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Social Protest in Chile: Causes and Likely Consequences

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Executive Summary. In 2011 widespread student protests in Chile made international headlines. In this *Insights* report we analyze Chilean political opinion in the aftermath of those protests. The results of the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey discussed in this report seem to convey a clear message: the legitimacy of political institutions is very low in Chile. Moreover, a younger generation that is progressively gaining majority status in the country has contributed to increased incidents of collective action around a demand for political and socioeconomic change. Such demands have resonated broadly with society at large, shaping protest movements, influencing relevant policy debates, and leading to widespread calls for political and constitutional change. Our analysis suggests that unless the Chilean political system is able to effectively respond to these demands, the country may continue to see similar protest movements in the future.

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Much like the wave of protests that swept Brazil in 2013, Chile's student movement made international headlines in 2011 by taking their political dissatisfaction to the streets. At home, the massive strikes, street demonstrations, and occupation of educational facilities put President Sebastian Piñera's government on the defensive. Although initially centered on education, the students' demands came to resonate with popular discontent with the political establishment and unfulfilled promises of Chile's unequal socioeconomic model. "Street politics" rapidly diffused across issue areas and across the country as legitimate and ultimately effective ways to extract concessions from a "cornered" government (and political class). In contrast, 2012 was relatively quiet and this might be interpreted as signaling that Chileans have reverted again to "normal" modes of political behavior. In this *Insights* report,¹ with data from the 2012 AmericasBarometer by LAPOP,² we provide an alternative interpretation.

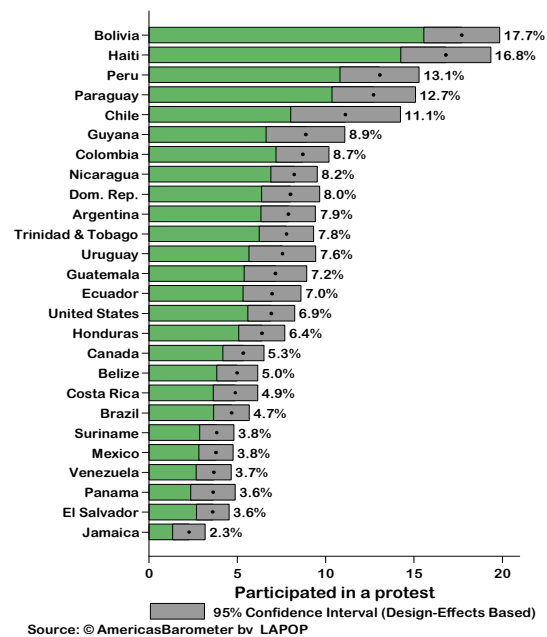
Our argument has two parts. First, we will argue that the wave of protests that ensued in 2011 has had a significant impact on Chilean public opinion. Those effects are visible on at least three fronts: public support for the political system and its main institutions (i.e., political parties and Congress, which we do not report here³); the country's public policy agenda; and citizens' preferences regarding political change and the instruments to pursue it. Such emerging trends are similar to those

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>

² Funding for the 2012 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

³These trends are reported in Chile's 2012 AmericasBarometer country report, which can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

Figure 1. Rates of Protest, 2012



observed in other countries that have witnessed rapid and drastic political change and the virtual collapse of traditional party systems (e.g., those in the Andean region in the 1990s and early 2000s). They also mirror in many ways patterns we are beginning to see in Brazil (e.g., Moseley & Layton 2013).

Second, we will argue that challenges to the legitimacy of Chile's political system, while catalyzed by the 2011 protest wave, are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Institutional safeguards that isolate the political system from societal demands are key to explaining this outcome. Yet, the findings reported in this note suggest that institutional stability comes at a cost: an increasing split between civil society and the "political class", which faces increasing challenges in terms of translating citizens' preferences into public policy outcomes.

We begin by analyzing the relative incidence of social protest in the case of Chile. Based on the 2012 round of the AmericasBarometer, Figure 1 reveals the percentage of the population in each country that reported having protested (at least

