Renewing the Political Arena: Social Uprising, Constitutional Change and Chile's New Government

Renovando la arena política: estallido social, cambio constitucional y nuevo Gobierno en Chile

Nicolás M. Somma
Pontifica Universidad Católica de Chile and COES
nsomma@uc.cl

Sofía Donoso
Universidad de Chile and COES
sofia.donoso@uchile.cl

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Abstract:
This article analyses the renewal process of the actors and ideas in Chile's political arena during the last decade, focusing mainly on the last three years. The 2019 social uprising accelerated this incipient opening of the political arena by igniting a process of constitutional change that is currently underway. The uprising activated previously institutionally marginal actors and social movements and contributed to the victory of the current left-wing Government of Apruebo Dignidad, led by Gabriel Boric. Our analysis shows that the dividing lines between institutional and non-institutional actors are more fluid than usually recognised and that this helps explain the renewal of Chile's political arena during the last decade.

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Resumen:
En este artículo analizamos un proceso de renovación de los actores y las ideas en la arena política nacional que comenzó en Chile durante la última década, pero en particular desde 2019. Esta incipiente apertura fue acelerada con el estallido social de fines de 2019, que puso en marcha un proceso de cambio constitucional actualmente en curso, que movilizó institucionalmente a actores y movimientos sociales hasta ahora marginales, y contribuyó al triunfo del actual Gobierno de izquierda de Apruebo Dignidad, presidido por Gabriel Boric. Nuestro análisis muestra que las fronteras entre actores institucionales y no institucionales son más fluidas de lo que se ha reconocido y que eso ayuda a explicar la renovación de la arena política en Chile en la última década.

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Key Words:
Chile, social movements, political parties, elections, political arena.

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Palabras clave:
Chile, movimientos sociales, partidos políticos, elecciones, arena política.

Renewing the Political Arena: Social Uprising, Constitutional Change and Chile's New Government [1]

*Nicolás M. Somma
and Sofía Donoso*

Introduction

Since the transition to democracy in 1990, Chile's political landscape has been characterised by both political and economic stability, as well as a tendency towards gradual change. In stark contrast to many other countries in the region, this pattern has been interrupted in the last three years by three consecutive causally linked events: a wave of mass protests across the country (known as 'social uprising'); a still ongoing process of constitutional change, which was agreed as an institutional mechanism to deal with the protests; and most recently, the arrival in government of a left-wing coalition (Apruebo Dignidad) that brought new leadership and the youngest president in the nation's history, former student leader Gabriel Boric, only 36 years of age.

This article analyses the process of renewal of the Chilean political arena, that is, the renewal of the set of individual and collective actors that influence public decisions and policies in the country.[2] In his *polity*

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[2] Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2002;

model,[3] Charles Tilly argues that political arenas are composed of central actors with low-cost access to the levers of institutional power—government, parties, Congress (polity members) and actors more distanced from institutional power who challenge from the margins, sometimes employing non-institutional tactics such as protests or other challenges to the political system.[4] The literature on social movements has long noted that "challenging" actors, such as social movements, push from the margins of the institutional system, while central members of the political arena seek to preserve the *status quo* or, at most, implement incremental changes. However, political arenas are not static. Events such as wars, economic crises, elections with unexpected results or rebellions can produce critical junctures in which political arenas are rearranged.[5]

Moreover, political arenas are not static because what constitutes an *institutional actor* and *non-institutional actor* is not constant. As has been argued in recent literature, the dividing lines between members of the political arena and non-institutional actors such as social movements are rather more porous than is commonly asserted.[6] In the case of Chile, social leaders who gained public notoriety as a result of the demonstrations are now part of both the executive and legislative branches of government. Likewise, the so-called *social uprising*—the largest wave of protests since the return of democracy in 1990—forced a constitutional debate that a section of the political establishment had been trying, unsuccessfully, to bring to the table for decades. In this way, focusing on Chile, we also seek to contribute to the conceptual discussion on the changing relationship between what are commonly considered institutional and non-institutional actors in processes

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Eduardo Silva and Federico M. Rossi (eds.), *Reshaping the Political Arena in Latin America: From Resisting Neoliberalism to the Second Incorporation*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018.

[3]   Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading, Addison-Wesley, 1978, chapter 3.

[4]   William A. Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest*, Homewood, Dorsey Press, 1975.

