Contentious Mobilization in a Demobilized Democracy:

Exploring Reasons for the Advent and Duration of the 2011 Chilean Student Movement

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Abstract: This study addresses the advent and continuation of the 2011 Chilean student protest movement. It attempts to explain how the movement happened in a stable and largely demobilized democracy. The study uses social movement theory as a framework to explain changing political opportunities that contributed to the movement’s emergence, as well as identifying organizational characteristics that explain the movement’s staying power.
Introduction

The political landscape of Chile’s post-transition democracy has been elite-centered and stable. Indeed, Chile has been the picture of democratic stability and neoliberal development led by the political class (including institutionalized parties and professional politics). The transition itself was conducted by an elite political class, focusing on moderation and pact-making. The same structure endured the decades following the return to democracy (Oxhorn, 2011: 122, Roberts, 2013: 1442), which has resulted in a muting of civil society’s capacity to mobilize, including diminishing levels of public protest (De La Maza, 2010: 277). Dissent is controlled, with minimal occurrence of contentious episodes (Roberts, 2013: 1424).

But in 2011, mass protest took the country by storm. Chileans took to the streets in uncharacteristic fashion to protest the growing costs and inequalities of their country’s education system. The demonstrations grew and received international attention as Chilean youth demanded radical changes to the system including the right to free, high quality public education at all levels. The movement continued through 2012 and 2013, surmounting the obstacle of sustained mobilization that a preceding movement in 2006 succumbed to after only a month. Such sudden mobilization is striking in the context of a system that should not be conducive to episodes of mass contention.

The 2011 protests are a novel phenomenon in the Chilean context, but anti-neoliberal protest in Latin America is a common occurrence. In recent years there have been many, “mass mobilizations” that, “constituted organized, politically meaningful pressure to reform both neoliberal capitalism and a system of electoral democracy that excluded their substantive demands” (Silva, 2009: 11). The Chilean protests are consistent with this type of mobilization,
with an ideological orientation that is critical of neoliberalism, specifically with regard to its effects on education (Bellei and Cabalin, 2013: 115).

In this paper I will attempt to explain the advent and duration of the 2011 Chilean student movement. Effects of systemic exclusion in the education system combined with the exclusionary nature of the elite-led political system created incentives for protestors to find alternative routes to political expression. Additionally, the post-transition fear of provoking instability and unrest was counteracted by a very important generational effect that saw the “children of democracy” become protagonists of a political movement. Explanations of advent and duration will be guided by social movement theory, particularly based on McAdam’s synthesis of the state of the art, which stresses the importance of three variables: political opportunity, mobilizing structures, and framing processes (McAdam, 1996: 2). Although social movement theory effectively explains much of the 2011 Chilean student movement, the generational effect challenges the literature to expand the scope of the political opportunity variable to include historical institutional changes that may not affect mobilization for a number of years.

**Social Movement Theory and the Chilean Experience**

The primary basis for the puzzle of this paper is the set of political conditions cited by literature on social movements that suggests that Chile is a highly unlikely case for mass mobilization. Chile is classified in a set of Latin American countries that had relatively consolidated and institutionalized parties (Roberts, 2008: 329, Roberts, 2013: 1442). This characterization of stability and lack of contention originates with a pacted transition to democracy that came in tandem with an “accommodative strategy” of “co-optation” rather than “capacity to mobilize popular support” (Roberts, 1998: 38). As a result, Chilean democracy has
become professionalized and disconnected from popular mobilization. The “democracia de los acuerdos” (democracy by agreement) strategy generally marginalized civil society, making it autonomous from the state, without strong linkages (Oxhorn, 2011: 109). This picture of an elite, professional political system precludes appeals to an anti-system party or movement. Roberts describes “dealigned” systems—the group that Chile is held in contrast to—as susceptible to “antisystem forms of social and political protest” (Roberts, 2013: 1424). The 2011 protests, however, are a clear example of mass contention, the likes of which would be more likely in unstable democracies (such as Venezuela or Bolivia).

In addition to the problem of elite-centered, professional, institutionalized democracy, there are other factors that should preclude the existence of mass mobilization in the Chilean context. The first of these factors, also linked to the democratic transition, is that the Concertación 2 demobilized labor and other social movements in the transition and post-transition by diminishing linkages to civil society (Silva, 2009: 258, Handlin and Collier, 2011: 146).

