting-age population has consistently dwindled since 1989. Turnout was 87 percent of voting-age citizens in 1989, 82 percent in 1993, 72 percent in 1999, 64 percent in 2005, 59 percent in 2009, 51 percent in 2013, and 47 percent in 2017. The decrease in voter turnout is more dramatic in municipal elections: only 36 percent of the voting-age population cast a vote in the 2016 elections (PNUD, 2017). In the 1990s and 2000s, the absolute number of citizens casting a vote remained relatively constant (around 7 million). A reform passed in 2012 abolished compulsory voting and the need to register to vote. As a result, the total voting population substantially declined (from 6.95 million in the 2008 local elections to 5.79 million in the 2012 local elections). Voter turnout in Chile was low also from a comparative perspective: turnout in Chile had been higher than in most Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and Latin American countries in 1990 but fell well below their averages in 2016 (PNUD, 2017). While turnout increased by 10 points across Latin America between 1990 and 2016, in Chile it dropped by 36 points.

As formal political channels lost relevance for significant groups of citizens, a chasm opened between the political elites and ordinary citizens. Party membership and ideological identification have systematically decreased since the 1990s (Bargsted and Maldonado, 2018; Bargsted and Somma, 2016; Joignant, Morales, and Fuentes, 2017b; Morales, 2011). The gap between elites and citizens is reflected in conflicting views regarding socioeconomic and political

issues, expectations, and demands (Márquez, 2015). For example, while only 3 percent of the members of the economic elite and 27 percent of the political elite would support a public pension system, the idea was supported by 80 percent of the public (PNUD, 2015). Such divides in preferences are repeated in most areas of policy where the private sector plays a significant role as a provider of public services (e.g., education, health care). In addition, they are accompanied by growing distrust of political institutions, including government, Congress, and political parties.

Because of their historical role in the twentieth century, unions could have placed pressure on the government to pass democratizing and redistribution reforms, but the labor reforms of the dictatorship were effective in weakening and depoliticizing workers (Corvalán, 2015). Overall, the persistent low coverage of collective bargaining and the expansion of wildcat strikes in the three decades since the end of the dictatorship testify to the difficulty for unions of becoming an effective channel for redressing perceived inequalities and rebalancing the system. According to official statistics, in 1990 only 13.4 percent of workers were affiliated with a union and only 7.6 percent were covered by a collective bargaining agreement. In 2017 these figures had been 17 percent and 7.8 percent, respectively. Union density hit its lowest level in 1999 (10.7 percent) and remained around that level for several years. In turn, the coverage of collective bargaining agreements hit its lowest level in 2003 (4.5 percent). Both indicators started to show some improvement in the second half of the 2000s, but the recovery was small and slow. Overall, in the 28-year period for which statistics are available (1990–2017), both union density and the coverage of collective bargaining have not surpassed the peak of 1991. In the Latin American context, current union density levels in Chile are slightly above the average for the region (16.1 percent), while the coverage of collective bargaining ranks well below the regional average (24.8 percent)² (ILO data for 2016 cited in Kugler, 2019).

Both the number of strikes and the average number of workers in strikes declined from the 1990s until the mid-2000s—strikes became less frequent and smaller (Armstrong and Águila, 2005). However, the restrictions on industrial action—in particular, the legal requirements that unions must meet to go on strike—created an incentive for wildcat strikes. Illegal strikes accounted for roughly one-third of strikes during the 1990s and have become a regular feature of industrial conflict. Between 2006 and 2016, a recovery of the protest activity of workers was noticeable in the frequency of legal and illegal strikes and number of working days lost per strike (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). In this period, illegal strikes mobilized the largest number of workers involved in industrial action, and in some sectors of the economy (such as transport, agriculture and fishing, and mining) they represented the majority of strikes (Gutiérrez et al., 2018; 2020).

During the 2010s, extrainstitutional forms of influence became a regular feature of civil expression (Joignant et al., 2020). Prior to 2019 the 2011 student protests were the largest episode of social upheaval since the end of the dictatorship. Students opened up a cycle of heightened social conflict that persisted in the following years. Since then a variety of social actors and campaigns has developed, including movements for the rights of women and sexual

minorities, indigenous movements, environmental and territorial movements, and the social movement against private pension companies (the No + AFP campaign). Most of these movements developed in relative autonomy from the party system and in opposition to it. The No + AFP platform was especially successful, as were the women's movements in March 2018 and 2019, in summoning hundreds of thousands of demonstrators to its rallies every year. These mobilizations and actors demanded greater equality and targeted political institutions and business elites alike (Roberts, 2016). Their demands embodied a threat to the vested economic interests that had prospered in sectors such as higher education, health care, pensions, and other public services after decades of liberalization of these sectors.

