# Can a Promise Stop Protests?

# An Analysis of the 2019 Chilean Outburst

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**Abstract**

This paper studies whether a promise of constitutional change effectively alleviates protests by using the 2019 Chilean protests as a case study. In October 2019, Chile experienced a violent social outburst to which the government responded with various strategies, including attrition, repression, short-term concessions, and, ultimately, the promise of a constitutional change. Using daily data, we show that the announcement of a path for constitutional change is the only factor that de-escalates violent and non-violent conflict. On the contrary, repression and concessions have heterogeneous effects: non-violent protests increased after repression, while violent protests decreased in response to concessions. A discussion of the factors that could explain why the Chilean government and political elite made such a promise and why the mere promise of constitutional change succeeded in quelling protests is provided.

**Keywords.** Protests, Conflict Resolution, Constitution Making.

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# 1 Introduction

Numerous protest episodes exploded worldwide in recent decades, but only a few resulted in institutional change. The Arab Spring, for instance, started a wave of protests that spread throughout the region, but the promises of constitutional reforms and their effects did not spread equally. In Bahrein, the king curbed the protest with a combination of repression and economic concessions without opening the door to the possibility of constitutional changes. In contrast, Mubarak's announcement of constitutional reforms was not enough to prevent his downfall. In Morocco, the people initially resisted a constitutional change proposal made by the king, but it ended up succeeding, and the government survived the protest.

This paper questions whether the *promise* of institutional change can quell protest. For this to happen, two conditions are required. First, the government must be indeed willing to offer an institutional change. This raises the question of why do some governments resort to institutional change to calm the outburst, whereas others remain in short-term concessions. Second, citizens must accept the promise and yield. Then, why does the mere announcement of constitutional change sometimes succeed in pleasing protestors while in other cases is dismissed as not credible?

We study these questions using the Chilean Outburst of 2019 as a case study. The recent wave of protests in Chile gathered international attention due to their magnitude and intensity. What started as a reaction to an increase in subway fare soon became a widespread uprising that involved every corner of the country. The intensity of the unrest forced the government to adopt a combination of strategies to try to de-escalate conflict. At the beginning of the conflict, the state responded with attrition, simply ignoring the protest (Bishara, 2015; Yuen and Cheng, 2017). However, the crisis reached a tipping point on October 18th, erupting with an unprecedented level of violence, which prompted the government to shift towards a strategy of repression (Carey, 2006; Inclán, 2009; Pierskalla, 2010; Aytaç et al., 2017) combined with short-run economic and political concessions (Rasler, 1996; Butcher and Pinckney, 2022). As the uprising continued and intensified, further measures became necessary. Ultimately the government turned to institutional change as the solution to the ongoing unrest. On November 15th, the entire political class, including the president and the

opposition, announced a broad agreement for constitutional change. The process of changing the constitution continues until today when a first draft was rejected and a second one is in preparation.

Using daily data on Chilean protests and government strategies, we empirically assess the optimality of these government strategies—attrition, repression, concessions, and institutional change—in de-escalating the conflict. We use data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, Raleigh et al., 2010) to construct measures of conflict at the region-day level and to develop two empirical exercises.

First, we construct a panel of daily conflict at the region level to assess whether each of these strategies is associated with changes in conflict. We use temporal variation to estimate the relationship between the government responses and the level of total unrest, and for violent and non-violent unrest separately. Our results show that the only strategy that decreases the level of total conflict is the 15N Agreement. There were no significant changes in the number of detentions by the time of the agreement, suggesting that the decline in protests was not due to increased repression or police presence. When decomposing protests into violent and non-violent, the effect of the agreement is still significant and negative on both types of conflict. However, the effect of repression and concessions seems to be heterogeneous. Concessions are associated with a lower level of violent protests, and no significant effect on non-violent protests, whereas repression is associated with higher levels of non-violent protests, but no effect on violent protests. This goes in the opposite direction of previous literature, that suggests repression shifts movements' strategies towards more violent tactics (Lichbach, 1987; Chiang, 2021).

Secondly, we explore structural breaks in the trend of conflict over different dates to identify the times when conflict experience a structural change. We estimate a parametrized model of conflict before and after a given date, and then compare whether conflict dynamics is different over a time window before and after that date. The results confirm the only significant observed change occurred on November 15, after the Constitutional Agreement. Overall, our results suggest that the promise that paved the way for institutional change was critical in de-escalating conflict.

We discuss the main features of the Chilean environment that made this possible. In the first place, we study why repression and concessions were not effective in de-escalating conflict. Repres-

sion was implemented with an intensity that had no comparison in the country since the 1980s dictatorship, and still, it failed (Somma et al., 2021). Some explanations for this coincide with what is usually highlighted in the literature: the variety of protesters' tactics or "repertoires" made protests harder to control (Tilly, 1978; Davenport, 1995; Morris and Shadmehr, 2021), and the combination of repression and concessions implemented by the government delivered confounding messages, fueling protesters' mobilization (Lichbach, 1987; Moore, 2000; Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021).

However, in addition to these well-known mechanisms, we identified a specific feature of democracy that prevented indiscriminate repression by the government: separation of powers. While it is widely acknowledged that democracy can be a barrier to repression (Davenport, 2007), the separation of powers as a concrete channel has not received enough attention. Full-scale repression in democracies requires commitment within the political class and agreements among different groups. We show explicitly that the sharing of power between Chilean political actors played a critical role in restraining the governmental repressive tendencies.