Secondly, the “fear of ‘ungovernability’” (Silva, 2009: 258) deters potential movement leaders from mobilizing. Memories of the 1973 breakdown of democracy and the ensuing authoritarian period are central to this fear (Oxhorn, 2011: 118). Third, the weakening of unions—traditionally the leaders of mass movements in Chile—during the dictatorship is a factor (Silva, 2009: 258). This is common to the Latin American experience in general as labor and peasant movements were weakened in the 1970’s and 1980’s during military governments, which dealt a blow to the organizational capacity of social movements (Roberts, 2008: 335). Without unions, there is a gap in the ability to organize, something that is essential to social movements.

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2 The Concertación is the center-left coalition that has dominated Chilean politics since the transition
Silva acknowledges that all three of these explanations surely contribute to the lack of protest in Chile, but offers one more variable that he finds to be more powerful. He writes that, “The Concertación tempered market economics with a commitment to socioeconomic and political inclusion” (Silva, 2009: 259). In other words, gradual reforms to the neoliberal system mitigated its negative effects enough to subdue potential protestors. This argument implies that Chileans have not mobilized in the post-transition democracy because the Concertación has minimized the presence of a reason to do so.

The assumption ignores an important tenet of social movement theory. Tarrow notably argues that, “outbreaks of contention cannot be derived from the deprivation people suffer or the disorganization of their societies. For these preconditions are far more enduring than the movements they support” (Tarrow, 1998: 71). Thus we cannot assume the absence of protest-worthy causes solely on the basis of a lack of mobilization. Silva does offer compelling evidence of the Chilean Left’s tempering of adverse effects of neoliberal orthodoxy, but also ignores some of its shortcomings. There is substantial evidence, which will be presented in ensuing sections of this paper, that the left allowed for the persistence of institutionalized inequality and cost in the education system. These conditions became the basis for contentious episodes in 2006 and 2011.

Understanding the inadequacies of the sufficient inclusion hypothesis, we must consider the conditions beyond deprivation and disorder that dictate movement advent and continuation. Early social movement theory stressed the importance of mobilization grievances, but Tarrow and others have shown the importance of additional factors in explaining social protest (McAdam, 1996: 21). Reasons for movements vary across cases, but some conditions are universal. A consideration of different schools of thought on social movement theory yields three
central factors beyond the presence of a mobilization grievance that dictate the emergence and sustaining of movements. McAdam describes these factors as follows: “(1) the structure of political opportunities and constraints confronting the movement; (2) the forms of organization (informal as well as formal), available to insurgents; and (3) the collective processes of interpretation, attribution, and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action” (McAdam, 1996: 2). I will consider each of these elements and I will evaluate the changes in each, and how these conditions aided the emergence and sustainability of the movement.

Sustainability is an essential characteristic of social movements. Continued presence is a definitional aspect of a social movement that separates it from more anomic forms of “contentious episodes” (Tarrow, 1998: 6). This becomes starkly apparent in Chile, when one considers the 2006 education protests that preceded the 2011 movement. The 2006 protests, which lasted for only about a month, were seen as a break from Chile’s lack of contention. This was an important but brief phenomenon (Oxhorn, 2011: 128; De La Maza, 2010: 288-289). Navia goes so far as to suggest that the 2006 episode turned the Chilean public against the idea of popular participation in general, feeding a fear that it would undermine the country’s representative democracy (Navia, 2010: 319). Why, then, were the 2011 protests a sustained phenomenon and not an undesirable and brief contentious anomaly?

The case of contentious politics in modern Chile challenges some of the central assumptions about both demobilization in Latin America and social movements in general. I will examine in this paper how the 2011 mobilization contests the idea that Chilean democracy is representative and stable, arguing that despite the relative lack of mobilization in the country in the past two decades, the 2011 protests display a widespread dissatisfaction with Chilean democracy as presently constructed. Thus, the moderate governance and acceptance of tenets of
neoliberalism that Chile has epitomized may no longer be sufficient to stop contentious politics from emerging.

With regard to social movement theory, the movement’s generational phenomenon challenges scholarship on changing political opportunities. The changes to the institution that informed this generation’s attitudes towards protest occurred many years before the protests themselves. Thus there is a time lag in the effects of changing political institutions. The effects of the transition to democracy on protest politics did not manifest themselves for years. This validates the use of a broader historical analysis of changing political institutions, rather than a focus on opportunity structure changes immediately preceding contentious outbreaks.

