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Politics of democracy (HT 2022)

'On almost all economic and political indicators Chile looks better than any other country in Latin America'. Why then is there so much public dissatisfaction in Chile?

Introduction

Chile has been described as the 'Switzerland of the South' (Benedikter and Siepmann 2013) and indeed on most economic and political indicators, the country performs better than many of its regional counterparts. According to World Bank data from 2020 for example[1], Chile ranked second in Latin America in terms of GDP per capita (see appendix 1, 2022). Chile also ranked second behind Uruguay in terms of poverty, with 4% (2017) and 3% (2019) of the countries' respective populations earning less than $5.5 per day (World Bank 2022). Finally, Gini estimates for the region suggest that Chile ranks 6th out of 18 countries in terms of income inequality (see appendix 2, World Bank 2022). With regard to politics, Chile also ranks rather admirably on the World Bank's governance indicators (see appendix 3, 2021). According to average values across all six governance dimensions, Chile ranked second among 18 countries in the region. Moreover, on the rule of law, regulatory quality and government effectiveness dimensions, Chile had the highest regional values. Nevertheless, Chile's results on the political stability governance index were noticeably higher prior to 2019, the year the *estallido social* broke out. The *estallido* was a watershed moment in contemporary Chilean history and the reflection of deep-seated public dissatisfaction in the country. Given the favourable statistics mentioned above, how might this degree of social discontent be explained?

The concept of public dissatisfaction merits some consideration at this point. This essay will assume that 'public' dovetails with citizenry and refers primarily to Chileans who are not part of any political or economic elite. Dissatisfaction is not a standalone sentiment; it requires an object. Hence, political dissatisfaction requires some political object that fails to meet public expectations. In work on political support, Norris has built on Easton's seminal distinction between specific and diffuse support (Easton 1965) and put forth a five-component, nested model of political objects. These will be leveraged throughout the essay and are as follows: 'belonging to [the] nation-state', 'core principles and normative values upon which [a] regime is based', 'the overall performance of [a] regime', 'regime institutions', 'incumbent office-holders' (Norris 2017, 23–24).

In the case of the Chilean *estallido social*, it would seem that public dissatisfaction was manifested through actual participation in protests and evidence from nationally representative survey data that many Chileans supported the mobilisations (Centro de Estudios Públicos 2020, 32). What was dissatisfying Chileans? Clearly, Piñera's second mandate was not meeting many citizens' expectations, but neither was the regime's performance or institutions or even its core principles given calls for a new constitution (Centro de Estudios Públicos 2020). Hence, Chileans were likely dissatisfied with a range of Norris' political objects. Yet, it may be necessary to introduce a further distinction between Norris' 'support for democratic ideals' and support for principles enshrined in Chile's constitution of 1980 (which was promulgated under Pinochet's dictatorship). While average levels of satisfaction with democracy in Chile over the past seven years have afforded the country a ranking of 12/18 in Latin America, during this time, around 70% of the same LAPOP surveys' respondents agreed that 'democracy is the best form of government'. This demonstrates that citizens also distinguish between regime type and regime performance.

[1] Excluding Venezuela, for which there has been no fresh data since 2014.

This essay will attempt to explain why there is a considerable amount of public dissatisfaction in Chile. It will also try to define the various political objects of citizen's discontent using Norris' typology (2017). An initial section will consider the institutional legacy of Pinochet's dictatorship and the unresponsiveness of *Concertación* parties in the post-authoritarian period. Then, the essay will examine the implications of the interaction between high inequality and the privatisation of social services. Two final sections will assess governments' overall repudiation of extra-institutional popular mobilisation and citizens' perceptions of corruption.

Unresponsive post-authoritarian parties

Following Chile's transition to democracy at the end of the 1980s, scholars have argued that the country's regime was only superficially democratic. Garretón and Garretón suggest observers should not mistake civil rights and democratically elected governments (i.e., '*elecciones [...] libres, limpias y no fraudulentas*') for authentic democracy given the persistence of 'authoritarian enclaves' (2010). There is little doubt that the military government's '*leyes de amarre*' constrained subsequent democratically elected governments and the regime's level of vertical accountability (Angell 2009, 273; Luna 2016).

