

Social Movements, Protest, and Policy

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Abstract

The capacity of Latin American social groups to mobilize has excited the imagination of students of the region since the birth of Latin American studies itself. Alongside the cultural turn, many social movement organizations continue to engage directly with politics. Aspirational goals notwithstanding, in order to improve conditions they devote much of their energy to influencing policy. Although scholars have begun to address the policy impact of Latin American social movements, we have limited systematized understanding of the conditions and mechanisms by which social movement protest affects policy outcomes. This essay argues that a policy process approach offers a useful first cut into more systematic analysis of social movements, protest, and their policy consequences in Latin America. *Keywords:* social movements, protest, policy, political participation, democracy.

Resumen: Movimientos Sociales, Protesta y Políticas de Gobierno

La capacidad de movilización social que evidencia América Latina ha captado el imaginario de investigadores desde los albores de los estudios latinoamericanos. A pesar del giro cultural sobre el tema, muchos movimientos sociales siguen entablando la política de forma directa. Amén de sus metas aspiracionales, en pos de mejorar sus condiciones dedican una cantidad apreciable de sus esfuerzos a influenciar políticas de gobierno. Si bien es cierto que una cantidad no menospreciable de investigadores consideran esos impactos aún hace falta conocimiento sistematizado sobre las condiciones y los mecanismos a través de los cuales la protesta social afecta las políticas del estado. Este ensayo argumenta que enfoques centrados en los procesos de la política pública ofrecen una buena entrada al análisis más sistemático sobre los movimientos sociales, protesta, y sus consecuencias para políticas de gobierno. *Palabras clave:* movimientos sociales, protesta, política, participación política, democracia.

Latin America has experienced a resurgence of social movements and protest over the past 25 years. Democratization after the end of brutal military regimes and civil wars facilitated claim making by aggrieved social groups. Neoliberalism deeply influenced renascent mobilization. Social movements protested against injustices in class, status group, and power relationships. Some proposed alternative economic, social, and political models, such as *buen vivir*, the

solidary economy, and participatory democracy. Not all was threat. Social movements also seized on neoliberalism's promotion of liberty and tolerance for individual, ethnic, and cultural identity-based diversity. Organizing among indigenous peoples expanded rapidly along with the awakening of Afro-Latino, women, and sexual orientation. Environmental consciousness grew significantly during this period as well.

Following the decline of radical neoliberalism's heyday in the early 2000s, a resurgence of left and centre-left governments created new opportunities and threats for social movements. Some vigorously protested left government development policies and political centralization because they endangered hard won citizen and ethnic rights. Others aligned with left governments and organized counter-mobilizations. These developments especially impacted indigenous peoples and other rural ethnic minorities faced with 'new extractive' mega development projects in energy (oil, gas, and hydro power) mining, agribusiness, and fisheries.

Thus, Latin America's rich history of poor, marginalized, underrepresented, and excluded social groups organizing for social justice endures. Then as now, Latin American social movements engage in unconventional politics and other forms of resistance to protect themselves from destructive policies and to push for economic, social, and political inclusion. Ever since the birth of Latin American studies their capacity for mobilization (for better or worse) has excited the imaginations of students of the region.

This essay argues that, despite the cultural turn, social movement engagement with politics has not abated and, thus, remains a significant subject for research. I suggest that a policy process focus is a useful first cut into the problem. Many movements seek to effect policy change and it is a vehicle for thinking about larger, cumulative political consequences of social movements.

The relevance of politics

Studies of Latin American social movements generally seek to explain their formation, trajectory, and consequences. In the wake of the decline of materially oriented labour movements, cultural approaches to social movement studies gained prominence as of the 1990s (Alvarez & Escobar, 1988; Escobar & Alvarez, 1992). They emphasize the importance of meanings, emotions, and practices for post-material identity-based organization of subaltern social groups, such as indigenous peoples, ethnic and racial origin, gender, environmental consciousness, and remote rural communities and *barrio* denizen everyday resistance. Where movement consequences are concerned, special attention is paid to the forging of new social subjects with strong solidarity feelings and practices to nurture them. Social change will come from the diffusion of new meanings and praxis that originated in communities far from the centres of economic and political power. Direct engagement with politics is played down because it is seen as corrupting and co-opting movements and do not yield

much in the way of substantive change. From this perspective, social movements are generally defined as loose networks of activists and supporters with low levels of organization in which power is horizontal that favour protesting over engaging the political establishment.