**Main Argument**

In this paper I will seek to explain the advent and continuation of the 2011 Chilean student movement. I take into account the above theories that describe the Chilean political system as not conducive to mass protest, and I derive an empirical explanation as to how the movement overcame each commonly cited obstacle to mass mobilization.

First, I argue the presence of a reason for protest. I examine the presence of the mobilization grievance around which the movement has been constructed, through data that illustrates the inequality and high costs that plague the Chilean education system. I compare Chile’s performance in educational quality and inequality countries with similar levels of economic development. I focus on educational inequality rather than other forms of inequality, because this is the issue that the movement most directly addressed, not because other forms of inequality are absent in Chile. Notably, the presence of inequality and high costs alone is an insufficient explanation for mobilization. Ensuing sections will examine how the generational
phenomenon of the movement helps to explain why education was the issue that the movement addressed and how movement leaders convinced students and other demonstrators of the need to mobilize.

The second section of analysis concerns reasons for the advent of the movement. This section focuses largely on changing political opportunity structures. I begin by examining the more immediate political events that led up to the 2006 and 2011 protests. I draw on news reporting and secondary literature that depict how political events opened the window for protest. These events include Michele Bachelet’s election, Sebastián Piñera’s election, and education policy proposals by the Piñera administration. I then examine a more historical change in opportunity structure which I classify as a generational effect. This effect stems from the transition to democracy and is based on the idea that the first generation to grow up in a post-dictatorship society developed different conceptions of public space than the generation that had experienced fear during the dictatorship. The effects of the transition only play out so many years later because they depend on the age of the “children of democracy” generation and its access to mobilizing structures. I examine the generational effect through data on protestor demographics that show the tendencies of young Chileans to mobilize compared to older cohorts. Explanations for the advent of contentious politics will also include the framing variable, explained by the movement leaders’ accounts of how they interpreted their mobilization grievances and communicated them to potential movement constituents when the protests were beginning.

In the third section, I will assess factors that promoted the movement’s continuation. In contrast to the 2006 protests, the 2011 movement transcended the status of contentious anomaly and became a full-fledged social movement. I focus on the generational effect in this section as the “children of democracy” led both movements and learned lessons from the first round of
protest that prevented demobilization in 2011. I will also examine how organizational capacity contributed to the sustainability of the 2011 movement, using secondary sources as well as primary documents from movement leadership. Furthermore, I will explore how students were able to make horizontal linkages with other social groups, broadening the popularity of their movement and building an independent, well-directed, sustainable movement base.

Lastly, I will address framing to explain how students were able to garner support for the movement despite the public fear of ungovernability. I acknowledge the complexity of this variable, taking into account not only how the students framed the protests but also how the media portrayed them.

This combination of factors will contribute to an understanding of how the 2011 Chilean student protests occurred in an unlikely context. They shed light on the conditions that counteracted proposed reasons for prior demobilization and helped to build the current trajectory of Chile’s representational democracy.

**Refuting the Inclusion Argument: Inequality and Cost in the Chilean Education System**

The fundamental condition for protest in the Chilean case is exclusion, mostly in the form of inequality in the education system. Despite its status as a developed Latin American nation, Chile suffers from massive levels of inequality. Chile’s Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, of 52.1\(^3\) classifies the country as the most unequal among all OECD nations (OECD, 2011). Recent protests, however, focus on inequality in the education system. This inequality is derived from a municipalized, market-based voucher system put in place by Augusto Pinochet in 1980 with the passage of the Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza (LOCE). The neoliberal, free market tenets of Chilean education survived the succession of post-transition

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\(^3\) Last measured in 2009
presidents. Even Socialist Ricardo Lagos subscribed to the notion that “pressures of competition” could improve the quality of education (Spooner, 2011: 234). This had been the dominant approach taken by previous Concertación presidents, who “did not tamper with the basic system left in place by the regime” (Spooner, 2011: 234).

