Can the Promise of Institutional Change curb Protests? An Analysis of the 2019 Chilean Outburst

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Abstract

From the numerous protest episodes in the recent decades, only a few resulted in institutional change. In this study, we analyze the factors that can make a promise of constitutional change an effective instrument to alleviate conflict, by using the Chilean 2019 protests as a case study. In October 2019, Chile experienced a social outburst. In the beginning, violent riots outraged the entire country; after that, large demonstrations consolidated a scenario of crisis. The government responded with a range of strategies, including repression, short-term concessions, and ultimately, the promise of a constitutional change. Using daily data, we show that only the announcement of a path for constitutional change de-escalated the conflict. We discuss the factors that could explain why the Chilean government did such a promise, and why the mere announcement of constitutional change succeded in quelling protests.

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 quells the protest. For this to happen, two conditions are required. First, the government must be indeed willing to offer an institutional change. But 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 quell the protests. Then, why does the mere announcement of constitutional change sometimes succeed in pleasing protestors while in other cases is dismissed as not credible?

This work studies these questions for the Chilean Outburst of 2019. 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 the 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, ranging from ignoring the movement to beginning a process of institutional change that aimed to write a new constitution. Using data on the protests and the timing of government responses, we show that the only strategy that curbed the conflict was the announcement of an institutional change. This process of changing the constitution continues until today when a first draft was rejected and a second one is in preparation. We examine the specific contextual factors in Chile that made institutional change an appealing option for both the government and the citizens, ultimately serving as an effective mechanism of conflict resolution.

To contextualize our analysis, we begin by detailing the Chilean experience with particular at-

tention to the strategies used by the government to deal with demonstrations and riots. At the beginning of the conflict, the state response was one of attrition, simply ignoring the protest (Bishara, 2015; Yuen and Cheng, 2017). However, the crisis reached a tipping point on October 18th, erupting with an unprecedent level of violence, which prompted the government to shift towards a strategy of repression (Carey, 2006; Inclán, 2009; Pierskalla, 2010; Aytaç et al., 2017). But these repressive responses did not deter conflict, and then coercion was 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 optimality of these four state strategies—attrition, repression, concessions, and institutional change—and their effectiveness in de-escalating conflict depends on various factors, which range from the internal features of social movements to the political and institutional environment. Using daily data on Chilean protests and government strategies, we empirically assess the efficacy of each government response.

First, we study the timing of structural changes in the dynamics of protests time series. The only significant observed change occurs on November 15, after the Constitutional Agreement. Next, we explore the agreement's impact on the intensity of protests. Our analysis shows that, immediately after the 15N agreement, the intensity of unrest decreased substantially. Specifically, we observed that the average number of events per day fell around 60%, from an average of approximately 40 events per day between October 18 and November 15, to less than 15 in the weeks following the announcement of the agreement. Interestingly, the decrease in the intensity of conflict after the agreement is more noticeable for violent events than those that are more peaceful and institutionalized. 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.

Overall, our results suggest that paving the way for institutional change was critical in de-escalating conflict, and the reduction in unrest was more marked in violent conflict than in non-violent protests.

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. Repression 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 in the literature. Full-scale repression in democracies requires commitment within the political class and agreements among different groups. In Chile, there were instances when the executive power made desperate attempts to increase repression, but these were met with wariness by the other forces. In one notable example, the parliament and the Judicial Court acted as a check against the president's repressive impulse. In another one, the Army's Commander in Chief required a complete consensus within the political class to support these measures. These events suggest that the sharing of power between political actors plays a critical role in restraining repressive tendencies.

Regarding the failure of concessions, an essential aspect of citizen demands was that they were complex and multifaceted, covering a wide span of reforms (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.

