Exploring Paths to Democratic Transformation: A Comparative Analysis of Social Movements' Role in Brazil and Chile's Constitutional Transitions from Authoritarianism

This paper examines how social movements have influenced the transition to democracy in Brazil and Chile by focusing on their roles in shaping constitutional change. In this study, the focus will be on the movement perspective, where the social struggles by poor, downtrodden groups achieve the extension of individual rights over a long period of time whereby social movements disseminate a knowledge of rights and secure them for themselves. The aim of this paper is to identify different paths towards democratic constitutional transformation in these countries. Utilizing qualitative methods such as comparative case studies and historical data analysis, the study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which social movements have influenced constitutional reforms and their effects on citizenship rights. By providing insights into the dynamics of constitutional change driven by social movements, this research contributes to our understanding of democratization processes and the role of civil society in promoting inclusive and rights-based democratic governance.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the world has witnessed numerous transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy, marking significant milestones in the pursuit of freedom, equality, and human rights. Among the pivotal actors driving these transitions are social movements, which have played instrumental roles in challenging oppressive regimes and advocating democratic reforms. Understanding the dynamics of these movements and their impact on the process of democratization is crucial for comprehending the complexities of political change in diverse contexts. Two prominent examples of such transitions are the movements towards democracy in Brazil and Chile. Both countries have undergone profound political transformations, transitioning from authoritarian regimes to democratic governance over the past century. These transitions were not merely political events but comprehensive societal shifts that reshaped power structures, institutions, and the rights of citizens. Central to these transformations were the efforts of social movements, which mobilized populations, demanded change, and influenced the course of political development. Brazil and Chile's journeys from authoritarianism to democracy were characterized by unique challenges and opportunities. In Brazil, the military dictatorship that ruled from 1964 to 1985 faced sustained opposition from various social groups, including labor unions, student activists, and grassroots organizations.

Similarly, Chile experienced the repressive rule of General Augusto Pinochet from 1973 to 1990, marked by human rights violations and suppression of dissent. However, in both cases, social movements emerged as agents of change, pushing for democratic reforms and advocating for the recognition of fundamental rights.

The significance of studying the role of social movements in democratic transitions lies in their ability to catalyze societal change and shape the trajectory of political systems. These movements serve as conduits for popular participation, channeling the aspirations and grievances of marginalized communities into collective action. By mobilizing citizens, raising awareness, and challenging entrenched power structures, social movements contribute to the dismantling of authoritarian regimes and the establishment of inclusive democratic governance. This research seeks to investigate the intricacies of social movements' impact on constitutional change and citizenship rights during democratic transitions in Brazil and Chile. By examining the historical context, socio-political dynamics, and outcomes of these movements, this paper aims to unravel the mechanisms through which they influence constitutional reforms and shape the rights of citizens. Through comparative analysis and qualitative methods, it seeks to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in the paths towards democratic constitutional transformation in these two countries.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to shed light on the critical role of social movements in driving democratic transitions and shaping the contours of constitutional change; and second, to contribute to the understanding of democratization processes and the role of civil society in promoting inclusive and rights-based governance. By elucidating the experiences of Brazil and Chile, this paper aims to offer insights into the broader dynamics of political change and the potential avenues for advancing democracy in diverse contexts. This paper reviews the relevant literature on democratic transitions, social movements, and constitutional change of Brazil and Chile. Then a theoretical framework is developed for further analysis and methodology. Next, this paper thoroughly goes through case studies of social movements in Brazil and Chile, analyzing their strategies, impact, and outcomes. Based on the findings, this paper discusses the implications for democratization processes in those two countries and the role of civil society. Finally, this paper concludes with reflections on the significance of research and avenues for future inquiry. Through this research, a contribution to the dialogue on democracy, social change, and the pursuit of justice in Latin America and beyond is highly encouraged.

Literature Review

The transition from authoritarian rule to democracy in Brazil and Chile has been widely analyzed within the broader literature on democratization, social movements, constitutional change, and citizenship. Rather than being understood as a simple institutional shift, these transitions are now generally conceptualized as complex and contested processes shaped by interactions among state elites, civil society actors, and broader socio-economic structures.

Within this context, social movements have been identified as central actors, although their influence is mediated by institutional constraints, elite negotiations, and historical legacies.

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A foundational body of scholarship conceptualizes social movements as key drivers of political change through contentious collective action. In *Dynamics of Contention*, Sidney Tarrow, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly argue that movements operate by mobilizing resources, exploiting political opportunities, and disrupting existing power structures. From this perspective, democratization is not solely an elite-managed process but also a product of sustained pressure from below. In both Brazil and Chile, labor unions, student organizations, and grassroots networks played critical roles in challenging authoritarian legitimacy and expanding political participation.