Despite increased spending in the Concertación era, the Chilean education system is highly unequal. Between 1990 and 2001, the Chilean government almost doubled its spending on education, which has helped lead to “enrollments in preschools, middle schools, and especially institutions of higher education increase[ing] significantly” (Weyland, 2011: 84). However, despite the overall improvements to inclusion in the system yielded by increased spending, Chile’s general adherence to market principles in governing education has failed to diminish the effects of inequality. Chile has “the most segregated educational system” of all OECD nations (Cabalin, 2012: 220). This means that students attend school almost exclusively with members of their own social classes, demonstrating that a system supposedly emphasizing choice has instead reinforced inequalities. The dramatic differences between national SIMCE testing results based on socioeconomic status further demonstrate the prevalence of inequality in Chilean education. In the 2010 secondary mathematics test, for example, upper-class students recorded scores about one-and-a-half times higher than their peers from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Cabalin, 2012: 222).

This extreme achievement gap translates to the university level as well. Enrollment in tertiary education is five times higher among the highest socioeconomic quintile as compared to the lowest (OPECH, 2010). Even once enrolled in university, high costs pose a serious threat to poorer students’ education. In 2009 “the average graduate’s debt represented 174% of her

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4 *Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación* is a national standardized test issued to primary and secondary school students.
projected annual income, compared to a rate of 57% of annual income in the United States” (Salinas and Fraser, 2012: 20). This leads to massive dropout rates. Confech\(^5\) estimated in 2011 that a staggering 65% of first generation university students abandon their studies due to debt (Confech, 2011b: 2). These indicators signal drastic inequality and crippling costs in Chilean education.

These findings run counter to Silva’s notion that Concertación policies had rendered social exclusion somewhat irrelevant with regard to protest politics. The Concertación may have made significant efforts at inclusion, but the data indicate that there were serious shortcomings in the realm of education. Neoliberalism in the realm of education was not accompanied by policies that effectively included marginalized portions of the population. Although school access increased during Concertación rule, sustained inequality reflected the continuity of exclusionary tendencies in the neoliberal education system. The system “retains most of the key elements of the neoliberal design” which in turn subjects it to cyclical socioeconomic segregation (Gauri, 1998: 25). The presence of this structural exclusion was the basis for Chile’s first significant post-transition mass mobilization. But why did students begin to perceive this persistent inequality as a valid reason to mobilize? The next section will explain how the movement emerged on the basis of this institutionalized social problem.

**Advent of Mobilization: How the Protests Began**

Having established the conditions under which the protests were founded, I now turn to explanations of the timing of the 2011 Chilean education mobilization. Informed by social

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\(^5\) Confech (Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile) is an organization that brings together a number of student federations from individual traditional (public) Chilean universities. For more see confech.wordpress.com.
movement theory’s notion of changing political opportunities, I will examine the events that allowed the early stages of the movement to unfold.

The 2011 Chilean education protests cannot be fully understood without examining their 2006 predecessor. In 2006, a set of protests known as the Penguin Revolution⁶ signified the first major deviation from Chile’s demobilized post-transition path.⁷ The Penguin Revolution, as noted earlier, was brief, but similarly to the 2011 movement it contested some of the tenets and effects of Chile’s market-driven education model. Despite the five-year gap of demobilization between the movements, scholars commonly acknowledge that there are significant thematic continuities between the two that necessitate treating them simultaneously (Salinas and Fraser, 2012: 26, Cabalin, 2012: 219, Somma, 2012: 299).

The timing of the first round of protests certainly bears consideration based on the political events that preceded it. The Penguin Revolution began in 2006 soon after the election of Michele Bachelet as Chile’s second consecutive Socialist president. Why would the election of a Socialist president trigger widespread protest against neoliberal education policies? The fact that the movement began within weeks of Bachelet’s election is no coincidence. It indicates urgency on the part of the students, who understood that their pressures would be needed to provoke significant change, even with a Socialist president. This need is evident given the political stagnation with regard to education described in the previous section. In terms of social movement theory, Bachelet’s election signifies a change in political opportunities for the students, reflecting the students’ recognition of the fact that the Bachelet government’s “rhetoric

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⁶ Named for the black and white school uniforms worn by its high school protagonists. In Spanish: Revolución de los Pingüinos.
⁷ Some scholars also note the relevance of sustained contention by indigenous (mostly Mapuche) groups. This paper does not explore these protests, as they do not enjoy the same levels of mass participation as the student protests, but they are important nonetheless. For more see Bidegain (2012) and De La Maza (2010).
of citizen participation” might open the door for them to affect change in the political system (Donoso, 2013: 5).