It remains to understand why the agreement for a constitutional change decreased conflict after all these failed attempts. We pose that there are two crucial features of the announcement that helped it to work: its effectiveness and credibility. In Chile, citizens considered the constitutional

change a valuable and effective mechanism to solve their demands. The saliency of the constitution as an obstacle to social development, and its relevance in the political agenda during the previous decade, had helped to put it on the table as the only feasible solution for fundamental changes (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, in the Chilean case, democracy as 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, on November 12, the president announced that the constitution would change. But, as our empirical analysis shows, protesters dismissed his call. The constitutional change only became credible when the entire political class, including the opposition, committed to reform.

2 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.

2.1 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.

2.2 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.[1] 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 (details in Section 3), but the outbreak's violence and massiveness continued to escalate. On Nov 15, after almost a month of social unrest, the presidents of nearly all political parties with rep-

[1] 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 4.

2.3 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).

3 Government Strategies

Facing protest, the government or the elite in power has several strategies: (1) attrition, (2) repression, (3) concessions and (4) institutional change. Admittedly, institutional change is also a concession, but given its permanent nature, we separate it from temporary concessions such as redistribution or cabinet reshuffle.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

3.1 Attrition

While traditional studies on protest focus on repressive or concessional responses by governmes, a recent literature identifies attrition as a proactive regime practice against demonstrations (Bishara, 2015; Yuen and Cheng, 2017). Toleration entails an array of defensive and offensive tactics that extend far beyond ignoring protests. In several cases, this might be the best strategy to avoid escalation. However, ignoring protests can risk exposing the government's lack of interest in the citizens' demands.

Attrition was the main government's strategy at the beginning of the protests, before the peak of the social outburst. As we describe above, the Chilean students began to protest in Santiago after implementing the fare increase, on October 6th, with a peak on Monday 14th and Tuesday 15th. While the government mobilized the police force, the administration's primary response was to ignore manifestations, minimizing students' struggles. The government seemed to underestimate students' galvanizing power, ignoring they had been the main mobilization force in the last years

in the country (Donoso and Von Bülow, 2017). In a later famous statement, a former minister told the youth that the protest "did not catch on, and they are not cooler for avoiding paying for the subway". On the contrary, a few days later, the protest did catch on with unexpected ferocity.

3.2 Repression

We understand repression as the coercive action by the government against protesters to increase the cost of protest (Tilly, 1978; Earl, 2011). Repression is not an unintended government response but a systematic strategy to deal with internal opponents. According to Davenport (2007), every statistical investigation of the subject has found that when challenges to the status quo occur, authorities generally employ some form of repressive action to counter the behavioral threat. However, there is little consensus about the effect of repression on protest.

Repression tactics may have very different short and long-run effects (Chenoweth et al., 2017). Coercion can deter and control social unrest, but police repression may also cause a political backlash and increase political dissent over time (Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021), either because of a behavioral response (Aytaç et al., 2017) or because of the information it conveys about the government and the likelihood of protest's success (Lohmann, 1993).

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, early in the morning, 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. 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).

The following week, the government switched to an accommodation strategy, but protests and riots continued uninterrupted. The incidents revived concern about attacks against public and private infrastructure. On November 07, the President announced a set of security measures, including a bill to Congress to increase sanctions for looting, use of barricades, and attacks on law enforcement. In addition, he also announced the urgency of the discussion of the "anti-hooded law" in the parliament. This new package of coercion policies increased the air surveillance capacity of the police and reinforced civil complaint channels against looters. The same day, the regime tried to increase repression by summoning the Security Council, but, as we will discuss later, other political actors prevented the escalation of repression.

Coercion and police violence reached levels that had not been seen since the end of Pinochet's dictatorship. The numbers are eloquent: 34 confirmed deaths, 3,400 injured, and 8,800 arrested (data by the Chilean Institute of Human Rights). By mid-November, Amnesty International had documented 23 cases of human rights violations during the period between October 19 and November 11. Their research suggested that Chilean security forces were using violence to injure demonstrators, which included even torture and sexual violence against protesters. In a press release on November 21, the organism recommended authorities to end repression, and to investigate responsibilities for the human rights violations committed in the context of the unrest.

