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## POLICY BRIEF - CLACSO



# The Challenge to Foster Citizen Participation: Some Reflexions on the Chilean Case\*

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### ◆ Presentation

Citizen participation in Latin America

Spurred by social mobilization and international factors, the 1980s in Latin America witnessed the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. Since the beginning of the 1990s, electoral democracy has been achieved in most parts of the region. Yet, there is a widespread dissatisfaction among citizens with regard to social justice, governmental efficiency and political inclusion (Dagnino et al., 2006). As a consequence, during the last two decades, Latin America has witnessed the

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## ◆ KEYWORDS

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- Chile

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- Citizen Participation

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- Democracy

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- State

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- Government

rise of protest politics which call into attention the faults of the current state of democracy. In most cases, social movements have questioned both the way in which policy is elaborated and implemented and the policy orientation, i.e., the type of policies delivered to citizens. The Student Movement in Chile is not the exception to this regional trend. Staging the largest protests since the reinstatement of democracy in 1990, the students have demanded not only a structural education reform to address current socio-economic segregation, but also a new constitution that allows for more citizen participation.

Indeed, as the 2004 UNDP report on democracy in Latin America acknowledges, the greatest challenge of the region is to extend a democracy of voters to a democracy of citizens, advancing to '[...] a type of politics that provides options, harnesses intentions and permits democratic empowerment' (2004: 30). In this way, the vast debate on the transition, its determinants and effects that dominated the 1980s and 1990s has gradually been replaced by a focus on the quality of democracy, i.e., the ways in which democracies actualize their potential as political regimes.

In this context, there has been a broad debate on the institutional mechanisms to foster citizen participation, and through this, contribute to the deepening of democracy in Latin America. Initiatives in this direction require the recognition by the political establishment that democratization goes beyond the narrow conception of representative democracy. In short, it involves acknowledging that the attainment of free elections does not say much about the equality involved in the process of making collective decisions. In the following pages, I discuss possible ways of addressing this challenge.



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## ✦ Political Analysis

### The political importance of citizen participation

What is — in theory and in practice — the political importance of citizen participation? This debate derives from a general critique to representative democracy and the recognition of the needs of going beyond free and fair elections to legitimate our political systems. Since democracy not only denotes a political system where power is acquired through elections, but also involves the need of the governments to be accountable to the people, scholars have insisted on the importance of participation and deliberation as a means to facilitate governments' responsiveness to people's preferences and interests and thus, deepen democracy (Drysek, 2000).

Although participation is a contested concept, it can be understood as an increased citizen control over the State, and the enhancement of ordinary people's capacity to decide on issues that affect their lives (Avritzer, 2009). The fact that such initiatives allow for the inclusion of citizens' views on policies, encourage mutual respect between the participants and, finally, improve the quality of the decisions taken through an informed exchange of opinions, also contribute to increase the legitimacy of democracy. In this way, it has been argued that in participatory institutions such as, for example, the experience of participatory budgeting in Brazil, deliberation enhances the legitimacy of the policy initiatives through participation and accountability (Fung and Olin Wright, 2001).

Participatory institutions, however, have not remained without criticisms. The creation of participatory councils in Brazil, for example, developed parallel to clientelistic webs, co-opting, diluting the demands of the social movement members that were participating, and thus weakening their role as promoters of social



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change (Hochstetler, 2000). It has also been noted that institutional mechanisms to promote participation can reproduce and even deepen previously existing inequalities (Baiocchi, 2001). This is explained by the fact that deliberative models reinforce the power of educated people, and exclude other ways of communicating apart from formal argumentation. Consequently, socio-economic inequalities and fragile political and cultural conditions may offset the benefits of deliberative institutional designs that seek to foster citizen participation.

Therefore, while recognizing the importance of creating institutions that promote the participation of citizens, it is centrally important to avoid the employment of universal formulas. Instead, it is crucial to acknowledge the need for and the deliberative capacity of State institutions is highly context dependent and defined by variables such as literacy and education, shared language, voting system designs, political culture, and, more generally, State structures and institutions. With this caveat in mind, in the next section I offer a policy proposal to foster citizen participation in Chile.

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## \* Proposals

### A proposal to foster citizen participation in Chile

So far, both the importance of fostering citizen participation and the need for a careful and context-specific institutional design to promote this aim has been emphasized. Without a doubt, the use of participatory institutions and the prospects of the fulfilling of their objectives will be defined by the expectations that social and political actors put in them.

