ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Social Movements, Public Policy, and Informal Institutions: The Role of Patronage in Chile (2006–2022)

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes how mobilization and public policy meet and shape one another in Chile over almost two decades, characterized by an intensive cycle of collective action (2006–2022). By examining the interrelationship between mobilization and public policy, we argue that patronage is the glue that binds the two issues. Using descriptive data from the Conflict Observatory of the Center for Social Cohesion and Conflict Studies, as well as secondary information produced by state agencies in Chile and primary information comprising fieldwork conducted in six regions between 2003 and 2021, we show that until 2019, patronage channeled and attenuated social conflict in specific areas, enabling the rapid delivery of social benefits and jobs that public policies should transparently manage but do not.

1 | Introduction

Since the 1960s, scholars have presented Chile as a laboratory due to its political and economic radical developments, its social movements, and the institutional responses to social and political crises. Schematically, the key historical turning points were first a deep agrarian reform that began under a Christian-Democrat president (Eduardo Frei Montalva, 1964–1970), ending *latifundio*, which revolutionized the traditional agrarian social structure. The subsequent national path to socialism under President Salvador Allende (1970–1973) was interrupted by a violent ultraconservative response, with a *coup d'état* in 1973. This established Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–1990), leading to the early implementation of a neoliberal regime. Later, during the transition to democracy from 1990 to the 2000s, a regime with authoritarian enclaves enabled the military and right-wing parties to keep the political system under control until the constitutional reforms in 2005. Institutional conditions under the transition to democracy helped to fuel 30 years of fast economic growth (1984–2014), drastically reduced poverty, and limited the impact of social movements. An economic slowdown in the mid-2000s rekindled a wave of social movements, leading to a social outburst and widespread protests in 2019 and two failed attempts to draft a new constitution. Currently, Gabriel Boric (2022–2026)—the youngest president in Chile's history and a former student leader—intends to achieve a progressive program including the social demands that have been brewing for over two decades on the one hand and the management of the state amid an economic uncertainty on the other. Attempts to implement these transformations also must counterbalance the pervasive effect of powerful informal networks in implementing public policies, especially patronage—a characteristic found in many countries in the region, regardless of the political orientation of their governments (Pérez 2020).

This contribution to the *Politics & Policy* special issue entitled "Exploring the policy-mobilization nexus" focuses on how mobilizations and public policy shape one another based on informal

political institutions. The literature has primarily examined cases from advanced countries of the North, neglecting empirical and theoretical contributions from the South (Streeck and Thelen 2005). Our contribution is twofold: it analyzes the evolution over nearly three decades of the mediation between social movements and public policies, and it develops a framework for triangulating mobilizations, public policies, and informal institutions. In Chile, patronage operates as a shock absorber of mobilizations in some sectors because it allows the rapid delivery of social benefits and jobs that public policies should transparently manage but do not.

We first present the theoretical framework, followed by the timeframe and method. Section 4 provides an overview of political dynamics, social movements, and public policies in Chile, focusing on the relationship between public policy effectiveness and social movements. In Section 5, we examine sectors where patronage has no impact, particularly education and pensions. Conversely, in Section 6, we analyze the areas where public employment mitigates social conflicts. In Sections 7 and 8, we review the period of the institutional crisis from 2019 on, and the limits of patronage to, moderate conflicts in times of economic hardship.

2 | Theoretical Framework: Triangulating Social Movements, Public Policies, and Patronage

In this section, we present the central concepts and then establish the relationships that are woven between them and the role that patronage plays in social mobilizations and public policies. We review the main elements of the theoretical debate and the contributions from Latin America. We close this section with the outline of the analysis that sustains this article.

2.1 | The Interaction Between Mobilization and Public Policy

Diani (1992, 1) defines social movements as "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities." The reference here to informal interactions is consequential to our analytical frame, where unwritten rules and informal sanctions govern political practices. Regarding public policy, we use the concept proposed by Peters (2018, 11): "public policy is the sum of government activities, whether pursued directly or through agents, as those activities have an influence on the lives of citizens." Again, the fact that agents other than public officials intervene in the policy process is meaningful for our analysis.

The study of the relationship between social movements and public policy goes back to the 1960s (Deutsch 1961). Social conflict and protests prompted and accompanied the construction of the welfare state. Well-known literature on the impact of the new social movements from the 1970s delved into the consequences of these forms of collective action for public policies (Korpi 1983; Esping-Andersen 1990). Under the mutual influence between social movements and public policies, mobilizations demand public intervention to solve pressing issues; these are then likely to trigger new social policies. Whether public policy solves the issue or falls short will affect the future of popular mobilizations. In summary, social mobilizations, whether radical or more reformist, have strong effects on the content of public policies and their implementation.