However, other scholars emphasize the structural and political limitations faced by social movements under authoritarian regimes. Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani highlight how repression, fragmentation, and organizational constraints often weaken collective action and limit its transformative capacity. In Chile, severe repression under military rule forced movements into fragmented and often clandestine forms of resistance, while in Brazil, divisions among opposition actors initially constrained coordinated mobilization. These constraints suggest that while social movements are important, their effectiveness is highly contingent on political context.

Building on this tension, a major debate in democratization literature concerns whether regime transitions are driven primarily by mass mobilization or elite negotiation. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter argue that transitions are typically "pacted" processes, where elite actors negotiate the terms of democratization. From this perspective, social movements may generate pressure for change, but the final shape of democratic transition is determined by elite agreements that often limit the depth of transformation. This argument is especially relevant in Chile, where the post-Pinochet transition was largely shaped by negotiated compromises that preserved significant institutional continuity.

In contrast, other scholars highlight the importance of class coalitions and popular participation in democratization processes. Evelyne Huber, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and John D. Stephens argue that democracy is more likely to emerge and consolidate when lower and middle-class groups are politically organized and capable of influencing state formation. This structural approach is particularly useful in the Brazilian case, where labor mobilization and working-class organization significantly shaped demands for political inclusion during the transition period.

Beyond questions of regime transition, scholars have also focused on constitutional change as a central mechanism linking social movements to democratic outcomes. Zachary Elkins, Tom Ginsburg, and James Melton emphasize that constitutions are not only legal frameworks but also political settlements that structure power relations and define citizenship. In Brazil, the 1988 Constitution reflected significant pressure from civil society and labor movements, resulting in an expansive rights-based framework. In Chile, however, constitutional reform was more constrained, reflecting the continued influence of authoritarianera institutional arrangements during the transition.

The concept of citizenship further deepens this analysis by linking institutional change to lived political experience. T. H. Marshall's classic formulation of

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citizenship comprising civil, political, and social rights provides a foundational framework for understanding democratic development. However, later scholars such as Engin Isin and Patricia Wood challenge static conceptions of citizenship, arguing that it is continuously produced through acts of claim-making and political struggle. From this perspective, social movements are not only agents of regime change but also ongoing producers of citizenship rights.

A significant strand of literature extends this analysis by focusing on human rights and transitional justice. Kathryn Sikkink's work on transnational advocacy networks demonstrates how domestic movements can leverage international institutions to pressure authoritarian regimes. In Chile, human rights organizations played a crucial role in documenting state violence and mobilizing global attention, thereby increasing pressure for democratic accountability. This transnational dimension highlights how social movements operate across multiple scales of political influence, extending beyond national boundaries.

Feminist scholarship further broadens the analytical scope by examining how gendered forms of mobilization shape democratization processes. Lisa Baldez shows that women's movements in both Brazil and Chile were instrumental in expanding democratic participation and redefining citizenship. These movements not only challenged authoritarian rule but also pushed democratic agendas beyond formal political rights to include issues of gender equality and social justice, thereby expanding the substantive meaning of democracy.

Economic inequality also plays a critical role in shaping democratic consolidation. Adam Przeworski argues that while democratic transitions can occur under a wide range of economic conditions, the durability of democracy depends on institutional capacity and inclusive development. In Brazil, persistent inequality has limited the full realization of citizenship rights, producing a gap between formal constitutional guarantees and their practical implementation. This highlights the importance of examining not only regime change but also the quality and depth of democratic governance.

Recent scholarships have increasingly focused on participatory institutions as mechanisms through which social movements influence governance beyond the transition period. Leonardo Avritzer's analysis of participatory budgeting in Brazil demonstrates how institutional innovations can embed movement demands within formal decision-making structures. These mechanisms illustrate that the influence of social movements does not end with democratization but continues through the shaping of democratic governance practices.

Despite the richness of this literature, several gaps remain. Much of the existing research tends to separate social movements, institutional design, and socio-economic conditions into distinct analytical categories, rather than examining their interactions. Comparative studies also often under-theorize how historical legacies shape divergent transition outcomes, particularly between cases like Brazil and Chile. Furthermore, there is limited integration between studies of formal constitutional rights and analyses of their implementation in everyday political life.

In response to these limitations, this study adopts a comparative and integrative approach that bridges social movement theory, institutional analysis, and citizenship studies. By examining Brazil and Chile side by side, it seeks to explain

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how different configurations of political opportunity structures, elite negotiations, and movement capacities shape both constitutional outcomes and the realization of citizenship rights.