It is outside the scope of this policy brief to account for the

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history of the predominant modes of State-civil society interactions that have characterized the post-transition era. Yet it is necessary to underline the long-term impact of the elite-led transition to democracy, and the gradual demobilization of civil society actors in general and social movements in particular. After democratic rule had been consolidated and the fear of an authoritarian reversal had been overcome, awareness of the need of promoting a more participatory democracy increased in the mid-2000s. This paved the way for an intense debate on how to tackle this challenge. A point of inflection can be identified in the election of Socialist Michelle Bachelet who won the elections in 2006 with the slogan ‘I am with you’ (*Estoy contigo*). Also by reassuring continuity with the previous Concertación governments while introducing a ‘bottom-up’ approach based on four principles: incorporate citizen participation in public administration; strengthen civil society organizations; introduce reforms regarding access to information and inter-cultural policies (Aguilera, 2007).

In this context, the demands of important social movements such as the 2006 Pingüino Movement and the 2007 Contract Workers Movement were addressed by creating a Presidential Advisory Commission. These commissions were composed of experts in the fields of education and labour, respectively, and were innovative in the incorporation of the leaders of the movements that had motivated their constitution and other civil society actors. Nevertheless, the outcomes of these commissions — policy recommendations that were translated into bills regarded as timid — de-legitimised this institutional mechanism to channel social movement demands. Taking into consideration this widely discussed experience, the policy proposals outlined below seek to go beyond ad-hoc and short-term solutions and promote the gradual strengthening of civil society actors who, together with other political actors, can exert social pressure and build the socio-political alliances needed to approve pending democratizing and equity-enhancing reforms.



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## Short-term thinking: restore confidence between political parties and social movements

When compared to other Latin American countries, confidence in political parties and political institutions, and the satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, has been low in Chile during the last decade (Latinobarómetro, various years). In this regard, a prerequisite of any effort to promote citizen participation in Chile, and through this way advance towards a substantive form of democracy, is to restore confidence in both the political establishment and political institutions. Thinking about initiatives that could be taken by the incumbent Government — composed of the centre-left political parties that formed the Concertación between 1990 and 2010, in addition to the Communist Party — I propose the following short-term measures. These aim to signal a new pact with civil society actors that can serve as a basis for later long-term efforts.

◆ **Policy-engagement initiatives.** The newly elected Government of President Bachelet has planned significant tax and education reforms, and proposed changing the *Constitution*. Given the complex nature of these reforms, they are not easily understood by public opinion. As a way of informing about the features and purposes of the reforms, the Government should make wide use of public hearings. A special effort should be made to invite civil society actors who then can socialize information about the reforms to their respective constituencies. This strategy could be complemented by public presentations made by ministers and sub-secretaries responsible for the reforms. These initiatives fulfil the double objective of engaging civil society actors and signalling that the reform efforts must be pursued in a joint effort.

◆ **‘Going public’.** Given the structural nature of the reforms proposed by the incumbent Government, there has been a

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widespread opposition by strategic and powerful actors. As a way to overcome current hostilities, the Government should ‘go public’ — i.e. strengthen its efforts to inform public opinion about the reforms and resonate with demands for greater social justice. This strategy also signals the Government willingness to build a pact with social actors that can serve to exert pressure and have the reforms approved.

### Long-term thinking about strengthening civil society actors

#### *Policy engagement and institution-building*

◆ **Access to information.** A central way of fostering awareness and participation to advance democratization in Chile is to provide access to information on political institutions and their work. This access should be institutionalized through, for example, bills that improve transparency in the policy-making process, enhance online access of the discussion of bills, and secure procedures that permit citizen oversight of the work of the political establishment.

◆ **Priority-setting meetings.** Another way of engaging social movement representatives and civil society actors more generally is to invite them to participate in priority-setting meetings at the Ministry of the relevant policy field. In this way, Ministries secure to incorporate citizen groups’ priorities and urgent concerns into their policy planning. This strategy also serves to strengthen the organization of civil society groups that need to prepare for meetings, etcetera.

◆ **Permanent committees with the participation of civil society representatives.** In addition to the former, the incorporation of citizens’ viewpoints in the design of public policies should also be promoted by the creation of a permanent committee with social actors. As part of the strategic planning of each



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Ministry to improve the chances of getting bills passed, these permanent meetings could strengthen the strategy of ‘going public’ when the opposition to the policy initiatives impedes their approval.

### *Support of civil society organizations*

◆ **Funding to support civil society organizations.** As a way of strengthening of social movement organizations and civil society groups, the State should strengthen the currently available pool of funding opportunities.

◆ **Funding for the construction of social networks among civil society organizations.** Related to the former proposal, there should be additional funding opportunities for citizen groups who wish to enhance their networks with other organizations in the same policy field. This would promote the construction of common agendas and strengthen the capacity of social actors to engage in policy debates.

◆ **Training of social movement leaders.** An addition way of strengthening social movement organizations is to offer training to social movement leaders that enhance their skills to construct discourse, organization and capacity to participate in policy debates.

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