[5]   R.B. Collier and D. Collier, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

[6]   Jack A. Goldstone (ed.), *States, Parties, and Social Movements*, Cambridge University Press, 2003; Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, "Ballots and Barricades: On the Reciprocal Relationship between Elections and Social Movements", in *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 8, no. 2, June 2010, pp. 529-542, at *https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710001234* (date of access: June 7, 2022)

of political and social change. We argue that it is this interaction that allows for the renewal of the political arena by incorporating new actors, ideas and political styles.

In what follows, we review the Chilean political and social conjuncture of the last three years based on the key points of analysis set out above. First, we describe the "stable" political arena of the period 1990-2013 and the first signs of change in it between 2013 and 2017. Subsequently, we present the critical juncture of the social uprising of 2019 and two of its major consequences, one direct (the beginning of a process of constitutional change) and the other indirect (the coming to power of a new left-wing coalition: Apruebo Dignidad). Throughout the analysis we account for the interaction between institutional and non-institutional actors, and how this relationship helps to explain the current political situation in Chile. We conclude that, as a whole, this process of change will bring to a close the political cycle initiated with the democratic transition in 1990,[7] renewing the actors and ideas in the political arena that will contest the new cycle in the current decade.

Stability in the post-transition political arena (1990-2013)

Following 17 years of military dictatorship, between 1990 and 2013, Chile experienced a period of political and economic stability that allowed for substantial progress with regards to social development. During these years, the polity members came from two large centre-left and centre-right coalitions that dominated the country's political life, winning the majority of seats in Congress in almost equal shares, and with a broad predominance in local politics. Between 1990 and 2014, the centre-left came to power five times (1990, 1994, 2000, 2006 and 2014) and the centre-right only once (2010). However, the centre-right always had a strong opposition role and the parity in Congress prevented the centre-left from

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passing reforms that challenged the socio-economic model inherited from Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship.[8]

The lack of deeper transformations to confront the neoliberal logic that had been installed by the military regime in the 1970s and 1980s produced a malaise that, during the 21st century, was slowly articulated by various social movements (indigenous, student, environmental and labour movements, among others).[9] Through the use of protest tactics from the margins of the political arena (such as marches, mobilisations, roadblocks, strikes and digital protest campaigns), these movements achieved increasing levels of collective mobilisation and placed increasing pressure on the political class.[10] Although these movements fought for specific concerns in their respective areas of public policy, in general, their demands were aimed at improving the distribution of material, symbolic benefits and opportunities in society. They also raised harsh criticism of the development model based on natural resource extraction (copper, timber, salmon and agriculture) and the way in which liberal democracy was instituted in Chile, such as the lack of citizen participation and the elitist nature of politics.

The impact of these movements was indirect, thanks to the pressure they exerted on political institutions. One indicator of this is the scarce presence of social activists in institutional political positions of national scope such as Congress or ministries (although they did achieve some insertion into local politics) during the period 1990-2013. For example, during those years it was unusual to find trade union representatives or environmentalists in high-level political positions. On the other hand, Congress and the executive branch were practically monopolised by professional politicians who enjoyed high rates of parliamentary re-election.[11]

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[8]   Carlos Huneeus, *La democracia semisoberana: Chile después de Pinochet*, Santiago, Taurus, 2014; C. Fuentes, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-187.

[9]   Sofía Donoso and Marisa von Bülow (eds.), *Social Movements in Chile: Organization, Trajectories, and Political Consequences*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 3-61.

[10] *Idem*; Sebastián Valenzuela, Arturo Arriagada and Andrés Scherman, "The Social Media Basis of Youth Protest Behavior: The Case of Chile", in *Journal of Communication*, April 2012, vol. 62, no. 2, pp. 299-314.

[11] André Marenco dos Santos, "Comparing Houses of Representatives: Parliamentary Recruitment in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico", in *Teoria & Sociedade*, vol. 2, special edition, 2006, pp. 42-69.

Incipient rifts in the political arena (2013-2019)

Some signs of change in the political arena were made apparent in the 2013 and 2017 elections. Student leaders who had gained notoriety in the 2011 mass mobilisations for free, good-quality education decided to run in the 2013 parliamentary elections and were unexpectedly successful. Some of these leaders belonged to the Partido Comunista (Communist Party), which had had a rather precarious and marginal insertion in institutional politics up to that point, despite being a historic party in Chile. Others came from recently created political parties (Revolución Democrática) and still others as part of political movements (Izquierda Autónoma). In addition, the Nueva Mayoría, a centre-left coalition that expanded the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia by incorporating the Communist Party, won the 2013 presidential elections. This led to former student leaders also entering the executive branch. For example, the División de Organizaciones Sociales was led by Camilo Ballesteros, former president of the Student Federation of the University of Santiago. Revolución Democrática, although not part of the Nueva Mayoría government, decided to join the Ministry of Education in order to promote educational reforms from that institutional space.