The valuable contributions of the cultural approach notwithstanding, many of the movements over the last 25 years exhibited more traditional characteristics. Some are decidedly material in their demands and grievances, such as the debt moratorium, anti-privatization, anti-free trade movements, and the continued significance of mobilization by unions, especially public sector and peasant unions. Others intertwine the material with the cultural, such as indigenous peoples' movements; witness the list of demands of the CONAIE in Ecuador or CSUTCB or even CIDOB, in Bolivia.¹ Autonomy and citizenship rights claims are also linked to control or access over economic resources.

The leaders and activists of these movements, many of which think of themselves as political actors representing excluded interests, explicitly engage the political system. Government institutions, political leaders, and their policies are the target of protests. They negotiate with authorities and/or build alliances with disgruntled political elites to push their demands. Movement organizations may be more or less structured and hierarchical, centralized or decentralized but their leadership thinks strategically and tactically about how to influence the decisions of power holders. A more apt definition of social movements with these characteristics sees them as 'collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in *sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities*' (Tarrow, 1994, italics added).

Scholars who study them are interested in the formation, trajectories, and the explicitly *political* consequences of movement. The centrality of politics derives from the following fact. The state is the locus of coercive and authoritative power that supports the inequitable economic, discriminatory social status, and distribution of political resources that are the source of unrest (Wickham-Crowley & Eckstein, 2015).

Movements, of course, have many political goals. Their aspirational goals often seek to effect broad political changes that shift the distribution of power in society. More immediately, they may seek to generate favourable public opinion, or spread models of action through mechanisms of diffusion. Often, however, in order to improve conditions much of their energy is directed to influencing policy. Many campaigns seek to either impede threatening policies, demand change in existing inequitable policies, or propose policies that advance their goals for social, economic, and political inclusion. Some campaigns engage in all three.

Many studies of Latin American movements recognize the importance of policy change for their subjects. Thus, although they may concentrate on movement formation, trajectory, and mobilization tactics they also assess policy change in relation to movement demands (Almeida, 2014; Arce, 2014; Rice, 2012). Nevertheless, we have limited systematized understanding about the

conditions and mechanisms by which social movement protest affects policy outcomes. Here is an area that merits further study by students of Latin American politics.

A deeper understanding of the subject contributes to knowledge of political participation in democratic politics. An important motivation for political participation by citizens is the desire to affect public policies and social movements are a normal form of political participation in democracies alongside voting for representatives, voting in plebiscites and referenda, supporting interest organizations that lobby on their behalf, and expressing interests through public opinion polls. Thus, the study of social movement effects on policymaking illuminates another dimension of the nature and quality citizen representation and political participation in Latin American democracies. We can learn a great deal about government responsiveness, accountability, and popular sector incorporation from researching the relationship between social movements, protest and policymaking. If we take a longitudinal approach we can also assess the degree to which Latin American democracies become more inclusive or not over time as well as the specific mechanisms of inclusion.

A policy process focus

A policy process approach offers a useful first cut into more systematic analysis of social movements, protest, and their political consequences in Latin America. Research has begun to address the policy outcomes of campaigns; they establish whether threatening policy was either stopped and if policy measures (laws and decrees) incorporating their demands were adopted. Movements and protest, however, can also have an impact on a wider range of stages in the policy process, such as agenda setting, policy initiation, policy formulation, implementation, and feedback loops.

The significance of this is that social movements can have varied policy impacts (Kolb, 2007). Influence at one stage does not guarantee influence at another and setbacks at one stage do not necessarily mean that a movement has not had positive policy effects at another. It should be emphasized that movements do not necessarily engage these stages in sequence or even all of them in any given campaign. An effect at any stage may be counted as a positive policy impact, therefore a positive step for change no matter how incremental it may be. This reminds us that in the context of democratic politics social movements generally are agents for reform, which, if it occurs at all, tends to be gradual. If we take the long view of a movement's policy impact we can assess its cumulative effects over time rather than just be focused on immediate problems and campaigns.