Several channels demonstrate this relationship. At the formal institutional level, there are elections to choose new authorities who enact and implement public policies, supported by political parties and civil society organizations. On a less visible but increasingly regulated level, there is also lobbying by different public and private actors, although social movements can also lobby for the implementation or abrogation of public policies (Araral et al. 2013). Elected authorities have also responded to the demands of their constituencies by diverting public resources to solve some issues and enhance their supporters' loyalty. Public employment is a case in point, where activists or former activists are appointed to positions in the public bureaucracy. This is likely a result of the greater professionalization of protest in recent decades and greater interaction between collective action and political office (Mella, Ríos, and Rivera 2016).

Scholars have recently emphasized alternative forms of interaction between social movements and public policies, including a renewed interest in human agency (Ishkanian 2022). As research progressed toward the study of post-material claims and their ability to influence public policies, the focus centered on how actors take advantage of political opportunities and frame ideas at the cultural level. However, finding evidence regarding periods in which social movements are less active is more challenging. Scholars often understand this situation either as the successful integration of social demands or, on the contrary, as abeyance; that is, phases in which collective action becomes isolated and without activists (Taylor 1989).

2.2 | The Role of Patronage in the Interplay Between Social Movements and Public Policy

Formal political institutions that are "products of conscious design and redesign" (Pierson 2000, 475) enter a complex institutional interplay during policy making. Indeed, as Dufour and Ancelovici (2018) point out in their analysis of citizenship regimes regarding housing policies in France and Canada, the consideration of norms and rules, as well as formal and informal practices, allows for a better empirical approach. Informal institutions are "shared social rules, generally unwritten, that are created, communicated and applied outside officially sanctioned channels" (Helmke and Levitsky 2006, 727). In social and political life (Stokes 2003), the study of informal institutions gained momentum because theories of formal institutions or theories inspired by rational choice seemed unable to explain major aspects of public policies or social movements (Weyland 2002). Recent studies on informal institutions and policies in Latin America have mainly addressed economic policies (Ardanaz, Scartascini, and Tommasi 2010), as well as urban social movements at the local level (Bradlow (2024) in Sao Paolo and Trasberg (2021) for Mexico). Spaces where public policy does not reach have also been analyzed, for example, in the case of the vigilantism movement in Latin America (Nivette 2016).

Patronage is an informal institution, specifically a mechanism of non-professional recruitment in bureaucracies, in which political parties and agents appoint their supporters to influential government positions. It involves a hierarchical relationship between political authority and a person from the middle or lower classes (Kopecký and Mair 2012). In English,[1] patronage also includes clientelism as a form of "personal dependence not linked to kinship, which is based on a reciprocal exchange of favors between two persons, the patron and the client, who control unequal resources" (Médard 1976, 103).

The relationship between social movements, public policies, and patronage is multifaceted. Basically, political authorities have two methods for addressing the demands of social movements: either by receiving petitions and accepting changes to their agenda or by co-opting them through patronage networks. These channels are not mutually exclusive in practice. Protests against the status quo often denounce or oppose public policies based on patronage, since they prevent universal or more egalitarian access to public policies. For example, mobilizations in the labor area reveal how patronage articulates with other mechanisms of subordination (Scala 2020) and the cultural, material, and symbolic conditions in which social and political actors mobilize (Allal, Catusse, and Emperador 2018).

Informal social ties connect collective action and public policies, as personal networks and connections influence social and political participation (Oberschall 1993). They also direct the application of public policies to certain sectors as a means of co-optation. Indeed, successful public policies often operate through both formal and informal networks. While formality is normatively desirable, even in less traditional political systems, informal networks are part of the design and implementation of public policies. Lately, interest in informal institutions has also turned to more developed countries, demonstrating their importance in key social, political, and economic processes or in the configurations through which informal institutions relate to social and institutional change (Parigi and Bearman 2008). Researchers have documented this in the most complex and regulated political systems in the European Union (Farrell and Héritier 2003; Kleine 2013) and the United States (Azari and Smith 2012).

2.3 | Informal Institutions and Patronage in Latin American Governance

Scholars have highlighted the key role of informal institutions in Latin America, particularly that of intermediating between citizens and the state or between social demands and public policies. Regarding specific areas that have received attention in Latin America, we can point to studies on how informal institutions operate in response to formal institutions, such as law enforcement in sensitive areas such as policing, social security, and protecting people's rights in Brazil and Argentina (Brinks 2003). In Mexico, for example, there is long-standing empirical research on informal practices that complement formal mechanisms, particularly in the delivery of social benefits through the patrimonialization of social policies or militant careers in social movements (e.g., Eisenstadt 2003; Gil-Mendieta and Schmidt 2003). The institutional weakness in the region hinders both the transmission of social demands to the state and the design, implementation, and assessment of public policies (Brinks, Levitsky, and Murillo 2019). The low quality of democracy in Latin America or "middle quality institutional trap" is due, among other things, to the fact that politicians lack incentives to promote reforms requested by citizens or social movements. Neither are there heavy penalties for favoritism or even nepotism, even though this reduces the provision of public goods and services to the population (Mazzuca and Munck 2021). Some stress that informal institutions are the correlate of deficient functioning of formal institutions in democracies that are still weak or with an insufficient level of development and modernization (Rocha 2006).