This incipient process of incorporating social leaders into decision-making spaces markedly deepened in the 2017 elections, which saw the debut of a new electoral system with more proportional representation than the previous binominal system. In January of that year, the Frente Amplio coalition was created, which brought student, territorial, environmental, feminist and trade union forces together. The Frente Amplio won 20 deputies and one senator in these elections. Moreover, their presidential candidate, the journalist Beatriz Sánchez, surprised everyone with 20% of the vote in the first round of the elections, and was very close to making it to the second round. Thus, there was a break in the predominance of the two traditional coalitions and a third political force, originating in the social movements, entered the political arena.

Other rifts were evident in the type of policy reforms. Michelle Bachelet's second government (2014-2018), supported by a simple majority in Congress, passed education and tax reforms increasing state interference. It also proposed a participatory process to draft a new constitution for Chile,

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a project to which it devoted enormous resources and political capital. Bachelet presented these reforms as part of the political system's response to the student mobilisations of 2011. However, the constituent process did not prosper due to a lack of political support and distrust of traditional political parties.

The nascent opening of the political arena took a step backwards in relation to the integration of new actors in 2018, when Sebastián Piñera came to power for the second time, forming a government with a strong technocratic imprint.[12] This partly explains why, with the exception of a few cases such as the Gender Identity Law (which allows transgender people to change their name and sex as registered at birth), no progress was made during Piñera's second government on the agendas promoted by various social movements.

The social uprising (October, 2019)

The social uprising of October 2019 was the critical event that accelerated the incipient renewal of the Chilean political arena–a renewal that is currently underway. Although important mobilisation processes had been outlined in previous decades, the uprising gave a sense of urgency to the public policy agendas promoted by social movements. It also made it possible for actors who had a strong orientation towards change to enter the political arena, who until then had remained on the margins of institutional politics.[13]

The uprising began in October 2019, when high school students led mass evasions of the turnstiles of several Metro stations in Santiago, Chile's capital. On the night of October 18, there were several coordinated actions of burning Metro stations, whose perpetrators are still unknown. In the days

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[12]   Mireya Dávila Avendaño, *Presidencialismo a la chilena. Coaliciones y cooperación política 1990-2018*, Santiago, Editorial Universitaria, 2020, pp. 223-253.

[13]   Kathya Araujo (ed), *Hilos tensados. Para leer el octubre chileno*, Santiago, Universidad de Santiago, 2019, pp. 9-36; Nicolás M. Somma, Matías Bargsted, Rodolfo Disi Pavlic and Rodrigo M. Medel, "No Water in the Oasis: The Chilean Spring of 2019–2020", in *Social Movement Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, February 2021, pp. 495-502.

following October 18 and in the face of police repression in the stations and on the streets, both peaceful and violent protests became widespread in several cities across the country, inciting an excessive police response and human rights violations, which were reported by international organisations. In addition, several economic, cultural and administrative activities (including concerts, sporting events and international summits) were brought to a halt. There was a widespread sense of chaos among the population that led to the creation of various neighbourhood assemblies (cabildos) to seek solutions.

The protests far outnumbered, both in numbers and scale, any previous protests on record.[14] The demands in the demonstrations were varied. In the spaces of dialogue that were organised at the local level—some of them with the mediation of municipalities—they expressed demands linked to guaranteeing rights in health, education and housing, higher incomes, women's and indigenous peoples' rights, as well as constitutional change, among others. The protests were not coordinated by any organisation in particular. However, many social movement organisations coordinated through the Mesa Unidad Social (Social Unity Roundtable) called for a general strike in November 2019, which contributed significantly to giving a sense of urgency to the looming political crisis.

The protests diminished as the summer approached and in particular the month of February 2020—the traditional holiday month in Chile. However, some spaces in the centre of Santiago were recurrently occupied by protesters, a situation that still persists to this day (2022). After a contentious start to March, the protests slowed and changed their demands following the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and the strict quarantine measures imposed by the government, which limited the concentration of people in public and private spaces.[15]

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[14] Alfredo Joignant Matías Garretón, N. M. Somma and Tomás Campos (eds.), *Informe Anual. Observatorio de Conflictos 2020*, Santiago, Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES), 2020, pp. 11-21.