According to Luna, the 'authoritarian enclaves' contributed to a 'slow-motion […] low-intensity [crisis of political legitimacy]' (2016, 134–35), whereby Chileans' identification with political parties gradually crumbled (Siavelis 2013, 222; Luna 2016, 129–30; Centro de Estudios Públicos 2020). In part, this may have been because voters perceived little difference between successive *Concertación* governments (e.g., between the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* and the *Partido Socialista*) and even between the *Concertación* and *Alianza*, given the continuation of free-market economic policies, the *Concertación*'s limited ability to reform the political system (Huber, Pribble, and Stephens 2010) and the resort to 'extrainstitutional policymaking' via what has come to be known as the '*democracia de los acuerdos*' (Siavelis 2013, 212). Moreover, the binomial system used for legislative elections tended to benefit both coalitions (rather than non-aligned parties) and ensure that each won a seat in each district, thus reducing the level of citizens' electoral accountability. Interestingly, given empirical evidence suggesting that turnout is influenced by the (perceived) closeness of elections (Cancela and Geys 2016), this system may have contributed to the increasing levels of abstention witnessed throughout the period (Bargsted et al. 2019, 95).

Siavelis further contends that the very factors that contributed to the surprising stability of the *Concertación* coalition ultimately led to its gradual rejection by voters (2013). Given the constrained and initially febrile environment in which it operated (the 1993 '*boinazo*' is a poignant example of this (Albala and Tricot Salomon 2020, 134)), the *Concertación* is understood to have 'privileged governability over representation and accountability' (Siavelis 2013, 228). Left-wing political parties in the post-authoritarian period notably avoided creating deep linkages with civil society. Huber et al. suggest that this was due to party elites' wariness of 'popular pressures' following the experience of Allende's downfall in 1973 (Huber, Pribble, and Stephens 2010, 80), but that this reaction compounded the representational deficit due to their lack of financial resources. Since these parties did not receive public funding and had exiguous bases, they were especially reliant on wealthy donors with special interests (2010, 81–82). In fact, there is evidence that political elites between 1990 and 2013 focussed on issues other than those at the top of civil society's agenda (Albala and Tricot Salomon 2020, 137–38) and, relatedly, a UNDP-sponsored poll in 2013-2014 documented a marked cleavage between 'political elites'' and 'social elites'' appetite for change (especially for constitutional reform) (Luna 2016, 129).

In sum, in the two decades that followed Chile's return to democracy, political parties were unresponsive to voters. Vertical accountability was strangled by the dictatorship's institutional legacy (much of which was abolished under Lagos in 2005) and the *Concertación*'s attempts to avoid democratic breakdown at all costs (Luna 2016). This generated an 'uprooted democracy' and set the stage for a deeper crisis of legitimacy in the 2010s (Luna 2016). Hence, during the 1990–2000s, the object of Chilean dissatisfaction seems to have been political parties, which could be mapped onto Norris' institutional component (especially since incumbents such as Lagos and Bachelet were extremely popular) (2017).

The interaction between inequality and poor public services

If aggregate political and economic indicators were all that mattered to a country's citizens then it would likely make little difference if their political system were unresponsive. However, many Chileans have become dissatisfied with their country's economic model, which has guaranteed growth, but seems to have limited social mobility and disproportionately benefitted the wealthy, essentially widening the gap between the 'two Chiles' (Benedikter and Siepmann 2013, 13; Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020). Roberts has described the backlash against this model as a 'repoliticisation of social and economic inequalities' and traces its initial rumblings back to the student protests in 2011 (2016, 127).

While the *Concertación* governments expanded social policies and introduced new ones (such as '*Chile Solidario*' and the '*Plan AUGE*' under Lagos, as well as Bachelet's pension reform, which increased the number of beneficiaries of the '*pilar solidario*') and the *Alianza* governments led by Piñera did not necessarily do away with these, none of these governments has substantially questioned the neoliberal economic model introduced during Pinochet's dictatorship. This model is based around the notion of the '*subsidiariedad del Estado*'.