Because Latin America has created its political arrangements since the 19th century through powerful informal institutions and patronage systems (Roniger and Gunes-Ayata 1994), to this day, patronage specifically is still highly used and continues to receive much attention in the region (Auyero 2000; Calvo 2012), even in countries with high levels of formality, such as Uruguay (Álvarez Rivadulla 2012; Antía and Vairo 2019). The analysis of the impact of informal institutions on governance (Freidenberg 2008) has allowed theoretical re-elaborations, including the concept of clientelist habitus, to explain a wide range of social relations on the continent and particularly in Argentina (Vommaro and Quirós 2011). In recent years, scholars have also introduced the concepts of patronage systems (Grindle 2012) and informal welfare (Holland 2017).

In this panorama, while there is valuable literature in Latin America, patronage is rarely connected with social movements. The demobilization of social movements is locally associated with the fact that protests by the poor are related to survival demands, which in turn highly depend on patronage relations. This is the case of the peasant movement in Argentina, among others, where patronage arrangements based on expectations of reciprocity come into play (Lapegna 2013). However, the role of patronage in the interplay between social movements and public policies may be the subject of a more systematic analysis.

2.4 | Presenting the Model

To understand how informal institutions intermingle with institutional change (Lee 2019), we describe the relationship between mobilizations and public policies, paying special attention to patronage as a practice that bridges the relationship between the two, considering the informal aspects of institutions (Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Table 1 provides a schematic process of the relationship.

Table 1 summarizes the relationships between social movements and public policies, and specifically how they both influence each other in terms of agenda and respond to each other's demands. It also shows the interplay between social movement and public policy through the mediation of patronage. This mediation can ease the delivery of social services or jobs. Of course, patronage is not the only intervening phenomenon between social movements

and public policies, but its magnitude in Chile positions it as a central element of intermediation.

While in theory, patronage has negative consequences for the functioning of democracy (because it detrimentally affects participation and demobilizes), in countries with low-quality public institutions, it institutionalizes social demands and guides implementation to specific audiences, even if it breaks the principle of equal access to services.

3 | Timeframe, Methods, and Analytical Model

3.1 | Timeframe

We focus on the period 2006–2022,[2] which corresponds to a complete cycle of collective action in Chile following two decades of no major conflicts after the 1990 post-transition period. In 2006, a massive high school student protest movement heralded a new cycle of mobilizations, which grew until the outburst of 2019. During this period, we can observe the shift from public policies focused on the poorest, mainly regarding pro-employment measures, to more universal social policies, which require greater investment by the state and the market in areas where the latter provides public goods (Espinoza and Barozet 2018). During this period, we can observe areas where patronage mediates between social movements and others where it does not. This is also the period for which data is available, through primary material collected in the research projects described below and from the Conflict Observatory.[3]

3.2 | Data and Methods

For the study of social movements, we use data from the Observatory of Conflicts of the *Centro de Estudios de Cohesión y Conflicto Social* (COES), which describes social protests and strikes from 2006 to 2022.[4] We also use secondary quantitative information produced by state agencies in Chile, especially the Budget Directorate of the Ministry of Finance (DIPRES) and the National System of Municipal Information (SINIM) on public employment. As COES data source only allows us to focus on the post-2006 period, we limit ourselves to that phase, although we refer to earlier periods relevant to the argument.

We also use information from four[5] projects on informal institutions in Chile. The corpus of these projects, involving over 20 years of field research, includes 200 interviews with experts, national, regional, and local authorities across the political spectrum,[6] and focus groups.[7] Since it is impossible to consider all the empirical evidence in one article, we will use the information in a meta and synthetic way, referencing already published results.[8] We also refer to other articles and books, which allow us to discuss research results from other sources on the intermediation role of informal institutions.