In sum, the literature demonstrates that democratization is a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of contentious politics, institutional design, elite bargaining, and socio-economic conditions. While social movements are widely recognized as crucial catalysts of democratic change, their impact is neither uniform nor autonomous. Instead, it is mediated by broader structural and political dynamics that determine whether mobilization translates into substantive democratic transformation. This study builds on these insights to provide a more integrated understanding of democratic transitions in Brazil and Chile.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the analytical framework developed by Joe Foweraker and Todd Landman, which provides a robust lens for examining the relationship between social movements, constitutional change, and citizenship rights. Central to their framework is the distinction between rights "in principle" and rights "in practice," a conceptual division that allows for a more nuanced understanding of democratization processes, particularly in transitional political contexts such as Brazil and Chile.

Rights "in principle" refer to the formal recognition and institutionalization of rights within legal and constitutional frameworks. These include provisions enshrined in

constitutions, laws, and official policies that articulate civil, political, and social entitlements. Such rights represent the normative commitments of a democratic state and signal the formal transition away from authoritarian governance. However, the mere existence of rights within legal texts does not guarantee their realization in everyday life.

In contrast, rights "in practice" denote the actual ability of individuals and groups to exercise and benefit from these formally recognized rights. This dimension emphasizes implementation, enforcement, and accessibility, highlighting the extent to which state institutions uphold legal guarantees. The gap between rights in principle and rights in practice is particularly pronounced in post-authoritarian societies, where institutional weaknesses, socio-economic inequalities, and lingering authoritarian legacies often constrain the effective realization of rights.

Within this framework, social movements occupy a central and dynamic role. Drawing on insights from scholars such as Sidney Tarrow, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly, social movements are understood as collective actors capable of mobilizing resources, shaping political opportunities, and transforming public discourse. They function not only as challengers of authoritarian regimes but also as key intermediaries between citizens and the state.

More specifically, social movements contribute to expanding rights "in principle" by advocating constitutional reforms and influencing the design of

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democratic institutions. Through protest, negotiation, and public pressure, they compel political elites to recognize and codify new rights within legal frameworks. At the same time, social movements play a crucial role in advancing rights "in practice" by monitoring state behavior, demanding accountability, and ensuring that legal provisions are effectively implemented.

This dual function underscores the importance of social movements as bridges between formal institutional change and substantive democratic outcomes. Their activities help transform abstract legal commitments into lived realities, thereby deepening the quality of democracy. However, the extent of their influence varies depending on political opportunity structures, levels of repression, and the nature of elite negotiations.

By applying Foweraker and Landman's framework to the cases of Brazil and Chile, this study seeks to illuminate how social movements shape both the recognition and realization of citizenship rights during democratic transitions. In doing so, it provides a more comprehensive understanding of democratization as a process that extends beyond institutional reform to encompass the ongoing struggle for the effective exercise of rights.

Hypotheses

Building upon Foweraker and Landman's framework and drawing insights from the broader literature on social movements and democratization, this paper posits the following hypotheses:

1. **Social movements significantly impact constitutional change in shaping citizenship rights during democratic transitions.**

Hypothesis 1a: Social movements' advocacy and mobilization efforts lead to constitutional reforms that expand the recognition and protection of citizenship rights "in principle."

Hypothesis 1b: Social movements' activism and collective action contribute to the implementation and enforcement of citizenship rights "in practice," thereby bridging the gap between formal rights and their actual enjoyment by citizens.

These hypotheses will be empirically tested through comparative analysis within the Brazilian and Chilean contexts, aiming to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms through which social movements influence constitutional change and citizenship rights during processes of democratic transition. Through a broader lens, this research contributes to theoretical insights and practical implications for promoting inclusive and rights-based democratic governance across diverse political landscapes.

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Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods, including comparative case studies and historical data analysis, to explore the influence of social movements on constitutional change and citizenship rights in Brazil and Chile. The selection of cases from Brazil and Chile is guided by the aim of capturing diverse experiences of social movements' impact on democratization processes. Cases are chosen based on criteria such as historical significance, intensity of social movement mobilization, and the outcomes of constitutional changes. The selection process ensures representation of various social movements, including labor unions, student activists, and grassroots organizations, to provide a comprehensive analysis of different perspectives. Data collection involves a thorough review of historical documents, archival records, scholarly literature, and media sources related to social movements, constitutional changes, and citizenship rights in Brazil and Chile. Primary sources such as protest manifests, organizational documents, and interviews with key stakeholders within social movements will provide valuable insights into strategies, motivations, and impacts. Secondary sources, including academic studies and governmental reports, complement the analysis by providing contextual background and comparative perspectives. By employing a qualitative research approach grounded in comparative case studies and historical data analysis, this study aims to provide nuanced insights into the role of social movements in shaping constitutional change and promoting inclusive democratic governance in Brazil and Chile.