A policy process focus prompts us to address questions regarding the conditions under which movements have greater probabilities for effecting positive outcomes. For example, in which contexts do direct or mediated interaction between movement organizations and authorities yield policy impacts? Direct

effects are those that social movement protest achieves on its own in relation explicit demands. Mediated effects refer to policy effects that are the result of social movement protest in combination with allies in the political system, such as political parties or friendly government agencies, as well as favourable public opinion. These questions sharpen our analysis of the myriad institutions, actors, interests, and their power resources that are involved.

I shall illustrate with examples from several well-known Latin American movements. When circumstances warrant, broader political consequences will be noted. The effects of movement organization involvement with politics on the movements themselves will not be considered. The relative autonomy or co-optation of movement organizations due to political engagement is an important topic for analyses of the recursive effects of political participation, but that is outside of the scope of this essay.

Argentine piqueteros

Argentina's *piqueteros* (picketers) offer excellent examples of *direct* and *mediated* effects of movement organizations in the policy process. *Piqueteros* was the popular name for the unemployed workers movement that emerged during the neoliberal period in the 1990s. They protested privatization, labour market policies, and meagre relief for the unemployed and underemployed. Their immediate demands focused on relief in the form of food baskets, cash transfers, and jobs programmes. Their impressive demonstrations and novel forms of direct action (road blocks) had *direct policy agenda effects* by forcing the government to acknowledge the problem and to address it. They also had *direct policy implementation effects*: Picketer organizations, in the Argentine corporatist tradition, implemented new and expanded relief programmes. They also had *mediated effects* in policy formulation. Party political allies and sympathizers of the picketers *facilitated* their participation in formulating the policies and their role in implementation in the legislative and the executive branch (Rossi, 2015).

What power resources did they command? The literature has long recognized the importance of coalition formation for social movement policy effectiveness. Ultimately, the *piquetero*'s rested on their capacity participation in *multi-sectorial coalitions*. Paul Almeida (2014) coined the term in reference to broad social movement coalitions that included diverse social sectors, issues, demands, and grievances. The *piqueteros*, for example, mobilized alongside formal labour unions, anti-free trade movements, anti-debt protesters, and anti-austerity politics. The level of disruption of their massive mobilizations helped each of the coalition members get their issues on the policy agenda and obliged incumbent governments to devise some policy response.

Multi-sectorial coalitions, mobilization in tandem with negotiation, favourable public opinion, and mediated policy interventions appear to be one way for social movements to have an impact on high salience policy issues, mean-

ing policies that are of vital/strategic importance to a government or the state, as was the case with welfare retrenchment during the neoliberal era.

Chilean student movement

Social movement protest may also have significant *indirect policy effects*. These refer to outcomes in which they influence allies or public opinion and these then independently influence outcomes. Policies address issues that movements raised, but may or may not reflect explicit demands.

The Chilean student movement of 2011-2015 offers a good example of indirect policy effects of movement (Bidegain, 2015). In 2011-2012, Chilean university and secondary students began a series of massive protests on a near monthly basis. In the name of equal opportunity for all, they demanded free, high quality education across the system and an end to for profit education in private schools that accepted state tuition vouchers. These demands required a much larger role by the state than the one allowed by the current privatized, expensive, and inequitable system introduced by the military dictatorship (1973-1990). The market orientation of the educational system was a high salience issue for the Chilean government.

Students gained favourable public opinion and by the end of 2011 they had forced the issues of price and quality on the national policy agenda. For the most part, however, student movement organizations and leaders avoided direct negotiation with political parties and government officials over the issue. Neither the conservative government of the time nor the major opposition political parties supported the students' maximum demands. Nevertheless, they adopted more generous student loan and public grant systems and created a new state supervisory agency to oversee quality control of education.