The history of secondary school student associations also informs our understanding of the 2006 movement’s timing. A meeting in December of 2005 saw the merging of the two major umbrella organizations that had led more minor student protest and representation in the early 2000’s, when a meeting with leaders of the ACES and the ACAS resulted in the formation of the Asamblea de Estudiantes Secundarios de Santiago (AES) (Donoso, 2013: 9). The AES had a politically diverse base and was not associated with a particular political party (Donoso, 2013: 10). Thus it enjoyed a very strong capacity to organize and was able to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the election of Bachelet. For a variety of reasons, however, the Penguin Revolution faded and disappeared after about two months of contention. These reasons will be discussed in the analysis of continuity, but regardless of their brevity, the 2006 protests planted the seeds for further, better-sustained contention in 2011.

Why, though, did the protests arise once again five years after the first round? In addition to the prerequisite mobilization grievance of the cumulative effects of inequality and education costs discussed earlier, the 2011 protests reflected their own reaction to new sets of changing political opportunities. One of these changing conditions was the election of Sebastián Piñera, Chile’s first non-Concertación president since the beginning of the post-Pinochet democratic era. Piñera’s government embraced neoliberal policy even more than the moderate leftists who had ruled Chile before him. Early in his term, in June of 2010, Piñera made announced reforms to higher education that would favor private universities (López, 2010). This announcement did not immediately trigger protests, but it did underscore education as a key policy area of his administration, opening up political conversation on the topic.
The beginning of the 2011 movement can be traced to April of that year. A small protest of about 200 private university students at Universidad Central took place against illegal profiting among university higher-ups and general dissatisfaction with university education quality. Soon after, Education Minister Joaquin Lavín issued a proposal to university officials and students in May that included a provision that would give schools funding based on students’ test scores, further deepening marketization in the education system (Salinas and Fraser, 2012: 21). The government also announced that 2011 would be a “year of education” which elicited a reaction from students like movement leader Giorgio Jackson, who recalled being baffled by the proposition of further privatization of an education system that already burdened students with very high costs (Jackson, 2012: 146). Jackson, then president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad Católica de Chile (FEUC), and other leaders like Camila Vallejo, president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECh) came together to begin organizing protests in reaction to the succession of education-related events in the country. The unitary structure of Confech was instrumental in this process, offering calls to action and involving its many member schools from all throughout Chile.

The movement’s advent and rapid growth was clearly tied to a growing dialogue on education that had been prompted by the actions of both government officials and student leaders. The prevalence of mass mobilization rapidly increased as Confech began organizing protests. In early May, Jackson released a call to action on behalf of Confech calling for a mobilization and strike on May 12 for the “recuperation of public education” (Confech, 2011a). The call to action enumerated three categories of reform to tertiary education: access, increased financing, and democratization of education and classified more specific demands under these

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8 Translation by the author. Original text in Spanish
categories. The first protest drew over 10,000 participants in Santiago, with a crowd largely comprised of university students, but also including high school students, teachers, and workers (Águila, 2011). The protests continued through the summer, and with growing numbers. One massive protest on August 21 included somewhere from 100,000 (according to police) to one million protestors (according to Vallejo) (Argandoña, 2011). Confech’s strength in numbers and organization counteracted the void in civil society left by weakened unions as described by theorists who seek to explain Chile’s demobilization.

In communicating their demands and the perceived need to mobilize, Chilean student leaders strategically framed their demands to gain the support necessary to begin a social movement. Jackson details three basic ideas that student leaders hoped to convey to students: inequality of access to higher education, financing, and regulation (Jackson, 2012: 148). These issues would resonate with university students, making the rich “question why they are deserving of this privilege and others [were] not” and to provoke “anger, impotence, and frustration with an unfair system” among poorer students (Jackson, 2012: 148). Student leaders involved the university students who were instrumental in the beginning of the movement by communicating these ideas. Eventually, the students’ demands became more diverse, as did the participants in protests, and the goals of the movement became much more sweeping than the original three-pronged approach that Jackson described. Camila Vallejo’s letter to Lavín on June 27, 2011 is emblematic of how the frame for the movement was rhetorically expanded. She writes, “The true dialogue that Chile needs is that which is concerned with ensuring the material conditions so that no young person with talent and capacity is left out of the public system; it is to ensure a whole education, committed to ethical and democratic values of participation and liberty…”9 (Vallejo, 2012: 102). As the movement grew, so did its goals, and issues of democracy, pedagogy, and

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9 Translation by the author: original text in Spanish
equality, with which many Chileans (not only university student) could identify, became a part of the movement’s rallying cry.