once) in the twelve months preceding the date of the interview.⁴

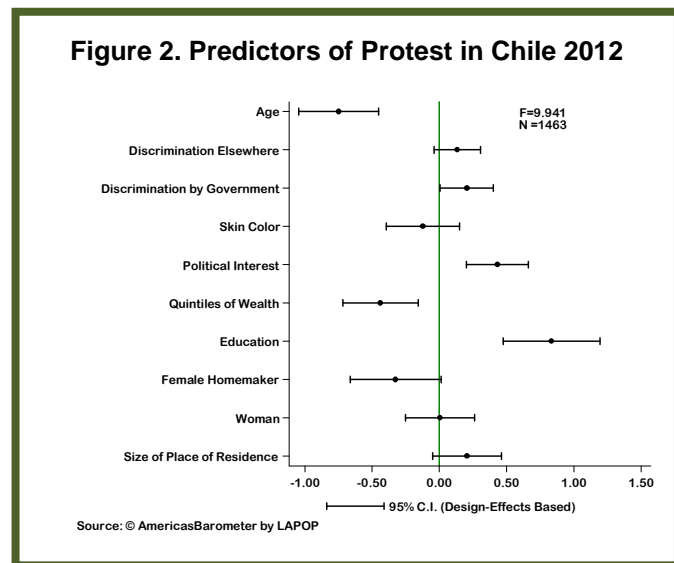
As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of the population that participates in protests is relatively small in all countries. Yet, in relative terms, Chile ranked among the cases with the highest percentage of protest participants, with about 11% of survey respondents reporting participation in at least one protest. Moreover, when compared to the results observed in the 2010 *AmericasBarometer* (Luna & Zechmeister, 2010), the change observed in Chile is striking. In 2010, Chile was among the four cases in the region in which protest was least prevalent: only 4.7% of respondents indicated having protested in the prior year. This short-term shift is fully consistent with the political events that unfolded in the country in 2011.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Protest Activity in Chile

As a first step, we assess who was more likely to have reported protesting in the 2012 *AmericasBarometer* survey of Chile. Across Latin America, protest events have occurred across a series of issue-areas in recent years (PAPEP/PNUD, 2011). However, the nature of protest participation is typically case-specific. Therefore, we present the results of a logistic model that seeks to identify significant socioeconomic and demographic predictors of protest activity in Chile.

The standardized results of the analysis are presented in Figure 2. The estimated effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable is represented by a dot. If the dot and its corresponding bars, which indicate the 95% confidence interval, fall to the left of the 0 line, then the relationship is considered both

negative and statistically significant; if the dot and bars fall to the right of the 0 line, the relationship is considered positive and statistically significant. If the dot or its corresponding bars overlap with the 0 line, the predictor is not statistically significant.



As observed in Figure 2, age and wealth are significantly and negatively associated with protest activity in Chile. Conversely, interest in politics and education are significantly and positively associated with protest activity. This means that *ceteris paribus*, those who are younger, those with lower levels of wealth⁵, those more interested in politics, and those with greater levels of education were most likely to have reported participating in a protest during 2011 (the year prior to the survey).

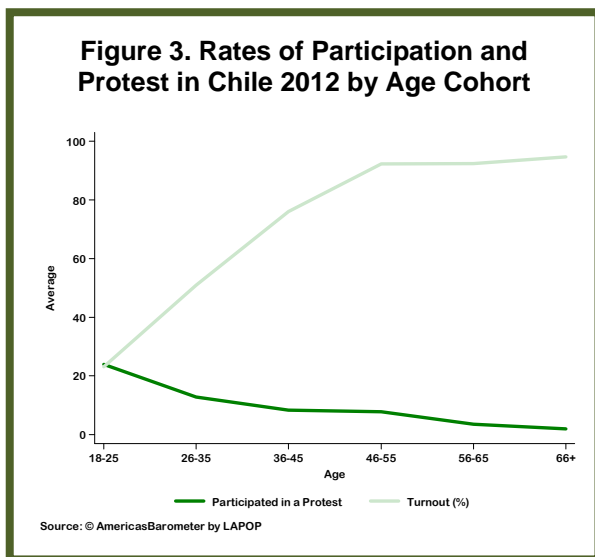
Two of these results are of particular interest in the context of Chilean democracy: the political engagement of youth and the relative impact of social class (approximated with the wealth measure) on the propensity of engaging in protest activities. Whereas the latter implies the politicization of distributive issues in Chilean society, the former partially counteracts the claim that younger cohorts are politically

⁴ The measure is PROT3: In the last 12 months, have you participated in a demonstration or protest march? Fieldwork in Chile took place between March and May of 2012.

⁵ For more on how the income measure is created, see Córdova 2009.

disengaged (Luna & Seligson, 2006; Riquelme, 1999; Toro, 2007, 2008). In this regard, taken together with recent political events, the evidence of the 2012 AmericasBarometer, suggests the need to amend conventional understandings of the political engagement profile of the younger generation of Chileans.