Regarding the failure of concessions, an essential aspect of citizen demands was that they were complex and multifaceted (Araujo et al., 2019; Cox et al., 2021). This demand heterogeneity made it challenging for the government to make meaningful concessions that would satisfy all groups involved in the protests. Furthermore, people's frustration and disappointment with political institutions contributed to their skepticism toward any sectoral promise made by the government.

Secondly, we question why did the agreement for a constitutional change decrease conflict after all these failed attempts. We propose two crucial features of the announcement that helped it to work: its effectiveness and credibility. In Chile, citizens considered the constitutional change an effective mechanism to solve their demands. The saliency of the constitution as an obstacle to social development has been in the political agenda for more than one decade (Piscopo and Siavelis, 2021; Escudero, 2022). On the other hand, the announcement was credible, in the sense that it would translate into a genuine participatory process in which the people will have a word in the new text. Again, democracy as a separation of powers played a fundamental role in generating credibility. It was precisely the presence of a formal commitment endorsed by opposition parties that served as a reliable signal that change was coming. Indeed, just a few days before the agreement the president

announced that the constitution would change but protesters dismissed his call. The constitutional change only became credible when the entire political class, including the opposition, committed to reform.

## 2 Literature Review

This paper contributes to the literature studying government reactions and responses to protests, and the effectiveness of these responses as a means to resolve conflict.

The literature recognizes four possible responses by governments and political elites when facing protests: (1) attrition, (2) repression, (3) concessions, and (4) institutional change.[1] *Attrition* is a proactive practice that entails tactics that go from doing nothing to an array of defensive actions. Bishara (2015) defines the concept of "ignoring", and exposes its risks in terms of the emotions that it can trigger in the public, and the implications for future protest behavior (see also Yuen and Cheng (2017) for a definition in terms of "toleration").

*Repression* is one of the most common reactions to protests and it has been widely studied (Tilly, 1978; Earl, 2011; Davenport, 2007). However, there is little consensus about the effect of repression on protest. Police repression may cause a political backlash and increase political dissent over time (Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021). There might be several reasons for this to happen: a behavioral response by the people (Aytaç et al., 2017); effects of repression on microbilization processes (Opp and Roehl, 1990); or the information conveyed about the likelihood of success (Lohmann, 1993). In democracies, media attention and international pressure might also limit its scope as a conflict resolution mechanism (Chen and Yang, 2019; Shadmehr and Boleslavsky, 2020).

The third response is to make *concessions* to fulfil protesters' demands, which can take the form of economic policies, political changes, or tactical concessions. As with repression, concessions might also backlash: they can signal government weakness and encourage protesters to keep going (Ginkel and Smith, 1999; Davies, 2016). When psychological gains are present, concessions might increase people's beliefs about the likelihood of protest success, and drive newcomers into the

[1] Even though institutional change is a type of concession, it is a permanent concession, so we separate it from the temporary ones such as redistribution or cabinet reshuffle.

movement (Rasler, 1996). When demands are multidimensional, or when concessions are combined with other strategies, its optimality can be even more intricate (Lichbach, 1987).

Finally, the government can concede to a process of *institutional change* to allow a permanent extension of political power to the people. These institutional changes are part of a gradual and continuous process of democratization that allow extension of power to the people (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Marino et al., 2020). According to the transition-from-below theories of democratization, institutional change occurs because of some latent or actual pressure that citizens exert through political unrest. This can directly affect the government's strength (Kim and Kroeger, 2019), or it can affect people's voting decisions and attitudes. The evidence of protests as drivers of institutional changes is extensive: the Great Reform Act passed by the British Parliament in 1832 (Aidt and Franck, 2015); constitutional changes in Tunisia during the Arab Spring (Biagi, 2022); democratic transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa (Aidt and Leon, 2016).

All of these strategies were somehow implemented during the Chilean Outburst (Section 4.2), so in Section 6 we discuss the features of the Chilean context that contributed to the failure of the first three, and the partial success of institutional change.

This paper also relates to the empirical literature assessing the effects of government strategies on protests. Studies at the macro-level analyze a sample of countries over time. Carey (2006) uses daily data from six Latin American and three African countries between 1977 and 2002 to estimate a vector autoregressive model. She shows that protest and repression are mutually interdependent. Davies (2016) uses a similar approach to include diversion—to divert attention to an international conflict—in the set of government strategies. Klein and Regan (2018), using a cross-national protest event data set from 1990 to 2014, find that the state represses or accommodates demands depending on whether protesters generate high concession or disruption costs, respectively.

Several other works focus on a particular country. Peroff and Hewitt (1980) study the empirical effects of three different policy approaches—reformist, repressive, and constitutional—in reducing rioting in Northern Ireland over the 1968-1973 period. They find that none of these policy approaches succeeded in decreasing monthly rioting. Rasler (1996) investigated the effect of Shah's policies of accommodation and repression on the escalation of the revolutionary mobilization in

Iran in the late 70s. Using weekly data, she shows that repression effects on protest are negative in the short-term but positive in the long term. Using negative binomial models, Inclán (2009) analyzes the effects of repressive threats and procedural concessions on the Zapatista protests from 1994 to 2003. Repressive threats had an initial negative and a positive delayed effect on protest activities, while procedural concessions are statistically insignificant. While the literature shows different results, there is consensus that repression's short and long-run effects vary considerably and that concessions can eventually backlash. Overall, there is no dominant strategy to deal with protests and social unrest, and the effect of government responses should be considered case by case.