4 | A Brief Review of the Political Dynamics and Public Policies in Chile

4.1 | The Chilean Historical Intermediation of Informal Relationships

Chile developed a patronage-based state, as elsewhere in Latin America (López 2017; Barría 2018). From a historical perspective, there are two central references for understanding the informal dynamics in resolving social demands and mediating between social movements and social policies. They have significantly contributed to understanding the delivery of public benefits and implementing social policies. First, Lomnitz and Melnick (1998) described the intermediation role of the political parties in the 20th century. Regarding the delivery of social benefits, they emphasize the dimension of party-political culture with factions and networks of trust formed. Second, Valenzuela (1977) analyzed the relationship between the parliamentary levels and the regional and municipal levels, describing the network that allowed local officials to obtain and distribute the state's scarce resources to meet individual needs and social movement demands in the 1960s.

In the days of the presidential system, political parties and Congress shaped the underlying structure of formal and informal exchanges. Through individual transactions, local authorities provided personal benefits (such as certifications linked to

TABLE 1 | Schematic process of the relationship between social movements and public policies with and without patronage over time.

	Channeling of unsolved issues →	Political articulation →	Outcome →	Protest and mobilization
Process without patronage	Issue placed on the political agenda with social conflict and mobilizations	New public policies addressing issues with formal institutionalization	Policy falls short	Likely mounting
Process with patronage	Particular demands of politicians with no mobilization	Patronage or clientelist use of resources, prioritizing specific audiences without formal institutionalization	Constituents appeased	Less likely

Source: Authors' elaboration.

inheritance and land property or *ex-gratia* pensions) and allocated projects and programs from national government agencies to their local constituencies. A brokerage system throughout the 20th century bridged local and national politics, where elites had local brokers throughout the country (Valenzuela 1977). This historical model also resolved social demands by efficiently distributing scarce social goods using perks and particularistic relations, thus limiting the possibility of open conflict. In exchange for receiving these goods, services, and programs, political and social players supported regional and national authorities.

4.2 | The Rupture of the Dictatorship in the Public Policy Model (1976–1990)

Unlike many countries, Chile began implementing neoliberalism (Lee Mudge 2008) under the Pinochet dictatorship in 1976. Party activity was banned, and those who dared to disobey were incarcerated. In 1978, the "seven modernizations"—a package of measures to reform the economy—established market dominance in the allocation of public resources, profoundly altering the connection between citizens and the state, which had prevailed in Chile for most of the 20th century (Vergara and Moulian 1985). Much of the modernization comprised the privatization of public services—pensions, education, infrastructure, and healthcare—under the assumption that private-sector management would be more efficient.

There were few studies conducted during the dictatorship about public bureaucracies and informal intermediation. However, the mayors appointed by the regime coexisted with military authorities and military procedures (Valenzuela 1977). Public-sector intervention was intended only to compensate for market inefficiencies of the new model, with local governments providing public subsidies to the poorest (Vergara 1990; Cohen and Franco 1992). Strong public participation remained in health and education, but for-profit firms could establish and run health insurance plans, schools, and even higher education institutions (Raczynski and Serrano 2005).

Scholars have established that political and partisan negotiation disappeared as a mechanism for the distribution of public resources (Rehren 2000). Patronage networks did not go through the power of the vote since that was not in effect, but rather through direct loyalties and the delivery of social benefits via municipalities, within the framework of the municipalization of social policies. Thus, right-wing parties monopolized power and privatized or concentrated patronage networks, displacing other persecuted political parties (Valdivia, Álvarez, and Donoso 2012). While it was a different model, this reinforced the previous patronage management, where public jobs and subsidies had historically been the object of capture by the authorities since before the dictatorship.

4.3 | The Return to Democracy and Accommodation (1990–2006)

In the transition period, covering the governments of Patricio Aylwin (1990–1994) and Eduardo Frei (1994–2000), both Social Democrats, democratic institutions had to struggle with authoritarian enclaves: the ex-dictator Augusto Pinochet was still in command of the military and a biased electoral system favored the right-wing coalition. The study of the revival of "extra-institutional circuits of power" (Cortés Terzi 2000) was not dominant in research, which instead focused on "transitology" and authoritarian enclaves. Many of these informal decision-making spaces were not subject to the scrutiny of academia or journalism, at least in the 1990s. Retrospectively, scholars observed that political parties banned during the dictatorship used the same practices as before the coup (Silva 2018).

The transition disarticulated social movements, losing democratic legitimacy, while governments designed public policies in a top-down manner (Oxhorn 2006). Local organizations were asked to follow the guidelines of functional participation for the implementation of public policies. The existence of powerful co-optation processes (Valenzuela and Yévenes 2015) helped in decision making and the implementation of public policies while weakening social movements. Few actors were involved in decision making and public policies during the transition's first two decades (Vial et al. 2006). Informal institutions functioned to fill the gaps of a formal institutional design far from optimal for processing social demands and implementing social policies under democratic rule (Siavelis 2006). In this framework, the literature regarding Chilean politics has identified informal mechanisms that serve to form consensus and get laws passed. Specifically, they allowed the "oiling" of institutional operations and brought social benefits: closed-door negotiations and the distribution of public positions based on electoral results, even if they are technical positions, known as "cuoteo" (Barozet, Espinoza, and Ulloa 2020).