Although public and private services generally coexist in Chile, the quality of the former is often significantly worse than that of the latter. Yet, with around 70% of Chileans earning approximately $650 a month in 2013, many are unable to afford quality, private services (Benedikter and Siepmann 2013, 14). This may be punctually significant when households face health emergencies, for instance, but it may also determine the country's longer-term, macrosocial outlook. For example, Chilean families' ability to achieve intergenerational social mobility via access to quality education is still highly stratified. There is a clear social gradient in students' access to the best pre-university education and (the best) universities (Meneses and Cáceres 2012; Donoso 2016, 179). Using *Casen* data from 2009, Meneses & Cáceres highlight that 38% of first-year students came from '*colegios particulares privados*' although these establishments only accounted for 5% of Chile's secondary students ('*enseñanza media*') at the time (2012, 47). As ex-Chilean finance minister Andrés Velasco and Daniel Brieba note in *Liberalismo en tiempos de cólera*, this begs the question of whether Chilean society is actually caste-like (2019).

In specific cases, there are no state-run alternatives to for-profit services in Chile. The country's pension system is especially renowned in this respect. In 1981, Chile's social security system was reformed under Pinochet's dictatorship. A new compulsory pension scheme was created and fund administration was transferred to new for-profit entities, the so-called '*Administradoras de Fondos de Pensiones*'. Employer and state subsidies to individual pension accounts were abolished, while employees were obliged to contribute at least 10% of their salary and pay administration fees (Borzutzky and Hyde 2016). Analyses of the Chilean pension system's performance suggest that it is 'expensive, concentrates income in the hands of the Pension Fund Administrators, generates huge profits for the *AFP*s, is exclusionary and discriminates against women' (Borzutzky and Hyde 2016, 60–61). Unsurprisingly, Chileans have protested against the system, especially through the strategically

creative '*No+AFP*' movement, which emerged in 2012, but began organising large-scale protests from 2016 onwards (Rozas Bugueño et al. 2019). Nevertheless, limited government reforms have never posed radical challenges to this unpopular system (Rozas Bugueño et al. 2019).

In short, many Chileans have expressed dissatisfaction with their economic model, which the current democratic regime inherited from its dictatorial forebears. This discontent likely straddles Norris' 'core [regime] principles and normative values' as well as her regime performance component (2017). Successive left- and right-leaning governments have been unable or unwilling to challenge the principle of state subsidiarity (Bachelet attempted to engage a process of constitutional reform during her second mandate, but this was cut short when Piñera returned to power). Finally, it may be important to remark that aggregate estimates of inequality such as the World Bank's Gini coefficient may be inadequate reflections of disparities in households' actual access to resources and opportunities[2]. This might help explain why there is an apparent disjunction between Chile's regional ranking on this economic indicator and public dissatisfaction in the country.

Lack of responsiveness to extra-institutional mobilisations

As touched upon above, Roberts contends that 'a new wave of social protest' emerged in the 2010s in Chile as citizens stopped identifying with traditional parties and sought to express grievances through extra-institutional means (2016, 127). This is consistent with Moseley's view that protest occurs in Latin America when citizens are both politically engaged and unable to use institutional channels to effectively voice their grievances (2018). Yet, responses to social mobilisation from incumbents have frequently failed to adequately resolve their grievances. In fact, in this respect, scholars have drawn attention to the exceptionality (within the Chilean context) of the interaction between the Chilean student movement and Bachelet's government during her second term (Donoso 2016; Palacios-Valladares and Ondetti 2019). Palacios-Valladares and Ondetti trace the roots of the 2011 protests back to mobilisations in 1992 demanding progressive tuition fees ('*arancel diferenciado*') and chronicle how prior governments 'largely avoided the substantive reforms demanded by students' (2019, 638).

More recently, the state's preliminary response to the '*estallido social*' has been criticised for its highly repressive nature. President Piñera's initial reaction was to repudiate protest participants, qualify them as 'a powerful enemy' and declare an '*estado de excepción constitucional de emergencia*' (Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020, 53). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' 2022 report on Chile describes this response as a 'stigmatisation [...] and criminalisation of social protest' (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2022, 46). Furthermore, Piñera's government has been criticised for its abusive use of the '*Ley de Seguridad Interior del Estado*'. More specifically, protestors have been charged with '*incitación a la revuelta*' for much minor actions (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2022, 47). In addition, the Chilean police ('*Carabineros*') has also been denounced for its 'excessive use of force' against protestors and for committing human rights abuses (Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020, 53; Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2022, 50). Overall, these responses likely further escalated the situation (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2022, 46–47) and damaged the standing of long respected institutions such as the *Carabineros* (Centro de Estudios Públicos 2020, 17).