# 3 The Chilean Outburst

In October 2019, Chilean society went into a revolt. What had started as a small student protest against a subway fare increase became the most significant wave of protests in the country's history. Every town in the territory got somehow involved in agitation and social unrest. The more direct consequence of the revolt was the start of a process of institutional change, which continues to this day. We provide a summary of the events, with a focus on the specific features that make the Chilean events a particular case study.

## 3.1 The Institutional Context

In Chile, the current constitution was imposed by Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in 1980. The Chilean militaries implemented an ambitious institutional engineering program to create a new vision of democracy called "protected democracy". The design was the reaction to the trauma that meant the coup d'état of 1973 and the criticism of the participatory institutions prior to the democratic breakdown.

The Chilean text is an early example of neoliberal constitutionalism, a political economy project emphasizing constitutions' power to limit sovereign states, anchor economic freedoms, and protect markets from democratic pressures for greater equality (Alemparte, 2022). This notion of the Constitution as a political economy project allows us to separate it into two main features. The first

is the economic dimension, which overprotects private property and favors the role of markets. In particular, the text enshrined the subsidiary role of the Chilean State, imposing that it can only intervene in social and economic life when the private initiative cannot or has no interest in doing so. Education, health, social security, and other related services will be provided primarily by markets, generating unequal access among citizens based on their socioeconomic status. This principle of subsidiarity becomes a significant obstacle to more aggressive public policies by democratic governments.

Secondly, the protected democracy aims to protect the markets from majoritarian redistributive pressures. The Constitution established several super-majority rules in which the minority has veto power, neutralizing the majority and protecting the status quo. Ever since the return to democracy, multiple attempts to implement political reforms have failed despite having the support of the majority (Piscopo and Siavelis, 2021). The Chilean Constitution created a democratic system in which the public's preferences do not effectively translate into public policies. This restrictive framework has transformed Chilean society into an unchanging, immutable model that impedes the country's political evolution over time, hindering representatives' ability to act in the best interests of the nation as a whole.

As anticipated by its designers, the Constitution has proven to be resistant to change by democratic governments. In 2005, the center-left government accorded some reforms with the right parties, but the authoritarian core of the Constitution could not be changed. Since then, the constitutional problem has persisted. President Bachelet, in her second period, implemented a system of self-convened local meetings where citizens in the entire country discussed the main topics and issues they would include in a new constitution. These efforts did not prosper at the time but contributed to giving salience to the institutional context as a critical factor for the implementation of more progressive system reforms.

### 3.2 The Outburst

On October 1, 2019, a Panel of Public Transport Experts determined that public transport fares would increase by 10 Chilean pesos for buses and 30 pesos for the subway.[2] The justification was mostly cost-driven—i.e., the value of fuel, US dollar and cost of labor—and the rise was effective start on October 6. The protests began immediately after it, with a coordinated evasion organized by secondary-school students. The evasion gained popularity, and on Monday 14th, several stations had to be closed due to violent incidents. The same happened the day after and the rest of the week, as the confrontation continued on several stations. On October 18th—the day that marked the beginning of the outburst—the protests went beyond the subway stations, and they took the streets. Barricades on several locations in downtown Santiago, the headquarters of the energy company Enel got on fire, 70 subway stations were burned, and the entire subway system shutted down during the night (Somma et al., 2021; Landaeta and Herrero, 2021).

Violence continued on October 19, with riots spreading across the country and the subway still closed to passengers. That night, the government imposed a curfew effective in Santiago and the Metropolitan Region, and the president addressed the country. The fare increase had been reversed, and a dialogue panel would be established to discuss the main issues behind the unrest: increasing living costs, safety, high cost of medicines and the health system in general. As the protests continued, several supermarkets and shopping malls remained closed due to violence. The curfew was extended to other regions, and authorities announced the closure of schools in most communes in the Metropolitan Region and the city of Concepción. Demonstrations continued escalating until October 25, when over a million people in Santiago and another thousand throughout the country took the streets. The protest, called "The Biggest March", became the largest protest in Chilean history and gave the movement a new flavor, as the same president recognized.

The government responded to the protest with a mix of repression and concession strategies (Section 4.2), but the outbreak's violence and massiveness continued to escalate. On November 15, after almost a month of social unrest, the presidents of nearly all political parties with rep-

[2]To give an idea of the magnitude, the 30 pesos subway fare increase corresponds to 5 cents of a dollar.

resentation in Congress signed an agreement to change the constitution through a constitutional convention that would legitimize and represent citizens in a broad way (Suarez-Cao, 2021). The protests continued during the following months, slowly becoming extinct towards the end of the year. Determining whether this decline was influenced by holidays, or it is directly correlated with the agreement, remains an empirical inquiry that we address in Section 5.

### 3.3 Causes and Demands

The direct detonator of the protests was the increase in the subway fare, as students organized immediately after its announcement to protest against it. However, the demands were beyond this fare increase. The slogan "it's not the 30 pesos, it's the 30 years" (from Spanish "*No son 30 pesos, son 30 años*") highlighted the idea that the people were not demanding the reversal of the 30 pesos subway fare increase, but that the deep cause of the protest was a series of unfair situations all along the 30 years of democratic governments after the fall of Pinochet's dictatorship (Araujo et al., 2019). The legacy of the dictatorship had been a constitution that set the stage for a capitalist, liberal economy in which critical social services were privatized. As the issues that concerned people had no room in the political discussion, middle-class and working-class citizens felt left behind.