Public appointments continued to be a space for the delivery of benefits rewarding political loyalty. At the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of the transition, administrative authorities established norms for regulating public employment. However, these were selectively implemented, or never implemented at all, by the governments in power, allowing for the manipulation of a large number of public jobs in their favor (Rajevic 2019).

5 | Education and Pensions: Sectors Where Patronage Does Not Apply

5.1 | Synchronic Relationship Between Social Policies and Protests in Chile

Informal institutions and a prolonged period of economic growth contributed to reducing social conflict until protests erupted in the mid-2000s. We use the information generated by the COES Conflict Observatory to show the temporal relationship between the evolution of contentious actions in Chile and the announcement of main public reforms between 2006 and 2021 (see Figure 1).

First, we highlight two dates: 2010 and 2019, which respectively mark the lowest and highest number of protest events. The 8.8-magnitude earthquake that hit southern and central Chile on February 28, 2010, produced a major disruption in life, reorienting public efforts to the reconstruction of the damaged areas,

while in 2019, the social outburst that erupted on the scene on October 18 generated an unprecedented political crisis. Apart from these two exceptional years, high school, and student mobilizations in 2006 and 2011 stand out in public memory; the number of protests in 2008 (pensions reform) and 2014 (labor reform) are also noteworthy. After a low point in 2017, protests rose again, evidencing an increase in social conflict. Many contentious actions in 2019 were related to the social outburst that lasted until March 2020. Conflictive action dropped with the onset of COVID-19 and the ensuing health crisis and lockdowns, but this remained at pre-October 2019 levels.

Despite the undeniable success of the Chilean economic model at the macro level, which led to a rapid reduction of poverty, other social issues remained unsolved. Income inequality did not diminish, salaries stagnated, and prospects in the labor market were less than auspicious despite increased access to education, especially university education. In fact, social policies during the transition years did not continue to improve the conditions of many emerging from poverty. Real income stopped growing from 2000 on (Espinoza and Barozet 2018). In parallel, the quality of primary and secondary education stagnated (OECD 2019), particularly in the public and subsidized sectors. Services not provided by the state, whose coverage was limited, forced families to go into consumer debt, even for basic services such as health and education (ECLAC 2017).

5.2 | The Case of Primary and Secondary Education

Patronage is not perceived as operating on a massive scale in the education sector. However, securing places for children in certain establishments requires the parents to activate social networks, especially in the subsidized sector. Using informal relationships to secure a position in school is a common practice in middle-class families (Barozet 2006). Upper-middle class and elite schools operate based on families' ability to pay the fees and on the activation of networks of recruitment among relatives and acquaintances, which is also a form of co-optation, albeit excluding the rest of society. However, there is no evidence that the delivery of jobs in educational establishments depends on political networks.

Regarding social movements, in 2006, high school students—who were brought up in a system designed in the 1970s and 1980s and concluded their studies with substandard academic preparation and under poor infrastructure conditions—began a new cycle of collective action, with 1939 protest events that year (see Figure 1). Michelle Bachelet's first government (2006–2010) succeeded in co-opting elements of the movement. In response, the government made greater investments in public education but did not change course. However, in 2015, high school students' and parents' movements once again pressured the government into action, implementing the school inclusion law, which eliminated shared financing and prohibited profit-making in establishments that receive state financing. The school inclusion law did not include private schools, where 7% of the population is educated. Despite the high level of investment, the quality of public education continued to degrade over the years, while the subsidized sector did not perform well academically. A significant gap in the quality of public education has persisted to this day. In summary, the lack of intermediation networks meant that benefits were not delivered to public primary and secondary education, and the quality of that education suffered, which is one reason why protests continued throughout the period studied.