Case Study: Social Movements in Chile (1963-1990)

Historical Background: Authoritarianism, Repression, and Structural Transformation

Chile's transition to democracy cannot be understood without situating it within the authoritarian regime established after the 1973 military coup led by Augusto Pinochet, which overthrew the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende. The coup marked not only a political rupture but also a profound restructuring of Chilean society, combining political repression with radical economic transformation.

The Pinochet regime systematically dismantled democratic institutions. Political parties were banned, Congress was dissolved, and civil liberties were severely curtailed. Thousands of individuals were detained, tortured, or disappeared, creating a climate of fear that initially suppressed collective action. At the same time, the regime implemented neoliberal economic reforms that restructured labor markets, weakened unions, and privatized key sectors of the economy.

These economic policies had contradictory effects. While they stabilized certain macroeconomic indicators, they also generated rising inequality, unemployment, and social dislocation—particularly during the economic crisis of

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the early 1980s. These conditions gradually eroded the regime's legitimacy and created the socio-economic foundations for renewed social mobilization.

Re-emergence of Civil Society and Fragmented Resistance

In the years immediately following the coup, repression severely limited organized opposition. However, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, civil society began to reconstitute itself in fragmented but resilient forms. Rather than a single unified movement, opposition emerged across multiple sectors, each shaped by different experiences of repression and marginalization.

Labor unions, although weakened, remained important for organizational actors. Their re-emergence was significant because they retained pre-coup networks and organizational experience. At the same time, new forms of grassroots organization developed in urban poor communities, particularly in response to economic hardship. These included neighborhood associations and informal networks that provided mutual aid and facilitated political discussion.

Women's movements played a uniquely transformative role in this period. Groups composed of relatives of the disappeared reframed political resistance in moral and humanitarian terms, shifting the discourse from ideological संघर्ष to human rights. This reframing was crucial in broadening the appeal of opposition movements and attracting support from middle-class and international audiences.

Student movements also became increasingly visible, particularly in urban centers. Universities served as key sites of dissent, where younger generations engaged in political activism, organized demonstrations, and disseminated information that challenged statecontrolled narratives.

From Fragmentation to Coalition: The Consolidation of Opposition

One of the most significant developments in Chile's transition was the gradual shift from fragmented resistance to coordinated opposition. By the early 1980s, different social movements began to converge around shared grievances and objectives. This process of coalition-building was neither automatic nor uncontested; it required overcoming ideological differences, strategic disagreements, and varying levels of risk tolerance.

The emergence of broad-based coalitions allowed social movements to scale up their activities and increase their political impact. National protest days (*jornadas de protesta nacional*) became a central tactic, bringing together workers, students, professionals, and marginalized communities in coordinated demonstrations. These protests signaled a shift from localized resistance to nationwide mobilization.

Importantly, these coalitions also facilitated interaction between social movements and political elites. Opposition parties, which had been suppressed under the regime, began to reengage with civil society actors, creating a more integrated opposition front. This interaction would later prove critical in shaping the transition process.

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Strategies of Resistance: Contention, Adaptation, and Institutional Engagement

Chilean social movements demonstrated a high degree of strategic adaptability. In the face of repression, they employed a combination of contentious and institutional strategies. Contentious tactics included protests, strikes, and acts of civil disobedience, which directly challenged the regime's authority. These actions were often met with repression, but they played a crucial role in maintaining visibility and demonstrating widespread dissatisfaction.

At the same time, movements increasingly got engaged in institutional and transnational strategies. Human rights organizations documented abuses and collaborated with international actors, amplifying pressure on the regime. This transnational dimension was particularly significant, as it contributed to Chile's growing isolation on the global stage.

Movements also began preparing eventual political openings by developing organizational capacity and political alliances. This dual strategy; combining confrontation with preparation, allowed them to respond effectively when opportunities for transition emerged.

The 1988 Plebiscite: Social Movements and Institutional Breakthrough

The 1988 plebiscite represented the decisive moment in Chile's transition. Although it was initiated by the regime as part of its institutional framework, it created an opportunity for opposition forces to challenge authoritarian rule through electoral means.