Mediated policy effects also occurred. They included explicitly placing education reform on the platform of presidential candidate Michele Bachelet in 2014. Her subsequent government (2014-2018) followed through initiating and pushing through secondary school reform legislation in 2014. The new law, of course, does not meet student maximum demands, but current reforms, including institutional changes, would not exist without their mobilization. University education is currently under discussion.

Multi-sectorial coalitions played a significant role in Chilean government responses. Labour unions, especially public sector unions, joined the students, along with environmentalists, and indigenous peoples, and LGTB activists. The students had framed their protest against enduring inequalities inherited from the military dictatorship, a grievance the other movements shared. The emergence of a multi-sectorial movement coalition in the context of a political system and culture that emphasized stability and institutionalized negotiation among insider political groups seemed destabilizing to the establishment. Contentious politics was interpreted as a policy failure.

Thus, governments were forced to respond. Sebastián Piñera's conservative government did so in ways that were market-friendly; hence the indirect policy effect of the Chilean student movement. Michelle Bachelet's centre-left government addressed the movement's explicit demands. However, policy initiation and formulation was mediated by the ruling coalition's political parties, which for the first time included the Communist Party, an important ally of the student movement from early on. As of this writing, the student movement continues to be involved in the process. It plays a watchdog role in the policy formulation and implementation stages – protesting when politicians stray too far from core demands.

Indigenous peoples movements in Ecuador and Bolivia

The indigenous peoples movements of Ecuador and Bolivia, the two most powerful in Latin America, offer insight into the *cumulative policy effects* of movement over time. The contemporary manifestation of these movements emerged in the 1980s. They share some important characteristics. They are comprised of heterogeneous organizations that consider themselves representative of the peoples they advocate for. They aggregate into federations and confederations. Most of these organizations, and therefore their leadership, consider themselves as interlocutors between their people and the state, hence they view themselves as having a specific political function. Highland indigenous confederations aggregate interests of indigenous peasants and lowland indigenous confederations encompass more autochthonous cultures. Highland indigenous are geographically concentrated and demographically more numerous; Lowland indigenous are less numerous and geographically more spread out.

In both countries in the 1980s they had important *mediated policy impacts*. They and allied parties and executive branch officials put indigenous cultural issues, especially bi-lingual education, through all of the stages of the policy process (Yashar, 2005). Policy implementation effects included indigenous organizations running the programmes.

The indigenous peoples movements led multi-sectorial coalitions against neoliberal stabilization and structural adjustment policies. In Ecuador, mobilization, in conjunction with congressional politicking, had significant mediated policy effects. Legislation initiated by the presidency was frequently postponed, watered down, or otherwise altered. The agrarian development law of the mid 1990s was a case in point. The constitutional reform of 1998 was a highpoint; the movement gained constitutional status for many of the citizen rights it had been demanding. In Bolivia, emblematic mediated policy impacts involved coca planting and privatization policy. The indigenous peasant organizations had some successes forcing the Bolivian government to alter aspects of the implementation of U.S.-sponsored coca eradication programmes. The main highland and lowland organization, in multi-sectorial coalitions also impacted

the implementation of water and natural gas privatization in the early 2000s (Silva 2009).

These movements, and their multi-sectorial coalitions, had *cumulative effects*, beginning with significant policy agenda impacts. During the cycles of anti-neoliberal mobilization in the 1990s and early 2000s, they forged a broad policy agenda for the resurgent left and the eventual governments of Rafael Correa (2006-present) and Evo Morales (2005-present). Their governments began to implement that agenda, starting with a constitutional assembly to recast the foundations of the polity in support of a programme of greater state involvement in the economy, expanding social services, and establishing citizen rights for indigenous peoples, along with varying degrees of autonomy for their peoples. Indigenous peoples organizations played important mediated and direct roles in the formulation of key clauses of the new constitutions (Garcés, 2010).

These were significant achievements that have been obscured by developments since then. To varying degrees, the relation between the Correa and Morales governments and the indigenous movement have become contentious. This is more pronounced in Ecuador where the government has pointedly shut out the major indigenous confederation – CONAIE – from policymaking, and direct participation in the policy process is precisely one of CONAIE’s core demands. In Bolivia the conflict is mainly with lowland indigenous organizations. Much of the tension is over implementation of constitutional rights to limited territorial autonomy, self-government, and rights to prior consultation over proposed mega-development projects on their land.