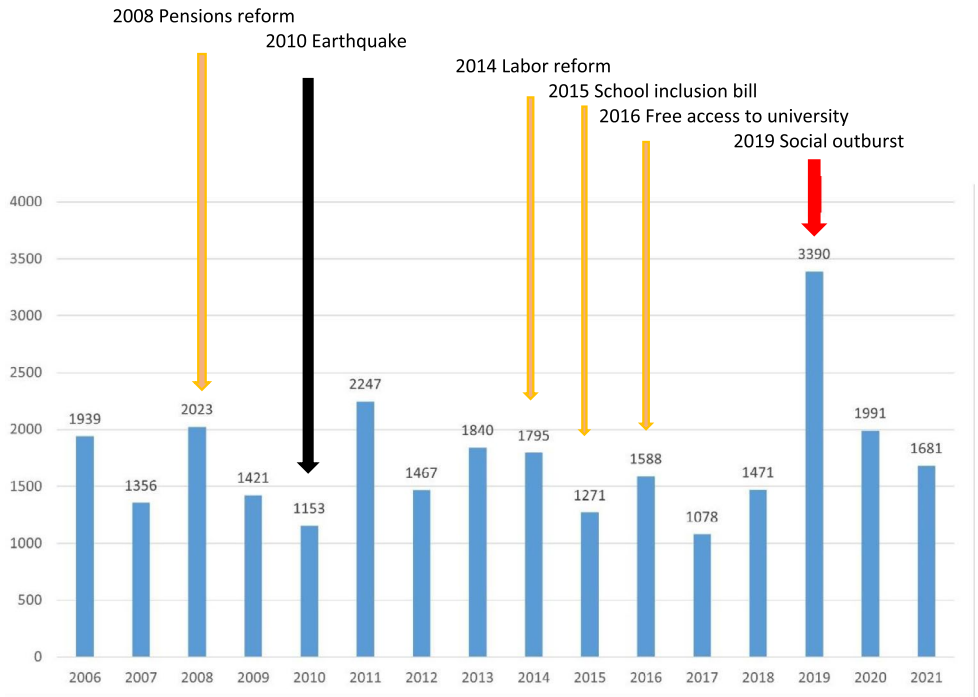

FIGURE 1 | Main public policy implementation and frequency of contentious actions 2006–2021 (years on the *x*-axis and frequency of protest events on the *y*-axis). *Source:* COES Conflict Observatory, 2006–2021.

5.3 | The Case of Higher Education

In 2011, the biggest wave of protest arose for university education during the first term of Sebastián Piñera (2010–2014). The fact that Piñera was a right-wing multimillionaire who was largely out of touch with the university environment, created political opportunities[9] for the left-leaning student movement. The university student demonstrations represented a peak in mobilization 5 years after the high school students' protests (see Figure 1). The creation of private universities in the 1980s, with an avant-garde new public management (Lorenz 2012), became an extensive business in the 1990s. All governments heavily promoted higher education with the promise of social mobility. Between 1983 and 2018, enrollment in higher education grew from 100,000 to over 700,000, according to the Ministry of Education databases, but it came at a cost. State-backed college credit hinted at meritocratic promises for a better future for low-income families, who bought into the program for which they became heavily indebted. However, getting lower-income students into college overall failed to guarantee better positions for them in the labor market. Although new generations are more educated, there is no evidence of greater income mobility (Espinoza and Núñez 2014).

This opened the way for student organizations to make increasing demands, through the occupation of campuses and street protests every year during the 2000s. Unlike the high-school movement, university student leaders did not allow themselves to be co-opted, continuing to pressure the government. In 2016, they obtained free tuition for the most vulnerable families, with broad support from the population (Mella, Ríos, and Rivera 2016). However, in general, the quality of higher education has not improved. The demand for better public higher education was translated into individual scholarships for students to choose where to study, which has strengthened the private offer. Meanwhile, the university system faces the classic problems of the massive arrival of people who are ill-prepared for higher education, having had problems since high school.

To date, there is no evidence in the material gathered over 20 years of fieldwork or through the work of experts, that admission to a particular university may depend on political networks at a general level. The same is true for academics to gain employment. In this latter point, networks of sociability and trust operate, but not patronage as such. The absence of co-optation mechanisms for university entrance, which is governed by competitive examinations and payment of fees, precludes the social buffer effect that partially exists in secondary education access through social networks.

Although the university student movement failed to add other social actors in its struggle against inequalities (Olivares and Carrasco-Hidalgo 2020), one of its outstanding achievements was in changing the perceptions of a significant portion of the population regarding the legitimacy of the prevailing system (Cordero 2022). It forced a change in public policy focus on the fight against inequalities and the precariousness of life in Chile (Bidegain and Maillet 2021), specifically during Michelle Bachelet's second term (2014–2018), which was more receptive to student demands but did not abide by patronage networks.

5.4 | The Case of Pensions

Having access to a proper pension is another pressing area for the population. Currently, they are low, and until the implementation of recent reforms, they were not available to the entire population. Before the dictatorship, access to pensions, especially for widowers, formed part of the services provided by brokers (Valenzuela 1977). However, the privatization and standardization of the pension system, now in the hands of large financial consortiums, does not allow for co-optation in receiving or increasing them. Neither is there any evidence of co-optation channels through personal, political, or patronage networks. In 2008, the first Bachelet government (2006–2010) implemented a solidarity-guaranteed minimum pension. This was largely done of her administration's own accord, without major pressure from the public in the form of demonstrations.