Social movements played a critical role in this process. They mobilized voters, organized grassroots campaigns, and contributed to the broader "No" campaign that opposed the continuation of Pinochet's rule. Their efforts were essential in transforming the plebiscite from a controlled political exercise into a genuine expression of popular will.

However, the plebiscite also illustrates the limits of social movement influence. While movements helped secure a democratic opening, the terms of the transition were largely defined by existing institutional constraints. The constitution established under the regime remained in place, and key elements of authoritarian governance persisted.

Evaluating Success: Rights "in Principle" vs. Rights "in Practice"

Applying the framework of rights "in principle" and rights "in practice" reveals the complex outcomes of Chile's transition.

In terms of **rights "in principle,"** social movements were highly successful. They contributed to the restoration of electoral democracy, the legalization of political parties, and the recognition of civil and political rights. These achievements marked a significant departure from authoritarian rule.

However, the realization of **rights "in practice"** was more limited. The persistence of institutional constraints, including constitutional provisions that protected military influence, restricted the depth of democratic reform.

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Additionally, socio-economic inequalities limited the extent to which marginalized groups could fully exercise their rights.

This divergence highlights a key limitation: while social movements were effective in achieving regime change, their ability to shape the long-term institutional structure of democracy was constrained by elite negotiations and inherited frameworks.

Broader Implications of the Chilean Case

The Chilean case offers important theoretical insights into the role of social movements in democratization. It demonstrates that social movements can be highly effective in triggering political transitions, particularly when they build broad coalitions and combine diverse strategies. However, it also shows that their influence is contingent upon the structure of the transition process.

Specifically, Chile illustrates that when transitions are highly institutionalized and controlled by elites, social movements may achieve political change without fully transforming underlying power structures. This results in a form of democracy that is stable but constrained, with ongoing tensions between formal rights and their substantive realization.

Case Study: Social Movements in Brazil (1973-1990)

Historical Background: Military Rule and Controlled Authoritarianism

Brazil's transition to democracy unfolded under a military regime that governed from 1964 to 1985. Unlike the abrupt and highly repressive authoritarianism seen in Chile, Brazil's dictatorship combined coercion with controlled political openness. Following the 1964 coup, the military justified its rule as a necessary intervention to maintain order and prevent perceived ideological threats. Over time, the regime consolidated power through institutional mechanisms, including the suspension of political rights, censorship, and restrictions on opposition parties.

However, Brazil's authoritarianism was characterized by a degree of institutional flexibility. While repression was real, particularly during the late 1960s and early 1970s; it coexisted with limited avenues for political participation. This hybrid structure created conditions under which civil society could gradually reorganize, even under authoritarian constraints.

Economic developments played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of resistance. The period known as the "Brazilian Miracle" brought rapid economic growth but also deepened inequality. By the late 1970s, economic decline, rising inflation, and external debt crises eroded the regime's legitimacy. These structural pressures created fertile ground for the emergence of social movements.

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Emergence and Diversity of Social Movements

Social mobilization in Brazil was notable for its breadth and diversity, encompassing a wide range of actors across urban and rural contexts. Labor unions were among the most influential forces, particularly in industrial regions such as São Paulo. These unions organized large-scale strikes that challenged both economic policies and political repression, signaling a shift from economic demands to explicit political demands.

At the same time, peasant movements emerged as powerful actors in rural areas, highlighting issues of land concentration and inequality. These movements broadened the scope of democratization by linking political change to socio-economic justice, emphasizing that democracy must extend beyond formal political rights.

Student movements also re-emerged as key participants in opposition politics. Universities became important spaces for dissent, where students organized protests, circulated alternative political ideas, and challenged state censorship. In addition, grassroots organizations, including neighborhood associations and religious groups influenced by liberation theology, mobilized marginalized communities and facilitated collective action.

This diversity of actors gave Brazilian social movements a pluralistic character, but it also contributed to fragmentation. Unlike Chile, where movements gradually coalesced into unified coalitions, Brazilian movements initially operated in parallel, reflecting regional, class, and sectoral differences.

Strategies of Mobilization: From Fragmentation to Convergence

Brazilian social movements relied heavily on mass mobilization as their primary strategy. Strikes, protests, and demonstrations became increasingly frequent during the late 1970s and early 1980s, signaling growing dissatisfaction with the regime. These actions were particularly significant because they occurred within a semi-authoritarian context, where limited political space allowed for incremental expansion of opposition activities.

Over time, movements began to converge around shared goals, particularly the demand for democratization. Campaigns such as “Diretas Já” (Direct Elections Now) exemplified this shift toward broader coordination. This movement mobilized millions of citizens in support of direct presidential elections, demonstrating the growing power of civil society.