Also important in the advent of the movement was a generational effect. The protagonists of the 2011 demonstrations were students who grew up exclusively in democratic Chile with no exposure to dictatorship. The implications of this generational effect were twofold. Firstly, they were the beneficiaries of the expansion of education throughout the Concertación era. The increase in access to schools meant that there were simply more students. Secondly, the “children of democracy” did not grow up in the climate of fear that permeated the dictatorship. Admittedly fear is not something that is easily measured, but clearly, a democratic Chile has a different definition of public space than the authoritarian state. Jackson reinforces the power of this effect, writing, “We grew up in the absence of dictatorship, without a curfew and without seeing armed forces on the street. This made us freer” (Jackson, 2012: 146). Experience with a more open conception of public space allowed the students a greater propensity to engage in public protest.

How does the theoretical notion of the “children of democracy” play out empirically? Luna and Toro’s study of 2012 AmericasBarometer data in Chile notes that protest participation can be explained with statistical significance by education level and age, among other factors (Luna and Toro, 2013: 2). Age is negatively associated with protest, meaning that the young are more likely to mobilize. Education level is positively associated with protest activity, which lends further credence to the generational argument. The “children of democracy” are in fact still somewhat children in a literal sense, and their youth and access to education can help to explain public protest. Luna and Toro’s data analysis also shows that age is also positively correlated with voting, meaning that the young generation exhibits a comparative preference for protest.
over voting as compared to older generations. This is all indicative of “dissatisfaction with the country’s formal representative institutions” (Luna and Toro, 2012: 3), which brings to mind Roberts’ descriptions of “dealigned” party systems that “spawned a legacy of heightened electoral volatility and widespread vote shifts from traditional parties to new parties or political movements” (Roberts, 2013: 1424). Clearly Chile’s parties are not in a state of disarray that threatens democratic stability, but the actions of the young generation at the forefront of the 2011 student movement indicate a shift, if only temporary and slight, towards this unlikely classification for Chile.

The generational argument helps to counter fear of ungovernability as one of the structural inhibitors to protest in Chile. The empirical findings demonstrate that there was, in fact, a group of people in Chile that was unafraid of provoking civil unrest through contentious politics. The students were reacting to the effects of neoliberalism on their own generation and they were far enough removed from the realities of ungovernability preceding the dictatorship that they were able to mobilize and engage in mass protest. It is not a coincidence that the anti-neoliberal movement in Chile arose from a young population in the realm of education, because this specific population was the one that was least likely to be influenced by fear of provoking polarization and social instability. The 2006 and 2011 student movements in Chile reflect a historical change in political opportunity brought about by the end of the dictatorship. This change manifested itself years later, when the generation that grew up having experienced the transition’s resulting freedom was old enough to organize and protest. The power of the generational variable lends strong evidence to the power of the fear of ungovernability variable in explaining the demobilized period in post-transition Chile. This fear seems to have diminished

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This “comparative” preference is not an absolute one; the 18-26 year old generation’s voting and protest participation rates are about the same, close to 20%, but that mark is the lowest for voting and highest for protest.
in age 18-26 demographic, suggesting that one of the inhibitors to mobilization may be weakened for the foreseeable future.

In sum, the advent of protest can be explained largely by a few different factors. The adverse effects of neoliberal education policy can be considered a prerequisite for the protest, but more important to explaining timing are political events, such as Bachelet and Piñera’s elections, and education policy proposals by the Piñera administration. Furthermore, the generational effect is an essential variable in explaining the movements’ occurrence. But with so many commonalities between the 2006 and 2011 movement, why have the second round of protests lasted so much longer than the brief Penguin Revolution?

Duration of Protest: How a Contentious Episode Became a Movement

The second part of the puzzle that this paper explores is the continuation of the 2011 protests past the year of their inception and into the succeeding two years. The 2006 protests disintegrated after about two months, and although there is no accepted amount of time that distinguishes a movement, the 2011 mobilizations clearly constitute a movement. By contrast, the Penguin Revolution was a brief contentious episode whose short duration did little to challenge perceptions of the participatory nature of Chilean democracy. In this section I will argue that the generational effect again holds explanatory power, as do organizational capacity and framing.