Figure 3 compares different age cohorts in Chile regarding their propensity to engage in electoral politics (through voting in elections) and in social protest. These types of political participation seem to behave as mirror images. Those age cohorts that participate more in electoral politics seem to protest less, and those that have participated in protests recently tend to have voted much less frequently. Interestingly, though, the youngest cohort appears to participate in protest and in voting at equal rates.



For all Chileans, then, and particularly the younger generation, protest participation in 2011 appears to have been a product of dissatisfaction with the country's formal representative institutions. In this way, it was instrumental in activating the voice and collective action of those that felt less represented by the established party system and the Chilean socioeconomic model, and those who had, until 2011, shown the lowest

levels of political engagement. In the remainder of this report, we explore the possible consequences of this wave of protests for the country.

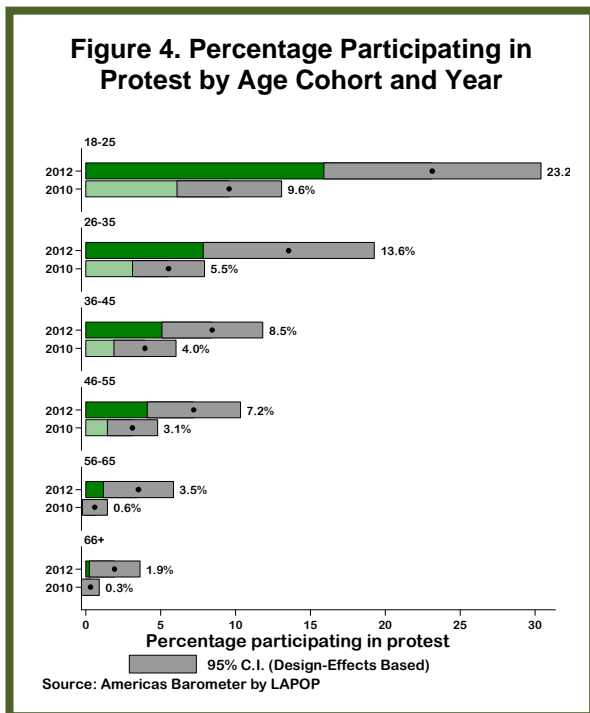
The Political Aftermath of the 2011 Protests

The protest wave of 2011 had various political effects, including the emergence of new political leadership and organizations that will likely become key political actors in years to come. Yet, four political consequences are of particular interest with respect to the broader legacies of the 2011 protest wave.

First, the protest wave likely generated demonstration effects, leading to an increase in protest events across a series of other policy areas (e.g., the local movements of Calama and Aysén in the past two years). Second, protest activity has also diffused across age cohorts. To illustrate this trend, Figure 4 compares the reported protest activity by members of different age cohorts in the 2010 and the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey. Whereas protest is more extensive and has grown more among the youth, it also appears to have diffused to older cohorts.⁶

In this way, protest activity seems to have catalyzed and reinforced the previously "inconsequential" (yet growing) discontent with political and representative institutions. As we find in analyses not presented here, the percentage of party sympathizers in Chile is among the lowest in South America, and their presence has declined steadily in recent years.

⁶These results should be read carefully because the absolute number of "protestors" in each age cohort is small. Therefore, the graph illustrates an observed trend, but the observed percentages for each age cohort and year do not display statistically significant differences (the error bars overlap for different years and the same cohort).



Third, yet related to the previous two trends, the 2011 protest wave seems to have yielded the articulation of a “social movement” that seeks political and social change in the country, and that is prepared to participate in both institutional (via the creation of new electoral vehicles) and non-institutional political arenas. Current public opinion on the need for a constitutional reform in the country is perhaps the starkest manifestation of such claims for “change”. In 2012, the AmericasBarometer’s Chile questionnaire included an item that asked about the perceived need for constitutional reform:

CHI60. [W]e have had a debate on the need to introduce in Chile a reform to the Constitution, aiming at changing the political functioning of the country... To what degree do you agree with the idea of introducing such reform?

As shown in Figure 5, more than 50% of respondents indicated they “agree” with the need to introduce a constitutional reform, while another nearly 20% said they “strongly agree” with the proposed reforms. In the meantime, only close to 4% of respondents openly disagreed with such a proposal. A follow-up

question asked respondents whether an eventual reform should be discussed by Congress (as a representative institution) or adjudicated through popular vote over different reform proposals. Although unconstitutional in the frame of the country’s current legal framework, the “popular vote” alternative obtained close to 90% of survey responses. Taken together, then, these results can be seen as another reflection of widespread citizen distrust with the “political class”.