In addition to contentious strategies, Brazilian movements increasingly engaged with institutional processes. As the regime initiated gradual political liberalization, social movements took advantage of emerging opportunities to influence policy debates and participate in formal political arenas. This dual approach—combining protest with institutional engagement—proved crucial in shaping the transition process.

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The Transition Process: Negotiation, Gradualism, and Participation

Brazil's transition to democracy was characterized by gradualism and negotiation rather than a single decisive event. Unlike Chile's plebiscite-driven transition, Brazil's democratization unfolded through a series of reforms and compromises between the military regime and opposition forces.

Social movements played a critical role in sustaining pressure throughout this process. Their continued mobilization prevented the regime from controlling the pace and scope of reforms entirely. At the same time, the fragmented nature of Brazilian politics meant that elites retained significant influence over the transition.

The culmination of this process was the drafting of the 1988 Constitution. Unlike Chile, where the constitutional framework was largely inherited from the authoritarian period, Brazil's constitution-making process was relatively participatory. Social movements, civil society organizations, and advocacy groups were able to contribute proposals and influence debates.

Constitutional Outcomes: The "Citizens' Constitution"

The 1988 Constitution is widely regarded as one of the most progressive in Latin America. It enshrined a broad range of civil, political, and social rights, including labor protections, social welfare provisions, and mechanisms for political participation. This reflects a high degree of success for social movements in shaping rights "in principle."

The constitution also institutionalized participatory mechanisms that allowed ongoing citizen engagement. These innovations demonstrate how social movements not only influenced the transition but also shaped the long-term structure of democratic governance.

Evaluating Success: Rights "in Principle" vs. Rights "in Practice"

Despite these achievements, Brazil's experience highlights the challenges of translating formal rights into substantive outcomes.

In terms of rights "in principle," social movements were highly successful. They played a direct role in shaping a constitution that expanded citizenship rights and promoted inclusive governance. Compared to Chile, Brazilian movements had greater influence over constitutional design.

However, the realization of rights "in practice" has been more uneven. Persistent socioeconomic inequalities, regional disparities, and institutional weaknesses have limited the effective implementation of many constitutional provisions. Political instability and governance challenges have further complicated efforts to fully realize these rights.

This divergence underscores a central tension: while Brazil achieved a more expansive legal framework for rights, it has struggled more than Chile to ensure their consistent application.

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Broader Implications of the Brazilian Case

The Brazilian case offers important insights into the relationship between social movements and democratization. It demonstrates that when social movements gain access to institutional processes, they can significantly shape constitutional outcomes. However, it also shows that institutional inclusion does not guarantee effective implementation.

More broadly, Brazil highlights the importance of state capacity and socio-economic conditions in determining the long-term success of democratization. Even the most progressive constitutional frameworks require strong institutions and equitable social structures to be fully realized.

Comparison

This section compares Brazil and Chile to explain why similar patterns of social mobilization produced different constitutional outcomes. Despite strong opposition movements in both cases, their influence over post-authoritarian constitutional design varied significantly. The analysis focuses on how elite bargaining and institutional opportunity structures shaped whether social movements were incorporated into formal decision-making during transition.

Social Movements as Catalysts of Regime Delegitimizing

The divergent trajectories of democratization in Brazil and Chile illustrate that while social movements are necessary catalysts of regime change, their capacity to shape constitutional outcomes is fundamentally conditioned by elite strategies, institutional opportunity structures, and the mode of transition from authoritarian rule. Drawing on theories of transitional bargaining (elite pact theory) and political opportunity structures, this paper argues that variation in democratic depth between the two cases is best explained not by differences in the intensity of mobilization alone, but by the extent to which social movements were incorporated into, or excluded from, formal decision-making arenas during and after regime breakdown.

In both Brazil and Chile, sustained social mobilization played a critical role in delegitimizing authoritarian governance. In Chile, large-scale protest cycles such as the 1983– 1986 "Jornadas de Protesta Nacional" mobilized workers, students, and human rights organizations against the Pinochet regime, creating sustained pressure for political opening. The 1988 "No" campaign further demonstrated the power of coordinated civil society action operating within institutional constraints.

In Brazil, similar mobilization emerged through labor unions organized under the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) and mass political campaigns such as Diretas Já (1983–1984), which demanded direct presidential elections and mobilized millions across urban centers. These movements expanded political consciousness, weakened authoritarian legitimacy, and created sustained pressure for democratization. In both cases, social movements functioned as indispensable pressure actors that made regime breakdown possible.