These waves of mobilization had significant politicization consequences, but they did not mend the breach between citizens and institutions (Albala and Tricot, 2020). The student protests of 2006 and 2011 led groups of activists to join political parties, establish social movement organizations, or create their own platforms. This activism had clear spillover effects (Ancelovici and Guzmán-Concha, 2019), including a growing influence of the feminist movement in public debates and the consolidation of new parties of the left and the formation of the Broad Front coalition in 2017. Michelle Bachelet's leadership in 2013 emerged as a response to social protests, especially the student movement. Her administration attempted to meet demands for social protection (including free university education), greater state involvement, and a new constitution. The incorporation of the Communist Party into the center-left alliance brought former activists to governmental positions (e.g., in education and women's and social development). However, the party system showed great resilience to these challenges (Roberts, 2013), while the responsiveness of the government to long-standing social demands was constrained by the institutional obstacles already described, strong opposition from interest groups and the right, and inability to alter the balance of power in the party system. Rising social unrest, growing mistrust of political parties and institutions, and the declining capacity of parties to represent and mobilize social groups did not trigger appropriate responses from the elites. The double process of erosion of institutions and popular politicization continued.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued that we can explain episodes of massive social unrest by looking at the interplay of institutions, legitimacy, and power. Protracted legitimacy issues can be destabilizing for the political order. Legitimacy depends on the way power is distributed among groups in society. Power distribution is shaped in critical junctures and later reproduced through formal arrangements and informal practices. Institutions build their legitimacy by providing citizens with the means to influence decisions and with the material basis on which to assess their allegiance. Closed institutions and power concentration engender instability as citizens lack channels to influence political decisions in a substantive way (e.g., to produce collective goods or social policies). Episodes of massive and intense social conflict can be seen as popular attempts

to rebalance the severely skewed distribution of power, and they are more likely to occur when formal political arrangements fail to incorporate these actors and channel their demands to produce significant outcomes (cohesion, integration, equality). They have the potential to inaugurate a critical juncture to the extent that they succeed in producing and consolidating a new balance of power.

The October 2019 uprising was the outcome of the double process of erosion of political arrangements and the politicization of popular unrest in an institutional system shaped by the transition to democracy. Constitutional norms and super statutes (labor and electoral laws, special majorities) were followed by the politics of consensus, co-optation, and state capture to consolidate a skewed distribution of power that enabled the legacy of the dictatorship to endure. This reasoning fits well a “juncture plus feedback” type of argument, well known in historical institutionalism. The closure of political institutions followed a path-dependent sequence initiated during the transition years. This configuration of power deprived the formal channels of their capacity to produce impacts that substantially diverged from elite interests, and extrainstitutional means of influence were incapable of correcting this problem. The dislocation between politics and society progressed slowly but uninterruptedly from the 1990s on. From this perspective, the societal project carried out by the dictatorship carried the seeds of its own demise in the long term. Neoliberalism failed to achieve legitimacy despite a transitory success in the 1990s. The 2019 uprising revealed that political institutions cannot provide long-term stability without drastic reshaping of the balance of power. Thus the constitutional crisis it revealed was, more fundamentally, a systemic crisis of the post-1990 political order.

This article has focused on the remote causes of the uprising, focusing on the ways in which structural tensions and institutional processes configured a situation of vulnerability to massive social unrest. The economic sources of the conflict (e.g., inequality, unemployment, recession) have not been dismissed, but there is evidence that governments and political leaders can garner citizens’ support even during adverse economic conditions (the COVID-19 pandemic provides a recent example), and we know that moral economies and cultural norms contribute to shaping grievances and demands. There is no such a thing as a direct effect of the economy on politics. The economy is “filtered” by politics in various ways. Analysis of the formation of political institutions offers insights into the way economic outcomes are connected to political decisions made in the past or inertias inherited from those decisions. By studying legitimation we can gain knowledge about the processes that connect the experiences of citizens and groups with the broader institutional and economic context in which these experiences are formed. Further research—especially comparative in nature—would be needed to unpack these processes and mechanisms in detail. Moreover, new research should focus on the interplay between remote, structural causes and proximate ones (triggers). Why did certain events (e.g., the protests against a hike in transport fees) and not others lead to massive upheaval? How did government reactions (repression, co-optation, negotiation) feed into the dynamics of conflict? What does ethnographic research tell us about the microprocesses of mobilization and how they combine with meso- and macroprocesses?

NOTES

1. For the Caval case, see <http://www.quepasa.cl/articulo/actualidad/2015/02/1-16218-9-un-negocio-caval.shtml/> (accessed July 17, 2021). For other cases of corruption involving politicians and the private sector, extensive coverage can be found at <https://ciperchile.cl/especiales/financiamiento-irregular-politica/> (accessed July 17, 2021).

2. Union density is higher in Bolivia (39.1 percent), Uruguay (30.1 percent), and Argentina (27.7 percent). The coverage of collective bargaining is also higher in Uruguay (94.6 percent), Brazil (70.5 percent), and Argentina (50.1 percent).

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