Fourth, and finally, the protest wave also helped reshape the country’s policy agenda. Whereas in previous years, education was not seen as a serious problem in Chile (Luna & Seligson, 2006; Luna & Zechmeister, 2010), in 2012 this issue increased in salience among the population (respondents who identified education as the most important issue for the country jumped from less than 3% in 2010 to about 10% in 2012). Moreover, as depicted in Figure 6, Chilean citizens’ perceptions regarding the quality of public schools in the country is on average the lowest of all the Americas. It seems likely that these opinions will influence the policy-agenda (and parents’ decisions regarding schooling options for their children) in the years to come.

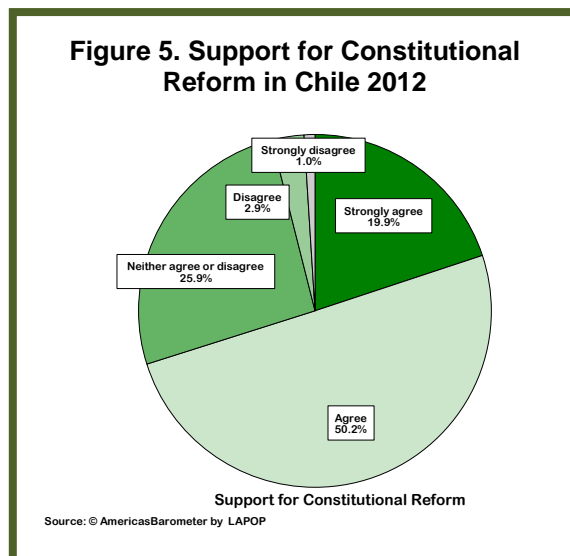
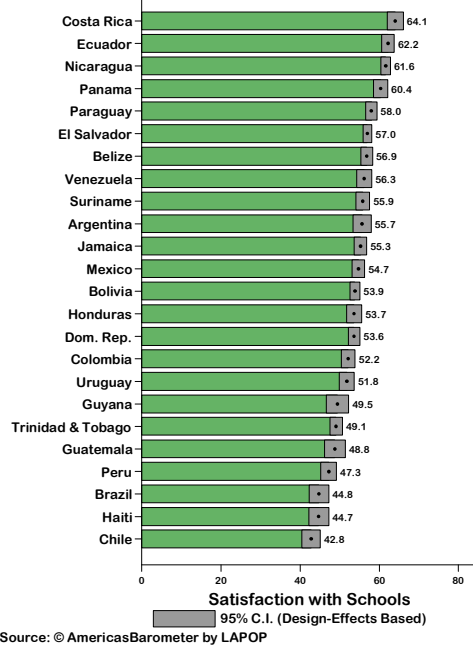


Figure 6. Satisfaction with Schools, 2012



What Lies Ahead for Chile?

The results of the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey in Chile discussed in this *Insights* report suggest that a newly politicized and active younger generation is at the forefront of a growing reliance among Chileans on contentious politics as a means of expressing its political voice. These new forms of political expression appear to be driven by demands for fundamental political and socioeconomic change and are becoming a more common feature of the Chilean political landscape. Whereas in the past Chile appeared to be relatively immune to the waves of protest that swept through its neighbors, it now seem that protest is quickly becoming part of Chileans' menu of political participation options.

From such a portrait one could assume that political change is forthcoming in Chile. Yet, that might not be the case. The current constitutional framework of the country, as well as the informal institutions through which the "political elite" has ensured its own reproduction (Altman & Luna, 2011) can still

succeed in isolating the formal political process from societal demands in the short to medium run. Change is thus likely to be protracted. Yet, Chile's contemporary political challenges do not seem likely to disappear any time soon and given the demographics of those on the front lines of recent protests, we should not expect such forms of collective action to go away any time soon either.

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Appendix

Table 1. Predictors of Protest in Chile 2012

	Standardized Coefficient	Standard Error
Size of Place of Residence	0.142	(0.131)
Woman	0.020	(0.128)
Female Homemaker	-0.415	(0.173)
Education	0.840*	(0.179)
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.411*	(0.143)
Political Interest	0.446*	(0.118)
Skin Color	-0.141	(0.141)
Discrimination by Government	0.188	(0.104)
Discrimination Elsewhere	0.117	(0.088)
Age	-0.735*	(0.149)
Constant	-3.026	(0.220)
<i>Number of Observations</i>	1463	
<i>Prob>F</i>	0.000	

Note: Coefficients marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, two tailed.