However, the degradation of retirement conditions—at a time when a significant part of the population was reaching retirement age under a system adopted in the 1980s—led to the emergence in 2016 of a new social movement, "No+AFP,"[10] which would become a central issue in the 2019 social explosion (Olivares and Carrasco-Hidalgo 2020). Low pensions led to a feeling of system precariousness, and when combined with individuals' and politicians' frustration in not being able to change the system, this made the protests over AFPs particularly acute. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this situation when on three occasions the government passed a law allowing people to withdraw their retirement savings to ease financial burdens and respond to the absence of a social safety net in the first months of the health crisis. This left nearly half of the population without pension savings (Barozet et al. 2021).

The high school, university student, and pension protests point to areas where patronage does not intervene in the relationship between social movements and public policies in Chile. This explains not only the rise of these social movements but also their intensity and duration in the cycle of collective action which began in 2006. The universal policies designed to resolve problems cannot be applied in these areas due to faults in policy design or lack of resources.

6 | Public Employment as an Answer to Social Conflicts

6.1 | The Black Box of Public Employment

With the 2014 labor reform, the second government of Michelle Bachelet (2014–2018) sought to address certain vestiges of the dictatorship and resulting union weakness with the introduction of alternative forms of collective bargaining and the prohibition of the replacement of striking workers. However, this did not serve to diminish protests, especially illegal strikes. Unionized workers called for new reforms to move away from a purely regulatory debate and to broaden the narrow spaces for negotiation and improve labor standards (Gutiérrez 2018). During the period under analysis, the labor sphere is also a focus of conflict in the areas where unions are strong, but unlike education and pensions, it is a space in which the networks of contacts and systems of favors typical

of patronage operate, especially in services run by local governments, where controls are weaker (Barozet and Espinoza 2019).

Local authorities require support and loyalty to be elected, reelected, or to implement their policies, while they control a significant part of public employment. Both the literature and our observations show that, at the local level, people often flaunt their connections to political authorities via parties or interknowledge networks to be considered for positions. These authorities are mayors, councilors, officials in positions of trust, regional councilors, or regional authorities appointed by the central government. Although patronage is not always explicit, because it rests on informal rules, both parties know who owes what. Fieldwork shows that this is noticeable in municipal services such as social programs, maintenance of public spaces, housing, and health (Moya and Paillama 2022). Through a series of agreements between people and authorities at the micro level, it becomes an informal meso social regulation mechanism, supported by forms of policy making at the national (macro) level (Moriconi 2011; Siavelis et al. 2022).

In Chile, Budget Directorate (DIPRES) reports make it easy to find figures on the number of national government jobs. According to DIPRES's latest report on public jobs, the central government employed 428,964 individuals as of December 31, 2020. Compared to the same date of the previous year, the staff increased by 13.3% or 50,304 positions (DIPRES 2022, 11). Historical data and the evolution of expenditures are not available at the local or regional level. Because of the opacity of how things work below the national level, we had to consult different sources to build out the dataset. We were unable to define the figure for regional governments due to this lack of reliable data, so we did not include it in Figure 2.

In 2008–2022, public staffing increased at both the central and municipal government levels, even within the framework of a public doctrine that seeks to maintain the state at its minimum level, as established during the dictatorship.[11] This increase outpaced demographic growth.

6.2 | Functions of Patronage and Disputes Between Stakeholders

The decision to pass the management of social policies to the municipalities under the dictatorship has had important consequences to date, especially regarding jobs and the provision of social services (Moriconi 2011). There are different contracts in the public sector: permanent (without termination date and with social security), fixed term (annual, renewable, and with social security), and independent (short-term contract, with minimum, or no social security). In recent decades, the number of permanent jobs in the public sector has declined compared to the most precarious jobs (annual, renewable, and short-term contract), even at the central level, where permanent jobs dropped from 70% of the total in 1995 to 30% in 2017 (Rajevic 2019). The central and permanent government staff remained at the same level throughout the 2006–2022 period, except in 2020, while the fixed-term contract staff more than doubled and independent contractors nearly doubled. We observe a similar trend at the municipal level, but while the number of fixed-term contract employees doubles, the number of independent contractors triples (DIPRES 2022). In this context, scholars have determined that public employment in Chile is neither professionalized nor transparent because fixed-term contracts and independent contracts do not guarantee stability, leaving positions at the discretion of the political "bosses" when it comes to hiring, permanence, or dismissal (Rajevic 2019). This is no different at the local level, considering that the main body of control is the municipal council (Escoffier 2023). There is no oversight incentive for councilors in the mayor's favor, and the technical complexity of financial issues makes control intricate for those in opposition (Barozet and Espinoza 2019).