[15] Nicolás M. Somma and Felipe Sánchez, "Transformative Events and Collective Action in Chile During the COVID-19 Pandemic", in Michelle Fernandez and Carlos Machado (eds.), COVID-19's *Political Challenges in Latin America*, Cham, Springer, 2021, pp. 103-118.

Direct impact of the uprising:
the constituent process

Beyond its complex internal dynamics, the uprising consolidated the process—initiated in 2013—of incorporating previously marginal and challenging actors into the centre of the political arena. A direct impact of the uprising and the subsequent political crisis it triggered was the impetus for the process of constitutional change that is currently underway. This process seeks to eliminate the 1980 Constitution— forged under dictatorship—and replace it with the first constitution drafted under democracy and with the participation of elected representatives of the citizenry. The constitutional process will conclude in September 2022, when citizens will ratify or reject the proposed constitution in a plebiscite with a mandatory vote.

The feeling of imminent institutional collapse among the political elite was the cognitive mechanism[16] linking the uprising with constitutional change. The political crisis unleashed by the uprising produced a sense of threat and collapse of the political arena by its central actors–parties, Congress and the Executive. After three weeks of mass protests, unprecedented levels of violent clashes between protesters and police, economic and administrative paralysis, and the deterioration of Chile's international image, on November 15, 2019, most political parties signed an agreement to initiate a process of constitutional change. Following the roadmap agreed on that day, an election was held in October 2020 with a voluntary vote where the electorate was consulted on whether they wanted to initiate a process of constitutional change. With a turnout of 51% of the electorate, 80% of voters chose to initiate this process, and the same percentage decided to do so through a constituent convention in which not all of its members belonged to Congress, showing a clear preference for the renewal of the political arena.

In the following months, it was agreed that the convention would be composed of 155 people with an equal gender composition. This

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[16] D. McAdam, S. Tarrow and C. Tilly, *Dynamics of contention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 72-88.

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was the first example of gender equality in politics and opened the door to the entry of women into the constitutional moment–who are under-represented in institutional politics in Chile, despite notable advances in the last two decades. In addition, an agreement was made to reserve 17 seats in the convention for representatives of indigenous peoples, who have little presence in institutional politics.

Elections for constituents were held in May 2021. A number of people with traditional party affiliations and experience in parliamentary or executive office were elected. However, the majority of the convention members came from different sectors of organised civil society and regional activist circles. Many of them were originally part of the Lista del Pueblo movement, which eventually disintegrated. As a result, the Constitutional Convention became a microcosm where innovative ideas that had not been discussed and experimented in institutional politics since the transition were brought to the table.

A goal shared by the vast majority of social movements and organised civil society present at the Convention was to eliminate the subsidiary character of the state in the new constitution. Since its creation in 1980, this principle has paved the way for the privatisation of social rights in the areas of health, education and pensions, among others. Other issues that have been insufficiently addressed since 1990 and have since taken centre stage in the constitutional debate include regional autonomy, indigenous legislation, a gender perspective in various areas, the elimination of the Senate and environmentally sustainable economic development, among others.

It is important to underline the centrality of the constitutional space into which many previously marginal or institutionally weak actors entered. Although constitutions are only one of the factors that determine public policy, they provide the broad outlines of the social, economic, political and cultural development of countries, and often last for decades.[17] Therefore, if the constitution were to be ratified in 2022, the long-term

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[17] Tom Ginsburg, *The Lifespan of Written Constitutions*, 2008, Berkeley, eScholarship-University of California, 2008, at *https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6jw9d0mf* (date of access: June 7, 2022).

impact on constituents could be far greater than that of the average congressperson.

Indirect impact of the uprising:
The Apruebo Dignidad Government

The social uprising also had an indirect impact on the renewal of the political arena: the shift of the National Government towards an option of social transformation that resonated with the demands raised during the mobilisations of 2019. This was embodied in the electoral triumph for the 2022-2026 period of the left-wing coalition Apruebo Dignidad, which includes the parties and political movements of the Frente Amplio, the Communist Party, the Federación Regionalista Verde Social and Acción Humanista. The victory of Apruebo Dignidad allowed the consolidation of a young generation of leaders between 30 and 40 years of age in the central levers of institutional power, producing a true generational change.[18]

Our thesis is that the uprising created a climate conducive to the triumph of the current president Boric. The uprising resulted from a climate of citizen tension towards the political elites and discontent with the distribution of both material and symbolic rewards in society. But the uprising also contributed to the political projection of this discontent. On the one hand, during the protests there was strong criticism of the Chilean state's inability to cover the risks of health, old age, illness and housing in a capitalist society, as well as the need to change the constitutional ties inherited from the dictatorship and to take on the historical demands of the indigenous peoples. Some groups in society began to take a more critical look at the inequalities of the development model and to value proposals for change in a more statist and redistributive direction.[19]

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[18]   Matías Bargsted and Andrés González Ide, "Política: Razones para el recambio", in *Mensaje*, January 18, 2022, at *https://www.mensaje.cl/edicion-impresa/mensaje-706/politica-razones-para-el-recambio/* (date of access: June 7, 2022).