3.3 Concessions

We refer to concessions as those government actions that aim to fulfil protesters' demands. These actions can take the form of economic policies, such as redistribution; political changes, such as cabinet reshuffle; or tactical concessions, such as those related to the de-escalation of repression tactics.

As is the case with repression, there is no consensus on the optimality of accommodation strategies. Even though one would naturally expect meeting protesters' demands to decrease the intensity of demonstrations, concessions can also generate the opposite effect. They might signal government

weakness and hence, encourage protesters to keep going (Ginkel and Smith, 1999; Davies, 2016). It might also be that concessions encourage newcomers, by increasing their beliefs about the likelihood of protest success. This is especially relevant when one considers the psychological gains from being part of a victorious movement (Muller and Opp, 1986; Rasler, 1996). The optimality of concessions might be even more intricate when combined with other strategies— such as repression—, and in contexts where demands are multidimensional (Lichbach, 1987).

In Chile, the government tried to implement an array of partial concessions in the form of redistribution, cabinet reshuffles, and repression de-escalation.[2] On October 19, the day after the protests started, the government announced the reversion of the transport fare increase that had ignited the conflict. As that did not 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.

Some days later, after the Big March, the cabinet was partially reshuffled, and Piñera suspended the emergency measures that had been previously implemented in Santiago and in most of the Chilean territory. The military troops that had been deployed on the streets for the first time since Pinochet's dictatorship were withdrawn, giving the signal of easing repression. A final attempt for concessions occurred on November 12, when the government promised three agreements:

[2] As we show in the next section, all the government actions that focused on repression and concessions were met with dissent. The pattern observed is consistent with Moore (2000)'s sequential model with a government that switches back and forth between repression and accommodation every time the strategy is met with dissent.

an Agreement for Peace and Against Violence, with the aim of punishing the violence that had taken the streets in the past weeks; an Agreement for Justice to carry a social agenda that would decrease inequality and move towards a more fair and equal country; and an Agreement for a New Constitution, in which a new constitution would be written with citizens' participation.

3.4 Institutional Change

The third strategy was to concede to a process of institutional change to allow the extension of political power to the people in a permanent form. It's relevant to note that to talk about an institutional change, we do not need to present full democratization, with a transition from an autocracy to a democracy. There are many examples of partial democracies in history, with political systems that present various degrees of elite political power. Democratization, then, is a gradual process of institutional changes that allow extending power to the people, including a continous process of democratic consolidation (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 pressure can directly affect the government's strength and its relation to the opposition (Kim and Kroeger, 2019), or it can affect people's voting decisions and pro-democratic 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). Many other studies find systematic evidence of the relationship between political unrest and institutional change (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011).

Already on October 20, the president of the Senate and other members of the opposition parties pointed to constitutional change as one of the mechanisms to overcome the crisis. On November 7, the Chilean Association of Municipalities, representing the mayors of all the communes of the country, approved to call a referendum in December where the citizens would be asked if they agreed to the development of a new constitution, in addition to other questions of a local nature. The announcement forced the government response, and on November 10, the Interior Minister announced

the beginning a process to draft a new Constitution through the current National Congress with a ratification plebiscite. On November 12, 14 political parties of the center-left signed a declaration in which they recognized that a New Constitution would be the only way out of the political crisis. They expressed a preference for a referendum and a constitutional assembly as the best way of writing the new constitution. That night, President Piñera addressed the country on national TV, with a speech that proposed three agreements: one focused on peace and security, a second one focused on social justice and redistribution, and a third one that proposed a process to write a new constitution with citizens participation. This was the first time the president opened to the possibility of a constitutional 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.

4 Assessing the Consequences of Strategies on Conflict

In this section, we test whether the government's different policies did change the conflict's dynamic. For that, we use data on conflict to observe how protest evolved.

The effect of government strategies on protests has been studied at the macro and micro levels.

The macro studies 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, and show 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 study the question for a particular country exhibiting social unrest. These studies have detailed data on protest events which they merge with information about state policies, and estimate the role of those policies on unrest.