In brief, although politically active Chileans have plausibly resorted to unconventional political participation due to the low responsiveness of post-authoritarian parties, successive governments have mostly expressed exasperation at citizens' mobilisations and even sought to repress them. These

[2] Beyond issues with the reliability of the household survey data on which they often rely (Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020).

responses may have further polarised the country, increasing some sectors' discontent with regime unresponsiveness and strengthening others' rejection of the formers' radicality (it is estimated that 4062 *Carabineros* were injured by protestors during the events of the *estallido social*, for instance (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2022, 62)). In this case, public dissatisfaction has mainly been with incumbents and institutions (Norris 2017).

Perceptions of corruption

Beyond the political system's responsiveness to popular demands, perceptions of widespread corruption may also be a source of public dissatisfaction with incumbents and institutions more broadly. Compared to other countries in the region and even beyond, Chile scores well on aggregate estimates of corruption (see appendices 3 and 5). Nevertheless, in the 2010s, Chilean scores on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank's Control of Corruption Index registered declines. This was likely in response to a number of scandals that rocked the country's institutions. Luna has singled out several impactful scandals, including the Penta scandal in October 2014 (where an eponymous company was caught channelling funds to the right-leaning *Unión Demócrata Independiente* party), the scandal involving Bachelet's son in February 2015 and that around the *Sociedad Química y Minera de Chile* a month earlier (when the company was revealed to be illegally financing the campaigns of both right- and left-wing candidates) (2016). These corruption scandals probably strengthened the perception that 'political and business elites [collude] to perpetrate "*abusos*" for the sake of "*lucro*"' (Luna 2016, 134) and likely damaged Chileans' trust in their incumbents and political parties. Nevertheless, since mechanisms of horizontal accountability were crucial to the revelation and condemnation of these misdeeds, it is unlikely that public dissatisfaction would have swelled and targeted all branches of power or state agencies (e.g., the judiciary, the *Contraloría General de la República* and the *Fiscalía Nacional*) (Luna 2016, 136).

Interestingly, these scandals may illustrate the potential for discrepancies between assessments relying on aggregate indicators of political performance and citizen's subjective perceptions of political reality. Relative to other countries all over the world, a small decline in aggregate corruption scores may seem to indicate that little is amiss in Chile. Indeed, according to Transparency International's assessment, Chile ranked 27th in the world (out of 180 countries) in 2021 (on a par with the U.S.). In 2012, it ranked 20th. However, from a citizen's domestic perspective, the outbreak of scandals (in a regional context of prominent investigations, such as the '*Operação Lava Jato*') may contrast sharply with past perceptions of public official probity, prompting disenchantment with public life that could be greater than expectable from a comparative perspective.

In essence, several corruption scandals involving elites from both sides of the political spectrum likely contributed to public dissatisfaction with incumbents, parties and business elites, but not necessarily with state agencies exercising functions of horizontal control.

Conclusion

Chile has frequently been dubbed 'Latin American's poster child' (Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020) thanks to its strong performance on a range of political and economic indicators. Notwithstanding, public dissatisfaction levels in the country are high. As has been discussed, many Chileans are discontent with their incumbents, their institutions (e.g., parties and the police) and their economic model (Centro de Estudios Públicos 2020). In these regards at least, Sehnbruch & Donoso question whether Chile is any more exceptional than many other countries in the region (2020, 56).

This essay has propounded several reasons for Chileans' dissatisfaction. It has argued with Luna, Siavelis and Garretón & Garretón that 'authoritarian enclaves' and the *Concertacion* governments'

prioritisation of governability contributed to a latent crisis of legitimacy before 2005 and 2010, respectively (Siavelis 2013; Garretón M and Garretón 2010; Luna 2016). It has also contended that the neoliberal model implemented under Pinochet has led to an enduring stratification of intra- and inter-generational opportunities, but that successive governments have typically condemned extra-institutional mobilisations against the model, instead of heeding this escalatory political behaviour. Finally, the essay has evoked how corruption scandals may have generated further dissatisfaction with the executive and legislative branches. Overall, the essay has pointed to Chileans' ongoing concern with output, throughput and input legitimacy, the latter two appearing weaker than the former in Chile (Schmidt 2013).