[19]   Carolina Aguilera, Nicolás Angelcos, Emmanuelle Barozet, Álvaro Cabrera, Vicente Espinoza, Francisca Gutiérrez Crocco, Daniela Jara, Violeta Montero and Marisol Rojas, "18/O: Per-

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However, another part of society was alerted by the escalation of violence and looting, and the political authorities' loss of control over some public spaces (such as Plaza Italia in central Santiago or some areas of Araucanía in southern Chile). This predisposed it to conservative right-wing alternatives promising a "firm hand", such as José Antonio Kast's nascent Partido Republicano. In other words, the uprising may have contributed to the polarisation of public opinion and the political scene.

Our thesis is consistent with the election results of the first and second round in 2021. For the first time since 1990, the candidates of the two traditional centre-left and centre-right coalitions failed to make it to the second round. In the first round in November 2021, these coalitions suffered a heavy defeat. The centre-right candidate, Sebastián Sichel, won 13% of the vote, while Yasna Provoste, a candidate backed by the Democracia Cristiana (Christian Democrats) and some centre-left parties, won 12% of the vote. By contrast, the winners, José Antonio Kast of the conservative right-wing Partido Republicano (Republican Party) (28%) and Gabriel Boric of the left-wing coalition Apruebo Dignidad (26%), were towards the extremes of the political spectrum. In the second round, Boric won by a landslide with 56% of the vote and was elected president of Chile.

It is impossible to know whether Boric would have won without the uprising. However, the criticism of the economic and political development model raised by said uprising, as well as the subsequent constituent process, set the agenda on issues for which Boric had explicit proposals: equality, dignity, redistribution, feminism, ecology, children, indigenous peoples and sexual diversity. In short, Boric was the candidate with the clearest proposal to institutionally address the demands of the uprising.

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sonas comunes en movilizaciones extraordinarias (Parte 1)", in CIPER, October 17, 2020, at *https://www.ciperchile.cl/2020/10/17/18-o-personas-comunes-en-movilizaciones-extraordinarias-parte-1/* (date of access: June 7, 2022); Oscar Mac-Clure, Emmanuelle Barozet, José Conejeros and Claudia Jordana, "Escuchando a los chilenos en medio del estallido: Liberación emocional, reflexividad y el regreso de la palabra 'pueblo'", in CIPER, March 2, 2020, at *https://www.ciperchile.cl/2020/03/02/escuchando-a-los-chilenos-en-medio-del-estallido-liberacion-emocional-reflexividad-y-el-regreso-de-la-palabra-pueblo/* (date of access: June 7, 2022).

Conclusions

The political arena in post-democratic Chile was characterised for a long time by its stability. While this bore great fruits in terms of political, economic and social development, the lack of renewal of both actors and ideas led to a deep malaise among citizens and mistrust towards institutional political actors. Without this context, it is impossible to understand the social uprising of 2019. However, this malaise was, in part, articulated by new social actors who then disputed power in the institutional sphere, contributing significantly to the renewal of the political arena. Less organically, but equally relevant to the political process, the social uprising spurred a constitutional process that, if successful, will define the contours of politics in the new political cycle that has begun.

In theoretical terms, the Chilean case illustrates two mechanisms for the renewal of the political arena in the neoliberal democracies of the southern hemisphere:[20] the arrival (in Congress or the executive) of new forces through regular elections, and the extraordinary irruption of processes of constitutional change in which the conventionality comes from the fringes of institutional politics. Furthermore, this case suggests some preconditions that accelerate the processes of renewal of the political arena: massive popular rebellions that combine peaceful, disruptive and violent tactics, which create a climate of imminent collapse among political elites; electoral system reforms that increase proportionality; and the gestation of social movements autonomous from political parties, whose demands and leaderships gain public support. Finally, the Chilean case exemplifies the fluidity of the dividing lines between institutional and non-institutional actors at critical junctures, and opens up a future scenario for studying the success or failure of these new actors.

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[20]   R.B. Collier and D. Collier, *op. cit.*, chapter 1; E. Silva and F.M. Rossi (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 3-20.