In this line, 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 estimates Poisson regression models to show 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.

4.1 Data and Specification

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]

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

[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.

A second relevant variable is repression. In Chile, police forces depend on the Ministry of the Interior and Public Security. From official sources, we have data on the number of arrests per police station across the entire Chilean territory. We construct an index of repression as the total number of arrests in a region on a given day. To control for repression is key to ruling out the deterrence effects on conflict.

Our empirical strategy is to study when the conflict experienced a fundamental change in its dynamic. There are two reasons why our approach is different from previous works (Peroff and Hewitt, 1980; Rasler, 1996; Inclán, 2009). First, we consider a short window of time in which the conflict was at its highest point. Second, most of the policies described in Table 1—such as political concessions, the tightening of repression rules, or the announcement of a constitutional change—are implemented nationwide, so we have no geographical variance. Accordingly, our strategy is to observe whether there was some specific data when the protest time series exhibited a structural break.

We estimate a parametrized model of conflict before and after an arbitrary date $t = 0$.

$$C_{it} = \alpha D_{it} + \beta T + \gamma D_{it} \times T + \delta_i + \chi X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where C_{it} is the number of conflict events in region i at time t , D_{it} is a dummy for times $t > 0$, and δ_i is region dummy that we model as fixed effect. X_{it} is a set of controls, which includes repression and the day of the week (because larger protests were organized on fridays).

Although our specification resembles a discontinuity design (Imbens and Lemieux, 2008; Hausman and Rapson, 2018), we are not pursuing that strategy. We consider two weeks before and after a particular date and check whether the conflict dynamic is similar in the two groups. However, we follow the recommendation in Lee and Card (2008) and cluster the errors at the day level.

4.2 Results

First, we explore when we observe 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]

Figure 2 should be contrasted with Table 1, where we detail the timeline of government strategies. Unfortunately, we cannot test the changes in the conflict in October, but a simple inspection of Figure 2 suggests that on those dates, there was no drastic change in the trend of conflict over time. For the event of repression on November 7th, we did not observe any effect, which is consistent with the fact that it was a legislative announcement. Nevertheless, the most interesting finding of the estimations is that the negative and significant coefficient measures a change in trend on November 15th, 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.

Overall, the evidence suggests that neither repression nor concessions had an effect on the intensity of the protests.

To dig deeper into the effects that the 15N agreement had on conflict, we report our estimation results with $time = 0$ for that date. Table 2 reports baseline results for three different dependent variables. In the first two columns, we consider total social unrest, while in the rest, we separate between non-violent and violent protests. The coefficients β are significantly negative in the first two columns. The value of the coefficient is large, similar to the daily average of social unrest in the estimation window, and about two-thirds of its standard deviation.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Interestingly, the 15N agreement seems to change not only the overall level of conflict but also

its composition. In particular, social unrest is a mixture of violent and pacific strategies. The 15N is associated with a decrease in the trend of violent protest, but no changes in the level of non-violent demonstrations. Overall, social unrest becomes less violent after the 15N Agreement.

5 Discussion

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.

5.1 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.[4] 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, especially 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 X, 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.

[4]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).

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 (see (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.

5.2 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.

5.3 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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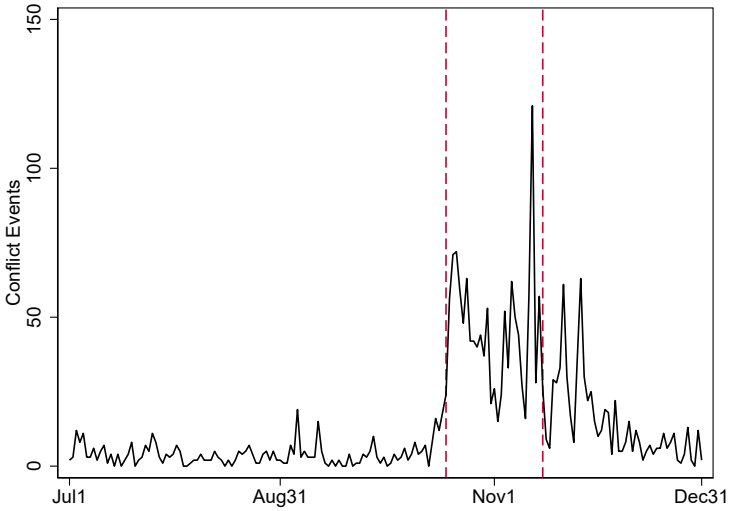
Data Availability Statement