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Elite Control and the Structure of Transition Outcomes

However, the divergence in outcomes emerges from the structure of elite bargaining during transition, a central insight of elite pact theory.

In Chile, democratization resulted from a highly controlled, institutionally engineered transition. The 1980 Constitution, designed under Pinochet, preserved authoritarian enclaves such as appointed senators and military autonomy, ensuring continued elite influence. The 1988 plebiscite, although a victory for opposition forces, occurred within a framework designed by the regime itself, limiting the scope for structural transformation. Subsequent negotiations remained constrained by these institutional boundaries, producing a "protected democracy" where authoritarian legacies persisted within democratic institutions.

In contrast, Brazil's transition was more fragmented and less centrally controlled. The gradual political opening process known as "abertura" created a fluid transition environment without a single binding elite pact. This allowed the 1987–1988 Constituent Assembly to become a genuinely contested institutional arena. Social movements, labor unions, and civil society actors directly participated in constitutional drafting, shaping provisions on labor protections, social welfare, and political rights.

For example, labor movements influenced the inclusion of Article 7 labor rights protections, while health reform movements helped institutionalize the Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS). Urban reform coalitions also secured recognition of the "social function of property." The result was the 1988 Constitution, widely known as the "Citizen Constitution," due to its extensive incorporation of social and participatory rights.

From External Pressure to Institutional Incorporation

This comparison demonstrates a key causal mechanism: elite control over transition design determines whether social movements act as external pressure groups or internal institutional actors.

In Chile, social movements were highly effective in generating regime instability and contributing to democratic opening, but their influence was largely confined to the phase of regime breakdown. Even the powerful 1983–1986 protest cycles translated into political opening rather than direct institutional redesign.

In Brazil, by contrast, the absence of a tightly controlled transition allowed social movements to transition from external challengers into internal constitutional actors. Their participation in the Constituent Assembly enabled them to directly embed demands into the legal foundation of the new democratic order.

Constitutional Expansion vs. Rights Realization

At the same time, the cases reveal a critical paradox in democratization outcomes: constitutional expansion does not guarantee effective rights of realization.

Brazil's 1988 Constitution is among the most progressive in Latin America, yet its implementation remains uneven. Despite formal guarantees such as universal

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healthcare through the **SUS**, access to services varies significantly across regions due to unequal state capacity and persistent socioeconomic inequality.

In Chile, although the post-authoritarian constitutional framework retained neoliberal institutional features, the state developed relatively strong bureaucratic capacity and macroeconomic stability during the 1990s and 2000s. This contributed to more consistent policy implementation in areas such as fiscal discipline and poverty reduction, even if political inclusion remained structurally constrained.

This divergence reflects a core insight of new institutionalist theory: formal institutional design and substantive governance outcomes do not necessarily align, as implementation depends on administrative capacity and structural inequality.

Coalition Structures and Movement Strategy

Finally, the cases highlight important differences in coalition dynamics and movement organization.

In Chile, opposition forces became highly coordinated under umbrella coalitions such as the Concertation, which unified disparate actors around the goal of ending the dictatorship. This unity strengthened bargaining capacity but also facilitated elite containment by channeling demands into negotiated institutional limits.

In Brazil, social movements were more fragmented across labor, urban, rural, and sectoral lines. While this reduced short-term bargaining strength, it produced a more pluralistic civil society with multiple institutional entry points. Over time, this fragmentation contributed to broader constitutional inclusion during the transition.

Overall Causal Logic of Democratization Outcomes

Overall, the comparison between Brazil and Chile demonstrates that social movements are not autonomous drivers of democratization outcomes. Rather, their impact is mediated by the configuration of elite bargaining, institutional openness, and transition design.

Social movements can initiate democratization through mass mobilization and regime delegitimizing, but their ability to shape constitutional depth depends on whether they are incorporated into formal rule-making processes or confined to external pressure roles. Chile represents a case of strong mobilization with constrained institutional transformation, while Brazil represents a case of more diffuse mobilization with greater constitutional incorporation.

Conclusion: Toward a Structurally Conditioned Theory of Social Movements

In sum, this analysis advances a more nuanced understanding of democratization by moving beyond movement-centric explanations and emphasizing the interaction between societal mobilization and elite-controlled institutional transformation.

The findings suggest that the most consequential variable shaping democratic depth is not the presence or strength of social movements per se, but the structure of political opportunity within which those movements operate during critical

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constitutional junctures. This highlights democratization as a fundamentally structured bargaining process, rather than a purely bottom-up outcome of social mobilization.