In this political context, the rise in the price of public transportation, an item sensitive to the pockets of millions of people, moved attention towards inequality and the cost of living. Chile was one of the wealthiest countries in South America, but it also had stark disparities. Chileans were trapped with high levels of debt. The education and health systems were mostly private, as was the pension system. Jobs were predominantly low-quality, with around 80% of workers receiving less than two minimum wages.

But the issue was not only income or economic inequality; inequality was also social and political. During those days, people talked about an evident disconnection between the people and the governing elites. Various regrettable declarations by government officials only served to emphasize their lack of empathy with the people's issues. For example, the Minister of Economy's comment on October 8th, in response to criticism regarding the subway fare hike, stating that "those who wake up early can benefit from a lower rate," caused a public outcry. Similarly, another statement

regarding the long wait times for the public health system suggested that "people do not only come to hospitals to see a doctor, but also to socialize." These statements seemed to trivialize the hard effort that millions of working-class citizens had to go through daily to make a living. They made it even more evident than before that, despite Chile being a democracy, the decision-making power was in the hands of an elite whose concerns and priorities were not aligned with those of the people (Rhodes-Purdy and Rosenblatt, 2021).

# 4 Data: Conflict and Government Strategies

## 4.1 Conflict

We study the evolution of the Chilean Outburst using data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, Raleigh et al., 2010). ACLED is a disaggregated set of conflict events collected from several local media reports and other sources, such as institutional records and research publications. The data include information about the specific dates and locations of conflict events, the types of events, and the groups involved.

ACLED has a flexible definition of conflict based on a set of actions that occur between designated actors. It includes six types of events: battles, explosions/remote violence, protests, riots, strategic developments, and violence against civilians. These types encompass conflict episodes ranging from deadly wars to social unrest and political demonstrations.

We define "total conflict" as the sum of all conflict events. For 2019, ACLED reports $42,105$ total conflict events in Latin America. Chile, with $2,923$ episodes, is fourth in the region after Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela. However, these countries are far more populated than Chile. When we compare per capita conflict, Chile was the more conflicting country in the region in 2019, with 15.3 conflict events per 100,000 inhabitants.

The composition of conflict in Chile, however, is different from the rest of the region. We define "social unrest conflict" as the sum of protests and riots. Social unrest is not related to territorial control but political instability. In 2019, social unrest accounted for 51.5% of total conflict events

in Latin America, while in Chile, the fraction increased to 91.0%. These figures illustrate that conflict in Chile is almost exclusively political disorder. Chile exhibited 14.3 events of social unrest per 100,000 in 2019, followed by Venezuela, with 9.6; the regional average was 5.1.

As the data shows, the country was relatively stable and peaceful before the social outburst, with less than 100 conflict events per month. However, during October and November, this number increased about ten times. From the total number of conflict events in the country in 2019, 45% of them occurred within October 15 and November 15, between the first subway evasion and the date of the agreement. Figure 1 shows the number of social unrest conflict events during the period.[3]

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

We observe a significant increase in the conflict events close to October 18, and the conflict had already significantly reduced in December.

### 4.2 Government Strategies

The explanatory variables of our empirical exercise are the periods in which main strategies of repression, concession, and the promise of institutional are implemented.

*Repression.* The Chilean regime used a variety of repressive strategies to control the protest. The peak of the social outburst, on October 18, was a battlefield between police forces and masses of angry citizens. The same night, the government invoked the State Security Law, which aggravated the penalties for those who protested. Some hours later, the regime imposed the "State of Emergency Constitutional Exception" in Santiago, according to which public order and security functions were transferred to the military. It was the first time a democratic government used the state of emergency created by the military dictatorship in the 1980s. On that very day, a curfew was imposed in the nation's capital, prohibiting gatherings, associations, and unrestricted movement on the streets. As protests spread throughout the country, the state of emergency and curfews were subsequently extended to encompass five additional regions. By October 23, a total of 15 out of 16 regions in the country were subjected to military rule, as confirmed by 18 executive decrees.

[3]For each day, we display the weekly moving average number of events centered on that day.

Instead of working it out through dialogue with citizens, the government adopted a confrontational language: "We are at war against a powerful enemy". The regime insisted that the entire crisis was due to the action of a small radicalized group managed from abroad (Dammert and Sazo, 2020).

We construct a dummy for repression that equals one for the days in which curfew was implemented in the five main regions, October 20th, until it is reverted, in October 26th.

*Concessions.* As repression did not seem to be enough to ease the demonstrations, on October 22, the president announced the so-called New Social Agenda, which included a series of reforms related to retirement, health, and taxes, which targeted many of the protesters' demands. The agenda included a law that would increase the pensions of almost a million senior citizens, and resources to complement the retirement savings of half a million workers. It also included policies that would reduce the burden of expenditure on medications, the creation of a monthly "Guaranteed Minimum Income" of 350 thousand pesos (450 US Dollars), and an increase in taxes for high-income people. Even when the agenda seemed comprehensive, these measures were received with skepticism by experts, as the policies' fine print was more modest and ambiguous than what they seemed. With the increase in the basic pension, a person would end up still receiving less than 180 US dollars, which is 40% below the announced guaranteed minimum income. The Guaranteed Minimum Income, in turn, was in the form of a subsidy paid by the government, and not an increase in the legally mandated minimum income. The dummy concession is equal to one after October 22th.