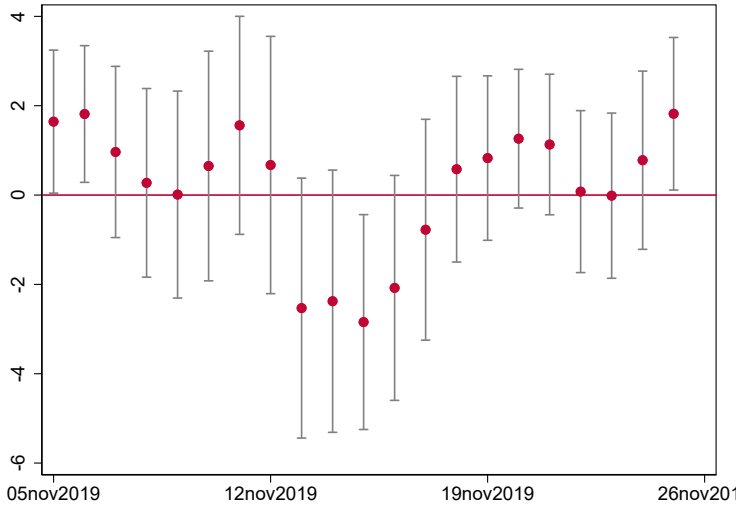
The data that support the findings of this study are available from two sources. Protest events are available from ACLED at the following website https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/. Data on arrests are available upon request from the Ministry of Interior and Public Security, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data so are not publicly available.

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 β 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: Timeline of Government Strategies

Date	Strategy	Event
15-oct	Attrition	Students block the subway system
18-oct	Repression	Social Outburst; State Security Law
19-oct	Repression	Emergency State in Santiago
19-oct	Concession	Reversion of the transport fare increase
20-oct	Repression	Emergency State in extended to 10 out of 16 regions
22-oct	Concession	New Social Agenda
23-oct	Repression	Emergency State in extended to 15 out of 16 regions
25-oct	Concession	Termination of the emergency state
28-oct	Concession	Cabinet Reshuffle
07-nov	Repression	Security Agenda and Law Anti-masks
12-nov	Concession	Promise of agreements in security, economics and constitution
15-nov	Institutional Change	Agreement for a new constitution

Sources: Landaeta and Herrero 2021, Somma et al. 2021.

Table 2: Baseline Results

Dep.Var.	*Unrest: all events*		*Non-violent Protest*		*Violent Protest*	
Time	0.18*	0.11	0.05	0.02	0.13***	0.10***
	[0.10]	[0.08]	[0.06]	[0.05]	[0.04]	[0.03]
Post 15N	-2.84**	-1.91*	-1.00	-0.60	-1.69***	-1.26***
	[1.15]	[0.94]	[0.64]	[0.57]	[0.50]	[0.40]
Time x Post 15 N	-0.09	-0.09	-0.04	-0.04	-0.07	-0.06*
	[0.12]	[0.08]	[0.06]	[0.05]	[0.05]	[0.03]
Arrested		4.83		-2.02		
		[8.84]		[4.11]		[5.14]
Observations	448	448	448	448	448	448
R-squared	0.06	0.52	0.04	0.33	0.07	0.45

Note. Baseline results. Estimations in even columns include arrests, regional fixed effects, and a dummy for each day in a week. *,**, *** represent significance at the 10%, 5% and 1% levels, respectively.