The application of the generational argument to protest duration is informed by the fact that the university students leading the 2011 round of protests were also the protagonists of the 2006 movement. The commonality of experience explains learning effects as well as access to new structures of organization that were absent in the 2006 Penguin Revolution. The 2011
movement lasted much longer than its predecessor, but what exactly did this generation of students learn from its experience in 2006?

To analyze the generational learning, it is first necessary to understand why the 2006 movements fell apart structurally. The 2006 protests did not lack internal structure. High school students in Chile were, as documented in the explanation of protest advent, very well organized in the Pingüino movement, through the AES (Donoso, 2013: 9). But the 2006 movement lost momentum when it entered the realm of formal political institutions. As is reflected in the discussion of parties in the literature review, elected officials in Chile have weak ties to civil society and thus do not need to be responsive to its demands. For this reason, “once the Pingüinos entered the institutional arena, their influence was constrained significantly” (Donoso, 2013: 26). The Bachelet administration did make some small concessions that did not include the structural changes that the students sought and created the Advisory Commission on the Quality of Education, ostensibly in order to discuss the movement’s broader goals (Donoso, 2013: 12). With a seat at the table, the students grew complacent and divided, and contentiousness within the group overrode the propensity to unite under common causes and demands. Part of the failure of the 2006 protests, then, can be attributed to factionalization that weakened the AES’s unifying abilities. Furthermore, one could charge student leaders with naïveté for their acceptance of Bachelet’s concessions. Some portion of the decision to cease contentious politics has to be attributed to faith that the collaboration between students and the Concertación government would be fruitful in addressing the students’ deeper concerns about the education system.

The 2011 movement was even better organized than the Penguin Revolution. Access to established groups like Confech gave the movement a strong organizational basis through which to conduct its protests. Additionally, individuals like Camila Vallejo, Giorgio Jackson, and
Camilo Ballesteros\textsuperscript{11} entered the fold as inclusive center points around which supporters could rally. But once their terms as presidents of their respective university federations ended, the movement continued with new leadership. Somma argues that the democratic structure of the 2011 movement in tandem with the strong central presence of Confech created “highly participative environments” that “granted legitimacy to movement actions” (Somma, 2012: 303). The students in these stronger organizations had learned from experience the difficulties of affecting real change in the Chilean government, which was reflected in the continuation of their protests. The Piñera government refused demands to end for-profit education and provide a right to free education for all, instead offering the expansion of university scholarships as a solution, which “did not appease the protestors” and the movement continued (Bellei and Cabalin, 2013: 114). With the lessons from 2006 in hand and a strong democratic structure, the movement was able to establish continuity and consistency. The strong organizational basis for the movement precluded the need for labor as a central organizational force to organize continued protests. Instead, unions were among the many other contingents of civil society that became important peripheral supporters for the movement.

The 2011 movement was very successful in establishing horizontal linkages to other social groups. The 2011 movement grew both within the cohort of youth and in other realms of society. Luna and Toro’s study on demographic effects on protest participation in 2012 underscores this trend. The 2012 AmericasBarometer data indicate that not only has protest “grown more among the youth, it also appears to have diffused to older cohorts” (Luna and Toro, 2012: 6). The growth among youth includes the rapid incorporation of a diversity of university students, but also includes high school students, who participated in protests and school takeovers. This presence in the movement was welcome and the breadth of demands expanded

\textsuperscript{11} Then president of the Federación de Estudiantes Universidad de Santiago (FEUSACH).
beyond just university students’ concerns. Older cohorts were not just individual actors who were swept up in the students’ cause, they were members of other sectors of organized civil society. Students collaborated closely with teachers’ unions and also gained the support of the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores* (CUT), the foremost labor union in Chile (Vallejo, 2012: 36, “CUT Confirma…”, 2011).

The movement found support not only among new participants, but also in terms of overall public support, influenced by the communication and framing tactics of movement leaders. Whereas the 2006 protests made the public uneasy about the prospect of returning to ungovernability (Navia, 2010: 319), the 2011 movement continuously defined itself as nonviolent, placing the blame of any confrontation between students and *carabineros* on the government. This strategy was, as expected, easily countered by government accusations that the movement was promoting unrest. Government and conservative media played up isolated incidents of property destruction and violence (Salinas and Fraser, 2012: 33). But aided by the presence of creative demonstrations such as kiss-ins, running laps around the presidential palace, and a massive coordinated dance to Michael Jackson’s Thriller, the movement built a reputation both domestically and internationally for embracing innovative, peaceful forms of protest (Barrionuevo, 2011).