*Promise of Institutional Change.* On November 15, eleven presidents of political parties, from left to right, signed an agreement that established the basis for a constitutional process. The discussion to reach that agreement began in the morning of the day before when most political parties with representation in the parliament—excluding the Communist Party—met with the objective of creating an institutional way out of the conflict that addressed the people's demands. The agreement included a proposal with a referendum in which people had to answer two questions: (i) whether they wanted a new constitution, and (ii) which organ should write this new constitution, i.e., a Constitutional Convention or a Mixed Constitutional Convention. The former was fully elected for the purpose of writing the Constitution, whereas the latter included a mixture of people elected for this purpose and assigned members of Congress. The organ chosen would

have nine months to write the constitution and should approve the norms and voting rules with a quorum of two-thirds of its members. The resulting constitution would be submitted for approval in a ratification referendum in which participation would be mandatory. We construct a dummy variable promise for November 15 onwards.

## 5 Empirical Methods and Results

We conduct two empirical exercises.

First, we construct a panel of regional daily conflict to check whether these strategies are associated with changes in conflict. Contrary to previous works (Peroff and Hewitt, 1980; Rasler, 1996; Inclán, 2009), strategies are nationwide, so we have no geographical variance for estimation. Accordingly, we impose a lot of temporal structure to the estimation to check their association with the protest. First, the estimation is dynamic based on the reasonable assumption that lag conflict is affecting the government's strategies. In a panel data context, it is unclear how many lags are required for estimation. As the first lag is enough to reduce the autocorrelation of our dependent variable,[4] we report one-lag estimations. However, all the results are robust to include additional lags. Secondly, we add a time trend. The underlying assumption is that the protest is a cyclic dynamic, with a moment of increase and a natural decay. We add a polynomial trend to avoid that strategies merely capture this dynamic. We report a quadratic trend, but most results are robust to higher-order polynomials. Finally, we include a week-day dummy because protests increased at the beginning of the week and then on Fridays.

The specification includes conflict as the dependent variable, lags of conflict and the strategies implemented as the main explanatory variables, a time-trend polynomial, and week-days' dummies. The estimation is a fixed-effect estimator with clustering at the regional level. The fixed-effect strategy does not deal with unobservable regional-specific time-varying variables, but the variables are unlikely to correlate with our regional-independent strategies.

The FE estimator is biased in a dynamic panel. Noting $y_{i,t}$ the dependent variable, and using

[4]For the averaged time series, the Breusch-Godfrey test for higher-order serial correlation accept correlation for the static model but rejected at the 1 percent level with one lag

first differences to drop out the fixed effects, we have that the term $y_{i,t-1}$ in $\Delta y_{i,t-1} = y_{i,t-1} - y_{i,t-2}$ correlates with $\varepsilon_{i,t-1}$ term in $\Delta\varepsilon_{it} = \varepsilon_{it} - \varepsilon_{i,t-1}$. The bias can be problematic in short panels (Nickell, 1981). To correct this problem, the literature proposes to use $y_{i,t-2}$ as an instrument variable for $\Delta y_{i,t-1}$ Anderson and Hsiao (1981) or use additional lags for efficiency in GMM approach (Arellano and Bond, 1991). Although our panel is large enough, we report also Arellano-Bond estimators for the coefficients.

Table 1 displays the results of our panel regression for total unrest, and for violent and non-violent unrest separately. Columns (1) and (2) show that the only strategy that decreases the level of total conflict is the 15N Agreement. Interestingly, the decrease in the intensity of conflict after the agreement is more noticeable for violent events (columns (5) and (6)) than those that are more peaceful and institutionalized (columns (3) and (4)). There were no significant changes in the number of detentions by the time of the agreement, suggesting that the decline in protests was not due to increased repression or police presence. Total unrest increases with repression, which is consistent with evidence about backlashes after repression in democracies.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

When decomposing protests into violent and non-violent, the effect of the agreement is still significant and negative. However, the effect of repression and concessions seems to be heterogeneous. When one compares the coefficient on concessions between columns (3) and (5) (resp. columns (4) and (6)), concessions are associated with a lower level of violent protests and no significant effect on non-violent protests. On the contrary, repression is associated with higher levels of non-violent protests, but has no effect on violent protests. Previous works had suggested the opposite effect: repression leads movements to shift towards more violent tactics (Lichbach, 1987; Chiang, 2021).

The second empirical exercise is to study when the conflict experienced a fundamental change in its dynamic due to the institutional promise. In particular, we explore structural breaks in the trend of conflict over different dates.

We estimate a parametrized model of conflict before and after an arbitrary date $t = 0$. Conflict is the dependent variable, and we explained by a linear trend. The estimate whether there is signif-

icant change in the trend of conflict on several dates, including 15N. We consider two weeks before and after a particular date and check whether the conflict dynamic is similar in the two groups. Although similar, we are not pursuing a discontinuity design (Imbens and Lemieux, 2008; Hausman and Rapson, 2018), we are not pursuing that strategy. However, we follow the recommendation in Lee and Card (2008) for that literature, and we cluster the errors at the day level.

To explore a change in the conflict dynamic, we estimate our specification for all days between the 5th and 25th of November. We selected the initial date because the social outburst was the days following October 18th, and our windows' sample includes two weeks before and after time zero. Figure 2 shows the coefficients that measure a change in the trend for all days in this range.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

A simple inspection of Figure 2 suggests that a change in the trend of conflict over time occurs on 15N, the day of the constitutional agreement. The effect is also observable on the days around the agreement, but that week's unique important government action was announcing the new path for institutional change.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

In the previous section, we showed that the promise of institutional change quelled the Chilean protest. This evidence is somehow surprising. On the one hand, the political class valued Chilean institutions, and then one would not have expected them to give away an essential part of their power. On the other, there was only a promise of institutional change, and that was enough to convince protesters who were not even sitting at the negotiation table.