Finding

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of democratization processes and the significant role of social movements in advancing inclusive and rights-based democratic governance. Through the lens of Foweraker and Landman's framework, our analysis illuminates the nuanced relationship between social movements, constitutional change, and citizenship rights. By distinguishing between rights "in principle" and "in practice," the framework highlights the complexities inherent in the democratization process, emphasizing the imperative of translating formal rights into tangible benefits through effective social mobilization.

Beyond the specific contexts of Brazil and Chile, the implications of our findings extend to broader understandings of democratization processes and the contributions of civil society to democratic governance. The success of social movements in influencing constitutional change and expanding citizenship rights underscores their transformative potential in challenging authoritarian regimes and driving democratic reforms. Through mobilizing citizens, advocating for policy reforms, and holding governments accountable, social movements play instrumental roles in consolidating democratic institutions and safeguarding human rights.

Reflecting on the practical implications of our research, policymakers and practitioners can leverage these findings to recognize the critical importance of supporting and empowering civil society actors, including social movements, in fostering democratic governance. By creating conducive environments for civic participation and activism, governments can enhance democratic institutions and foster inclusive decision-making processes. Moreover, addressing structural inequalities and social injustices, as highlighted by the mobilization of social movements for land reform, labor rights, and social welfare, becomes imperative for promoting sustainable democratic governance.

Furthermore, this research underscores the significance of international solidarity and support for civil society movements advocating for democratic reforms. By amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and advocating human rights globally, international actors can contribute to advancing democratic governance and upholding citizenship rights on a broader scale. This study contributes to deepening our understanding of democratization processes and the transformative role of civil society in promoting inclusive and rights-based democratic governance. Through an examination of the experiences of Brazil and Chile, our research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of social mobilization, constitutional change, and citizenship rights, with implications for informing policy, practice, and future research endeavors in the realm of democratization and governance.

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Conclusion

This paper has examined the crucial role of social movements in democratic transitions, focusing on the cases of Brazil and Chile. Through a comparative analysis, it has explored the emergence, strategies, and outcomes of social movements in both countries, highlighting their influence on constitutional change and citizenship rights. The findings underscore the transformative potential of social movements in challenging authoritarian regimes, shaping political openings, and advancing demands for more inclusive and rightsbased forms of governance.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that the impact of social movements is not uniform but is shaped by the broader political and institutional context in which they operate.

While both Brazil and Chile experienced strong social mobilization that contributed to democratization, differences in elite control over the transition process and the structure of political opportunities significantly influenced the extent to which these movements could shape constitutional outcomes. In Chile, a more controlled and elite-managed transition limited movement participation in institutional design, whereas in Brazil a more open and contested transition allowed for greater incorporation of social movement demands into the constitutional process.

These findings suggest that while the expectations of this study (H1a and H1b) are broadly supported—social movements do play a central role in constitutional change and the expansion of citizenship rights—their effects are conditional rather than automatic. Social movements are most influential when institutional arrangements allow their integration into formal decision-making processes, rather than restricting them to external pressure roles. In this sense, their impact is mediated by elite strategies and the degree of openness in transitional institutions.

Moreover, the comparison highlights an important distinction between constitutional change and the realization of citizenship rights in practice. Even where social movements successfully contribute to the expansion of formal rights, as in Brazil, the translation of these rights into effective outcomes remains uneven due to structural inequalities and institutional constraints. Conversely, more constrained constitutional frameworks may exhibit greater institutional stability, but limit the scope of participatory inclusion. This tension underscores the gap between rights "in principle" and rights "in practice" in democratization processes.

This study therefore reaffirms the importance of analyzing social movements not in isolation, but in relation to the political and institutional environments that shape their effectiveness. Social movements remain key actors in democratic transitions, but their transformative capacity depends on whether they are incorporated into or excluded from formal political institutions during critical constitutional moments.

Looking ahead, there are several directions for future research on this topic. First, comparative studies including additional cases could further clarify how different transition pathways shape the influence of social movements across diverse political contexts. Second, longitudinal research could examine how the relationship between social movements and democratic institutions evolves over

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time, particularly in relation to democratic consolidation and erosion. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches drawing from political science, sociology, and historical analysis could deepen our understanding of how collective action interacts with state structures in shaping democratic governance.

In conclusion, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the transformative role of social movements in democratic transitions. By comparing Brazil and Chile, it demonstrates that while social mobilization is a critical driver of democratization, its outcomes are ultimately shaped by the interaction between societal pressure and institutional structure. This highlights the enduring importance of civil society activism, while also emphasizing that its impact is contingent on the political conditions under which democratization unfolds.

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