Additionally, movement leaders communicated and adjusted their demands in an inclusive manner. This type of framing was useful during the early stages of the movement, as described above, but it also ensured the basis for a movement that was popular with the Chilean public and could last for a long time. Jackson and Vallejo, the primary voices of the movement in its first year, were “highly articulate spokespersons who were able to communicate the purposes and claims of the movement to the mass media” (Salinas and Fraser, 2012: 33).
Jackson, for example communicated very clearly the problem of inefficiency in a supposedly efficient market-driven education system, explaining that, “more than half drop out of college, and of those who manage to graduate, approximately two-thirds don’t find work in the subject they studied” (Jackson, 2012: 150). The student leadership’s ability to communicate their perceptions of deficiencies in the education system was essential, and their success is borne out in polling data, which show that in the fall of 2011, the movement enjoyed 67-79% approval, while Piñera’s administration saw its approval ratings drop from 41% in April 2011 to 27% in August (Salinas and Fraser, 2012: 22).

The 2011 student protests were able to overcome hurdles presented by both demobilizing variables and shortcomings of the 2006 protests to achieve a remarkable sustained presence. The generational effect of prior experience in 2006 taught students important lessons about how to interact with the government if they wanted their more serious concerns to be addressed. Students also achieved access to and utilized an established and effective mobilizational structure in Confech that allowed for both strong leadership and democratic decision-making. This organization served as a stand-in for unions, which, weakened by the dictatorship, were no longer capable of repeatedly organizing protestors. The movement also grew and flourished as a result of its horizontal linkages to other groups and its framing as a palatable and just cause for the public to support. Combined, these factors created a solid basis for extended mobilizational success.

**Conclusions**

This paper has explained how a multitude of factors led to the advent and duration of Chile’s surprising student movement. The contentious behavior of the Chilean public was
unexpected, but it was not inexplicable. The empirical evidence suggests the importance of a young generation involved in protest. This helps to explain both the issue—education as opposed to other areas where inequality is similarly problematic—and the timing of the movement—both in 2006 when the students gained access to high school organizations and 2011, when they gained access to more established and effective university federations.

The findings in relation to the generational variable indicate that political opportunity structures that changed years ago contributed to a somewhat invisible growth of the possibility of sustained contentious outbreaks. This possibility became a reality in 2006 and exploded in 2011. Events that are temporally proximate to the protests do not tell the whole story. Analysis of the protests must follow a somewhat unconventional application of social movement theory, with particular attention to historical political events. The effects of this historical change in political opportunity are far from over in Chile.

The children of democracy have a new approach to politics in Chile. They demand changes to the education system, but more philosophically they hope to deepen Chilean democracy, making it more responsive to the demands of the public. They question assumptions that we hold about the stability of Chilean democracy, and are not afraid to threaten that stability for the sake of expanding the government’s responsiveness to popular demands. Questioning traditional conceptions of democracy in Chile is central to the movement. Giorgio Jackson writes, “Chile had always been seen as a model of development, as the ‘jaguar of Latin America’ and we managed to jeopardize the foundation on which past governments had constructed this image” (Jackson, 2012: 150). A combination of political events, mobilizing structures, and issue framing has given rise to a social movement that will inevitably have a profound effect on the future of Chilean democracy.
Stability alone is no longer enough. The children of democracy expect more of their government, seeking to deepen the democracy in which they were born. Their protest could easily expand to other areas if inequality is not addressed effectively. Now is the time for the Chilean government to focus on incorporation, otherwise this new generation, which has already diminished the fear of ungovernability both within itself and with connections to older generations, could begin to pose serious problems to the government.

In 2014, political opportunity structures have again aligned in a way that may precipitate some of this change. Michele Bachelet has assumed office once again, with campaign promises to address inequality in Chile through tax reform and changes to the Constitution. She finds herself allied with a Concertación majority in the Congress, but not the four-sevenths supermajority required to implement a new Constitution. This necessitates collaboration with the coalition of the right, which has strong incentives to protect Pinochet’s Constitution. But if gridlock persists and structural reform is once again postponed, contentious politics could become the new norm in Chile. The children of democracy have already shown that they will not sit idly as their demands are ignored.
Bibliography