This section discusses two interlinked questions. The first is related to the government's promise. Why did the Chilean political class resort to institutional change to calm the outburst? We begin by discussing the reasons that contributed to the failure of all the government strategies but institutional change and show later that the institutional solution did not seem expensive for the political class then.

The second question is about the demonstrators' reactions to the constitutional promise. Why did a promise, still not materialized, help to calm the protest? We argue that, from the citizens' side, the saliency of the institutional issue and the relevance it had gained in the political agenda during the previous decade put it on the table as a feasible solution. Also, the multi-party and formal nature of the agreement gave the process the credibility needed for the people to yield.

### 6.1 Why did the Political Class Promise to Reform the Institutions?

A first, although partial, answer to the question of why the political class offered an institutional change is that all other strategies to calm down the protest failed. After October 18th, attrition was not an option. The consequences of the social outburst on the Chilean economy were enormous. The national and international media attention, the increase in uncertainty, the fall in stock markets (IPSA), and the Chilean peso depreciation are only some of the costs of the protests that exert pressure on the government to react (Gillion, 2013; Madestam et al., 2013; Acemoglu et al., 2018). The situation required moving to a new scenario of repression and accommodation.

Repression, as explained, was not able to stop the conflict either. Although repression episodes were the largest exhibited in Chile since the end of the dictatorship, the Chilean democratic government was prevented from using full-scale repression. As we will explain at the end of this section, in a democratic context, increasing violence against the population is a delicate decision that requires the consensus of all the powers of the state. During the outburst, the conservative groups in power tried to increase repression, but other political actors prevented them and pressed for a political accommodation to the crisis.

A second factor that difficulted the success of repression in the Chilean context was the combination of violent and nonviolent repertories of strategies by protesters. The beginning of the outburst, on October 18th, was ferocious. The violence spread throughout the country in the following days, and the government imposed repressive responses and a military curfew in all major urban cities. However, the non-violent "The Biggest March" on October 25th changed the entire picture. The transformation of violent to non-violent social unrest signalled that the citizens preferred accommodation to repression. The effects of this change in the protest's mindset were immediate. The night

after the march, the government reversed the emergency laws and ended the curfew. Although the regime continued using coercion, they also began to talk about accommodation and concessions since that day.

Similarly to repression, short-term economic concessions did not pacify the protest either. As the literature has recognized, concessions oftentimes might be ineffective in de-escalating conflict. They might backlash and increase the intensity of protests.

Two features of the Chilean protests contributed to the failure of concessions as a conflict resolution. Firstly, the demands put forth by the protestors were highly multidimensional, encompassing a range of issues from the reversal of the subway fare increase to broader sectoral demands for reform of the education, health, and retirement systems (Cox et al., 2021). The multidimensionality of demands made it impossible to address all of them. The government's attempts at accommodation included a full array of policies targeting several issues. The New Social Agenda, for instance, proposed a series of policies focused on taxes, pensions, and the price of medications, that relieved pressure from some groups but outraged others. Meeting the protesters' demands would ultimately require a comprehensive overhaul of the system, which paved the way for considering institutional change a more viable option.

Secondly, the timing of concessions was not optimal. Partial concessions followed intense repression, and then, they met an already outraged society that received these conflicting signals with skepticism.[5] The first significant concession was proposed on October 22nd when the emergency state was already imposed in almost the entire country. Even the mild reversal of the Subway fare came after a long period of the government ignoring the initial students' protests, and by then, demonstrations had already diffused to several sectors of the population. Overall, concession met a society that had already seen the government ignoring and repressing students, a society already polarized against the government.

Having all other strategies failed, the government resorted to the promise of a constitutional change. However, this was a very risky proposal, given that the support of the political class, espe-

[5]This is also consistent with the literature, which suggests that when governments combine concessions with repression—as was the case of the Chilean protests—they might give confusing signals about the government's intentions, often helping to accelerate protest activity and increase their spatial diffusion (Lichbach, 1987; Rasler, 1996).

cially of the conservative group in the government, rested on the constitution enacted during the dictatorship. Why did the government decide on such a high concession as institutional change? The critical issue is that the government still had political support to be optimistic about the expected costs of taking this road. The right-wing parties defended the institutional framework and accepted the agreement under very restrictive conditions, lowering the costs of the institutional solution.

As we describe in Section 3.1, one of the main features of the 1980 Constitution was the supermajority decision rule. The requirement of a large coalition to implement any change in the country had given the right to the veto power to defend the legacy of the dictatorship. To accept an institutional change, the government asked for insurance: to maintain the rule of two-thirds. This clause minimized the expected cost of the reform to the regime and made the constitutional referendum possible: even if the referendum succeeded, right-wing parties would have veto power in the constitution writing process.

What is critical about this is that this insurance made perfect sense for right-wing politicians given the previous electoral results in which they had veto power indeed. But this calculus was done in a high-uncertainty scenario and was only partially correct. According to the Chilean electoral office SERVEL, the right-wing parties got between 35 to 45 of the votes in all the elections since 1990. In this scenario, the cost of a constitutional change was greatly reduced, as right-wing parties could use their veto power in an eventual constitutional process. However, constitutional change was approved in the referendum with a vast majority. To make this even more stark, some months later, in 2020, when the representatives in charge of writing the new constitution were elected, parties on the right experienced their worst defeat in the democratic period. They elected only 37 representatives, corresponding to much less than a third of the convention, losing their historical veto power. The elected group was composed primarily of women, with mostly young people and high participation of independent representatives.