On at least two occasions, the essay has also tried to demonstrate how aggregate indicators of economic and political performance may contrast with citizen's subjective assessments of their regime's performance. On the one hand, comparative, international rankings (of corruption) may not be equatable with citizens' ongoing monitoring of fluctuations in the salience of scandals. On the other, aggregate estimates of macroeconomic attributes (e.g., income inequality) may obscure deeper variation in households' actual access to opportunities.

Over the coming years, Chileanists will be especially interested to observe whether the country's constitutional convention and new left-leaning government can pull on an effective combination of levers in order to curb public dissatisfaction in the post-pandemic era.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: GDP per capita in 18 Latin American countries (in current US$)

Country Name	Rank	Value in 2014	Value in 2020
Venezuela, RB	1	$16 055,65	-
Uruguay	2	$16 831,95	$15 438,41
Chile	**3**	**$14 670,99**	**$13 231,70**
Panama	4	$12 796,07	$12 509,84
Costa Rica	5	$10 847,17	$12 140,85
Argentina	6	$12 334,80	$ 8 579,02
Mexico	7	$10 928,92	$ 8 329,27
Brazil	8	$12 112,83	$ 6 796,84
Peru	9	$ 6 672,88	$ 6 126,87
Ecuador	10	$ 6 377,09	$ 5 600,39
Colombia	11	$ 8 114,34	$ 5 334,56
Paraguay	12	$ 6 118,32	$ 5 001,07
Guatemala	13	$ 3 779,64	$ 4 603,34
Belize	14	$ 4 718,44	$ 4 115,18
El Salvador	15	$ 3 589,04	$ 3 798,64
Bolivia	16	$ 3 081,88	$ 3 133,10
Honduras	17	$ 2 190,65	$ 2 389,01
Nicaragua	18	$ 1 934,06	$ 1 905,26

Source: World Bank (2022). N.B.: data for Venezuela is from 2014.

Appendix 2: World Bank Gini index estimate for 18 Latin American countries in 2020

Country Name	Country rank	Latest estimate	Year of latest estimate
Brazil	1	53,4	2019
Belize	2	53,3	1999
Colombia	3	51,3	2019
Panama	4	49,8	2019
Guatemala	5	48,3	2014
Costa Rica	6	48,2	2019
Honduras	6	48,2	2019
Nicaragua	8	46,2	2014
Ecuador	9	45,7	2019
Paraguay	9	45,7	2019
Mexico	11	45,4	2018
Venezuela, RB	12	44,8	2006
Chile	**13**	**44,4**	**2018**
Argentina	14	42,9	2019
Bolivia	15	41,6	2019
Peru	16	41,5	2019
Uruguay	17	39,7	2019
El Salvador	18	38,8	2019

Source: World Bank (2022). N.B.: countries are ranked from most unequal to most equal according to the estimates.

Appendix 3: World Bank governance indicator values for 18 Latin American countries in 2020

Country	Rank	Avg.	Voice and accountability	Political stability	Government effectiveness	Regulatory quality	Rule of law	Control of corruption
Uruguay	1	0,97	1,31	1,05	0,78	0,58	0,68	1,42
Chile	**2**	**0,89**	**1,02**	**0,07**	**0,99**	**1,05**	**1,07**	**1,15**
Costa Rica	3	0,68	1,14	0,76	0,36	0,45	0,57	0,78
Panama	4	0,08	0,57	0,23	0,07	0,32	-0,21	-0,51
Peru	5	-0,10	0,22	-0,29	-0,24	0,53	-0,34	-0,49
Argentina	6	-0,12	0,59	0,04	-0,22	-0,57	-0,47	-0,12
Colombia	7	-0,14	0,15	-0,67	0,04	0,32	-0,49	-0,18
Belize	8	-0,18	0,53	0,51	-0,65	-0,54	-0,76	-0,19
Brazil	9	-0,21	0,26	-0,42	-0,45	-0,16	-0,18	-0,34
El Salvador	10	-0,29	0,04	-0,02	-0,36	-0,02	-0,76	-0,59
Paraguay	11	-0,31	0,07	0,02	-0,47	-0,20	-0,42	-0,87
Mexico	12	-0,41	-0,04	-0,85	-0,16	0,08	-0,67	-0,85
Ecuador	13	-0,46	0,02	-0,36	-0,44	-0,89	-0,55	-0,54
Guatemala	14	-0,64	-0,39	-0,43	-0,69	-0,17	-1,05	-1,10
Bolivia	15	-0,67	-0,07	-0,47	-0,56	-1,02	-1,15	-0,76
Honduras	16	-0,68	-0,60	-0,54	-0,60	-0,50	-0,96	-0,86
Nicaragua	17	-0,93	-1,10	-0,65	-0,71	-0,66	-1,22	-1,25
Venezuela, RB	18	-1,82	-1,51	-1,52	-1,78	-2,23	-2,35	-1,56

Source: World Bank (2021).