Conflicts over the ‘new extractivism’ dominate much of the research on indigenous social movements in these two countries and elsewhere. They are real. The heaviest impact is on the local communities where the projects are sited. Ecuador’s Correa has arguably taken the hardest line and CONAIE has next to no policy impact. The situation is somewhat different in Bolivia where Evo Morales’ government, while occasionally running roughshod over indigenous rights, in the end may negotiate; thus, protest and mobilization can have policy implementation effects. The TIPNIS highway building case is the most emblematic. Part of the difference lays in the policy salience of the issue areas. In Ecuador it is about oil and mineral development, which are key strategic economic sectors and sources of state income. In Bolivia it was about transportation infrastructure.

Despite these conflicts, the governments of both of these countries have implemented *other* demands raised by indigenous peoples movement organizations and their allies during the neoliberal era, with or without indigenous peoples organization input. Social policy, health care policy, and citizen rights in general have a beneficial effect on indigenous populations who tended to be among the poorest and most isolated. In the furore over the betrayal of (some) indigenous rights it is often forgotten that these were also core demands of the

indigenous peoples' movement in Bolivia and Ecuador. Therefore, at minimum, these movements have had significant indirect policy effects.

A policy focus, then, also draws attention to the distributional consequences of government responses to indigenous peoples demands (in this case left governments that mobilization helped bring into office), and that these vary in Bolivia and Ecuador. In Ecuador, the major national indigenous movement organization – CONAIE – was excluded from political participation that it demands. Correa's government ignores CONAIE support of local community protests against extractive mega-projects and in the process runs roughshod over their prior consultation and autonomy rights. However, Correa's government works with a minor peasant-indigenous organization on land and rural labor issues. It works with municipal indigenous governments in the provision of public goods and services that CONAIE had championed. It has integrated indigenous people as citizens of Ecuador into a system of substantive rights focused on expansive social policy.

In Bolivia, indigenous peoples gained more direct political influence because their organizations helped form the left political party now in office. They also established a more or less formal Unity Pact to hold elected officials accountable to the governing platform on indigenous issues. The distributive rift seems to be between the highland peasant organizations that are 'in' and the lowland organizations that bear the brunt of expanding extractive (mainly extensive soy crops) and mega-development infrastructure projects. They are the ones for whom autonomy rights are most threatened. Like in Ecuador, indigenous people have been integrated as citizens into a system of substantive rights focused on expansive social policy.

These distributive conflicts, and tensions over autonomy and prior consultation rights, set up new struggles for indigenous peoples movements in Ecuador and Bolivia over the implementation and enforcement of constitutionally granted rights. These struggles intertwine with the priorities of government for building political support and the salience of different issues for the government's national development programme. Because some are high salience issues, and multi-sectorial coalitions or critical political party support are not likely, it may be difficult for the indigenous movements to have an impact on those policies. However, this may be less true for Bolivia than for Ecuador.

Social movements and democracy

Democratic regimes are generally considered to be favourable political opportunity structures for social movements because of their relative openness, tolerance of opposition, and freedom of association and information within certain limits, of course (della Porta, 2013). Less frequently considered is whether social movements contribute to building democratic institutions. This is an empirical question.

In part, the answer depends on a movement organization's goals and whether it perceives it can advance them in democracy. For example one of CONAIE's enduring goals is to be a major player in the policy process. In 2001, after more than ten years of anti-neoliberal mobilization, it gave up on democracy as a means to effect change. In the context of an intense cycle of anti-neoliberal protest a faction of the CONAIE organized a coup d'état with dissenting junior military officers. They stormed the presidential palace, ousted the president, and installed an extremely short-lived progressive civic-military government along the lines of 1960s and 1970s regimes in Ecuador and Peru. In this case substantive socio-economic and ethnic goals trumped democratic loyalties. Chastened, CONAIE soon returned to the democratic fold, although debilitated by the putsch misadventure.