Nevertheless, their expectations were not entirely wrong. For reasons beyond the scope of this work (Larrain et al., 2023), the elected group wrote a new constitutional text that did not represent the majority of Chileans. In 2022, a new referendum rejected the constitutional proposal. Nowadays, Chile initiated a second process of constitutional change.

### 6.2 Why was the Promise Enough to calm the Protesters?

Perhaps the more puzzling feature of the 2019 Chilean social outburst was the fact that the people in the streets accepted a promise of constitutional change as a solution to conflict. There are at least two main explanations for such behavior.

The country experienced a long-standing constitutional problem. Constitutional change has been a salient issue in Chile in the last decade (Escudero, 2022). The 1980 Constitution was reformed in 2005, but the changes did not affect the core of the authoritarian constitutional project. Therefore, the debate continued. Five out of six presidential candidates proposed a constitutional change in the following 2009 election. The right-wing parties, who did not join the reformers, won the election to experience a strong wave of social unrest during the following years. When the center-left regained the government in 2013, they promised a process of constitutional change. President Bachelet implemented the self-convened local meetings, or ELAs, from the Spanish nomenclature, where more than 100,000 citizens over the entire Chilean territory discussed a new constitution (Welp and Soto, 2019). While she finally failed to pursue effective changes, the idea of an institutional revision was very present in Chile before the social outburst.

Consistent with the interest of citizens in these matters, the demand for a new constitution took shape during the outburst. Even though this learning dynamic has not been studied formally, the evidence shows that the demand for a constitution does not appear immediately at the start of the protests but develops during the first weeks of conflict. The increasing interest in knowing and studying the Chilean Constitution is the first sign of the development of a demand for a new constitution. On November 10, 2019, five days before the Agreement, the text of the Constitution was among the week's best-selling books. Just a month into the protests, the constitutional text had increased its sales by 40% and registered more than 27 thousand visits to the Congress Library. Similarly, Google Trends data shows a systematic increase in searches related to the Constitution between the start of the Outbreak and the day of the Agreement. Naturally, this does not reflect preferences but suggests how constitutional change sets the agenda as the protests persist.

Polls conducted during that period reinforce the idea that support for constitutional change

was massive. The primary surveys carried out in November 2019 for academic and independent centers showed consistently that more than 80

A second and critical element of how people perceive institutional changes is the credibility of the process. Even if citizens view a new constitution as an effective solution to address their demands, the lack of credibility in the promise of constitutional change can undermine its potential to resolve conflicts. This was evident, for instance, in Egypt during the Arab Spring protests. Despite President Mubarak initially making promises of constitutional change, they were perceived as insincere, ultimately leading to his overthrow. Similarly, early indications of a constitutional change in Chile had a different effect than the 15N Agreement. However, on November 15, the people witnessed all factions of society with parliamentary representation committing through a written agreement for a specific timeline that would eventually lead to a participatory constitutional writing process. It was not merely the president attempting to secure his position by making promises but the entire political elite acknowledging the need for institutional change to resolve the conflict. By uniting various segments of society, the agreement carried greater weight and instilled confidence in the public that their demands for a new constitution would be addressed.

### 6.3 A Common Factor: Democracy and Separation of Powers

In the above narrative, a key factor was that Chile is a democratic country. Democracy prevented the scalation of state repression and endowed credibility to the institutional agreement.

A critical finding in comparative literature is the negative association between democracy and repression. While there is some debate about the more appropriate model to summarize the relationship (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005; Carey, 2010), there is consensus that high democracy levels reduce the likelihood of political repression. Democracy matters for several reasons: authorities can be voted out of office, citizens are more used to values challenged by repression, and democratic institutions provide conflict resolution mechanisms (Davenport, 2007).

A case study like ours unravels another mechanism through which democracy can prevent repression. In particular, the Chilean case suggests that democratic plurality and the separation of

state powers play a critical role in curbing indiscriminate coercion. Full-scale repression requires a strong commitment among the political class, given its dramatic consequences on the population. The ruling class has homogeneous interests in authoritarian regimes, not requiring additional consensus, whereas, under democracy, full-scale repression requires agreement among multiple heterogeneous actors.

During the Chilean outburst, there were two moments in which the government tried to increase repression, but other political actors prevented them. On November 07, the government summoned the National Security Council, COSENA, a body integrated by the commanders of all Army forces, Senate and Deputy Chamber presidents, the president of the Judicial Court, and the president himself. The government asked them about possibly scaling repressive measures against protests, but the other civilians responded negatively. The opposition leaders of the legislative power criticized police repression, advocating a legal or constitutional solution, while the president of the Judicial Court called for unrestricted respect for human rights. On November 12, after the more violent day of the outburst, President Pinera called the army's commander-in-chief by phone. The right-wing parties demanded to increase the repression, but the commander required a complete consensus of the political class to put their troops in the streets. Again, the opposition refused to escalate repression and pressed for a political agreement. That night, president Piñera announced a comprehensive agreement that would be the prelude to the final 15N constitutional agreement.

There is also a second aspect of democracy that played a fundamental role in the Chilean case. Separation of powers, once again, implied that the political class was not entirely united beyond the government. While this last one was occupied by the right-wing conservative forces, the more obstinate defenders of the Chilean model and its institutions, the center-left forces had control of the Congress, and other politically independent forces led offices in the state. This heterogeneity within the political class generated a three-player game in which opposition politicians acted as mediators between citizens and the government.