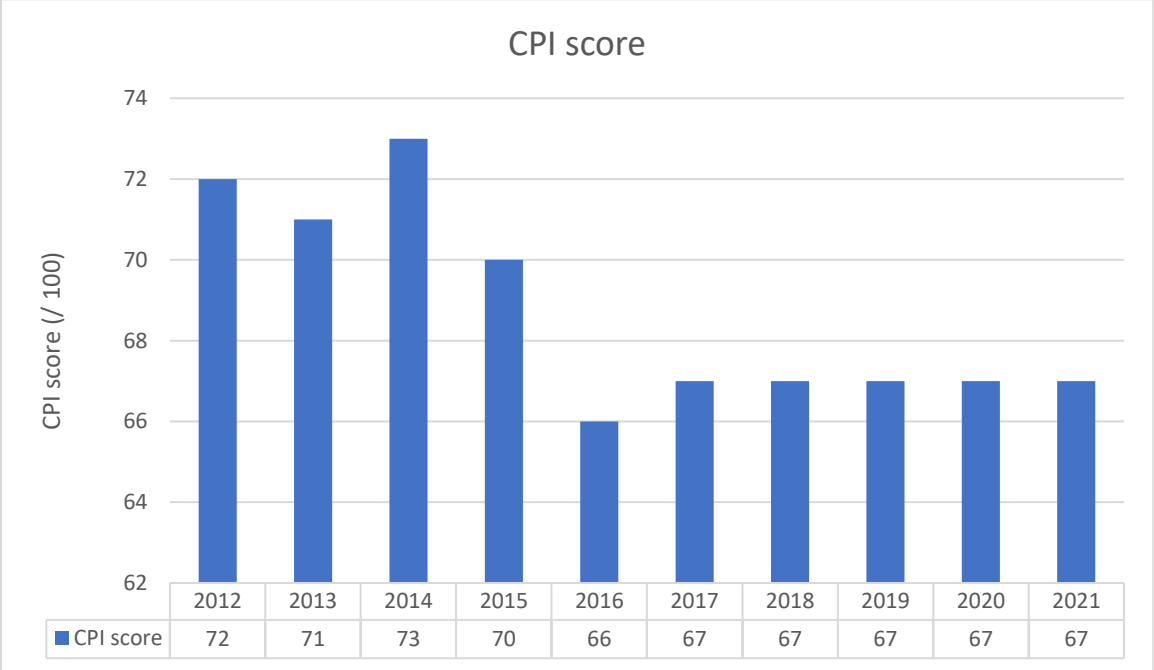
Appendix 4: average satisfaction with democracy according to the last four waves of the LAPOP survey in 18 Latin American countries

Country Name	Rank	Satisfaction with democracy (/ 100)
Uruguay	1	59
Costa Rica	2	52
Nicaragua	3	51
Ecuador	4	50
El Salvador	4	50
Belize	6	49
Bolivia	7	47
Guatemala	8	46
Argentina	8	46
Panama	10	45
Paraguay	10	45
Honduras	12	44
Chile	**12**	**44**
Mexico	14	42
Brazil	15	41
Peru	16	40
Colombia	17	39
Venezuela, RB	18	37

Source: Latin American Popular Opinion Project (LAPOP); 2021, 2018, 2016 and 2014 waves (2022). N.B.: data were not available for all countries in all waves (e.g., Belize, Venezuela), meaning that some averages are

calculated from less than four survey waves; averages were obtained from LAPOP's online 'data playground tool' and are weighted.

Appendix 5: Bar chart of Corruption Perceptions Index scores for Chile (2012–2021)



Source: Transparency International (2021). N.B.: lower scores indicate greater perceptions of corruption.