In general, however, CONAIE, the major Bolivian indigenous peoples confederations, the *piqueteros* and other social movements, such as the new workers' in Brazil, while harsh critics of liberal representative democracy, are not anti-democratic. They propose more radical, participatory forms of democracy that promote more participation by ordinary citizens in political decision-making. In practice, this seems to work best at municipal levels of government, as exemplified in Brazil with participatory budgeting.

However, Ecuador and Bolivia show that elements of participatory democracy may also function at the national level. Because they privilege majoritarian decision rules over the protection of minority interests direct democracy mechanisms like referenda are frequently employed to settle conflicted policy issues. As we saw above, social movements played a role in putting the issue on the policy agenda and in formulating mechanisms of participatory democracy during constitutional assemblies. Of course their effect was highly mediated by the delegates of allied political parties who had the actual power to craft and approve constitutional articles.

Participatory and majority rule democracy in Bolivia and Ecuador and elsewhere is at the service of advancing greater socioeconomic equality and inclusiveness of a broader range of societal interests than had been possible in representative democracy with its focus on the protection of minority (usually propertied) interests. Of course the implementation of this more radical vision of democracy was out of the movement's control. Specific forms of radical populist democracies, as they have been called, were the indirect and often unintended consequences of social movement mobilization. That said, in some cases, like Bolivia, important national movements agreed with centralization of power and majoritarian rule because these were tools to weaken opposition by vested interests that had always impeded greater substantive democracy, meaning promotion of socioeconomic rights in addition to political rights.

In other cases, like Colombia and Brazil, elements of participatory democracy co-habit more easily with the institutions of liberal representative democracy. Be that as it may, the variety of democracy that emerges from demands for a more participatory democracy will be the result of specific political con-

texts and the correlation of forces of a country; thus highly mediated, indirect, or unintended policy consequences of protest. They are not, however, expressions of the inherent advantages or deficiencies of more or less participatory forms of democracy. For some, of course, any departure from the classical ideal of liberal representative democracy is by definition no longer a democratic.

Before closing I would like to briefly consider one more aspect of democratic regimes that social movements may affect: interest intermediation regimes (Silva n.d.). Social movements are, among other things, expressions of political participation. Because they seek inclusion, they sometimes seek to influence institutions of interest intermediation. For example, many of the indigenous movement organizations of Bolivia and Ecuador favoured a corporatist system. So did the Argentine *piqueteros*, as well as many movement organizations in Brazil. In Bolivia, Argentina, and Brazil they gained mediated and indirect policy impacts in securing corporatist-like access to state policymaking institutions. In Ecuador they failed. There the state incorporates popular sector interests (but not organizations) by interpreting their needs, designing, and delivering targeted policies to all citizens who meet requisite criteria. This is a system of interest intermediation that I have called state managerialism; it was an *unintended consequence* of social movement activism. A very informal system has also appeared in Bolivia, which I have termed a contestatory system of interest intermediation. Movement organizations protest government policy, government eventually negotiates and abides by the negotiation. The process repeats in ritualized form across many issue areas.

There is much more one could say, but I will end with this. In the context of democratic regimes a focus on the policy impacts of social movements highlights the fact that policy outcomes are also the beginning of a new phase of struggle. Aspirational goals will not have been met and policy reform is likely to be partial and usually incremental instead of sweeping. A new phase in the dynamic of movement protest and government response ensues, but built on a different, hopefully but not necessarily more favourable, benchmark. For example, a great contemporary challenge for building more inclusive democratic institutions is the task of establishing effective institutions to implement constitutionally granted rights. This is an enduring problem in Latin American politics that has again come to the fore with the resurgence of the left. Movements have important watchdog and accountability roles to play. Their protest and other forms of political engagement serve to hold the authorities' feet to the fire. But results will depend on whether conditions exist for building multi-sectorial coalitions, winning political allies, favourable public opinion, and the salience of the issue area under contestation. Outcomes will most likely be mediated, indirect, and full of unexpected consequences rather than due to direct action by movements on their own.

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Note

1. Confederación Nacional de Indígenas Ecuatorianos, Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos Bolivianos, Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas del Oriente Boliviano.

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