As in the case of repression, we can recognize at least two moments in which the role of the opposition politicians was relevant for pushing a constitutional agreement. First, the very idea of constitutional change as a solution to the crisis was announced publicly by the president of the

Senate and other center-left parties a couple of days after the beginning of the riots. Some weeks later, the Association of Municipalities, integrated by all mayors in the countries, and with strong participation of the opposition parties, called for a referendum to ask for institutional reforms. Secondly, the opposition was fundamental in giving credibility to the 15N agreement. As we explained, a few days before the government had proposed an itinerary for constitutional change but the announcement failed to alleviate the intensity of the unrest. After that, and acknowledging its credibility problem, the government delegated the construction of the agreement to Congress. On November 15, eleven presidents of political parties, from left to right, signed an agreement that established the basis for a constitutional process. The role of the opposition parties in defending the agreement gave citizens confidence regarding their participation in this new process.

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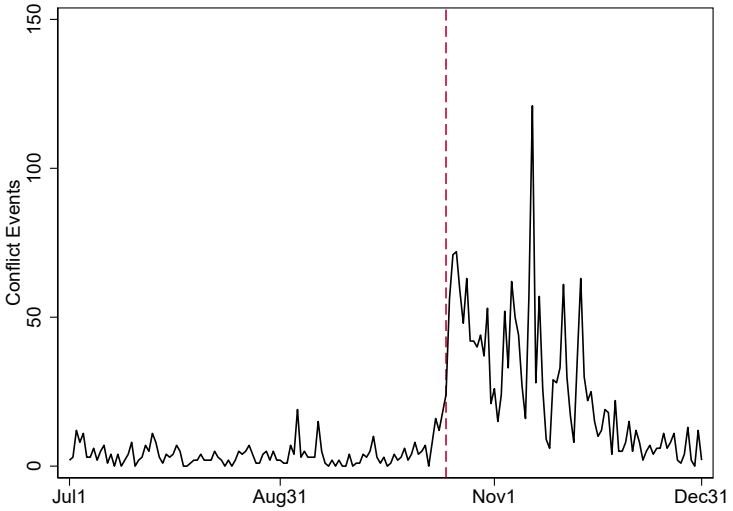
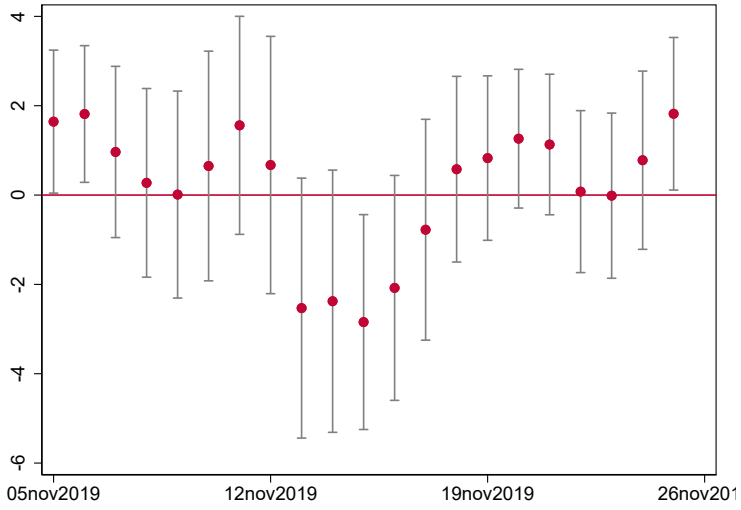
Figure 1: Chilean Social Outburst 2019




*Note.* Daily number of events of social unrest in Chile, from July to December 2019. Source: ACLED

Figure 2: Change in the trend over time




*Note.* The figure displays estimated $\beta$ coefficients and 5% level of confidence intervals. All estimations include region fixed effects, and errors are clustered per day. Time period is 10 days before and after November 15th.

Table 1: Baseline Results

| Dep.Var. | *Unrest: All Events* | | *Non-violent Protest* | | *Violent Protest* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Unrest (t-1) | 0.292*** | 0.248*** | | | | |
| | (0.054) | (0.050) | | | | |
| Non-Violent Protest (t-1) | | | 0.102** | 0.062* | | |
| | | | (0.036) | (0.035) | | |
| Violent Protest (t-1) | | | | | 0.203*** | 0.117*** |
| | | | | | (0.025) | (0.021) |
| Agreement (t-1) | -1.149*** | -1.209*** | -0.495** | -0.542*** | -0.623*** | -0.645*** |
| | (0.331) | (0.320) | (0.199) | (0.193) | (0.184) | (0.172) |
| Concession (t-1) | -0.795 | -1.079 | 0.148 | 0.231 | -0.661** | -1.235*** |
| | (0.591) | (0.733) | (0.235) | (0.269) | (0.293) | (0.409) |
| Repression (t-1) | 0.956*** | 1.093*** | 0.553*** | 0.597*** | 0.111 | 0.122 |
| | (0.181) | (0.182) | (0.119) | (0.121) | (0.107) | (0.158) |
| Observations | 960 | 944 | 960 | 944 | 960 | 944 |
| Regions | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 |

*Note.* Baseline results. All estimations include regional fixed effects, a quadratic time trend, and dummies for weekdays. Odd (even) columns are Fixed-Effect within (Arellano-Bond) estimations. *,**, *** represent significance at the 10%, 5% and 1% levels, respectively. CHEQUEAR CUAL COLUMNA ES CUAL