This environment has created a fruitful space for patronage. Though it is not possible to evaluate the number of employees hired in the framework of patronage, major layoffs following a change in the local, regional, or national administrations are proof that public jobs serve as accommodation for the authorities in office (Rajevic 2019). Even after the Controller of the Republic obliged the state administration to stop hiring people as independent contractors and provide them with more permanent options in 2022, a silent but effective wave has been rising since 2023, especially in the municipalities, which insist that their finances do not allow for permanent positions. Advances have also been slow in Congress, despite the national progress made in labor protection over the past decade, because parliamentarians are the ones who benefit from the patronage system for their reelection (Ferraro 2008). As both judge and party, a senator or deputy has no incentive to work in favor of a transparent bureaucracy that would only serve to weaken loyalty networks that garner votes (Barozet, Moya, and Espinoza 2022). Local, regional, and national authorities are not willing to lose control over public appointments and votes, which allows them to control local conflicts and social movements and to have a direct influence on implementing social policies.

7 | The Social and Institutional Crisis of 2019: The Limits of Public Policy and Patronage in the Face of Exacerbated Social Problems

7.1 | Claims About the Limits of the Model and the Lack of Policy Responses

The social outburst of 2019 shows the limits of the public policies implemented in the last decades and the crisis of the model, together with greater difficulty of patronage to lessen social conflicts in the sectors where it operated. In 2014, a drop in Chinese demand brought the end of the copper "supercycle,"[12] further contributing to a slowdown in the Chilean economy (Eyraud 2015). In addition, in 2015, illegal political financing was uncovered, affecting almost all political parties. This massive scandal discredited the political elite while also demonstrating that the interests of large companies were favored over those of citizens. It was a major blow for Chile, as it was historically considered Latin America's best institutionally functioning country with relatively low levels of corruption. On a closer look, however, experts recognized that "low intensity" corruption was present in Chile, although some argue that it was not

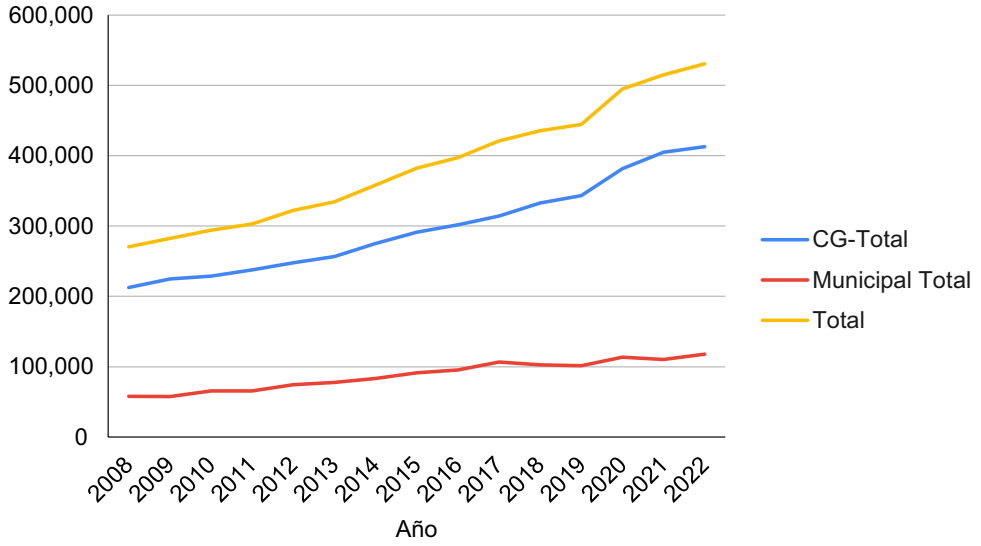

FIGURE 2 | Evolution of total public employment at the municipal and central levels (years in the *x*-axis and number of jobs in the *y*-axis). *Sources:* Budget Directorate of the Ministry of Finance (DIPRES) and National Municipal Information System (SINIM). CG = Central Government, 2008–2022. In the central government data, we exclude "Substitutes and Replacements" and "Others." Central government data correspond to DIPRES reports, while municipal employment data correspond to SINIM. Central government data do not include armed forces or the police.

very visible precisely because it was part of the informal political culture (Pollack and Matear 1996).

In 2018, a major feminist movement took universities by surprise and spilled into the streets, denouncing sexist violence and the enormous burden of unpaid work that falls on women in a country where women's wages are low and access to preschool care for their children, which would permit mothers to work, is limited. Political parties and patronage networks did not address these issues before the mobilizations. From then on, social pressure and signs of unrest increased. In early October 2019, a hike in the price of the Santiago subway made the pressure bubble pop. This situation led to a moment of major crisis and institutional fluidity (Dobry 2009). The public demanded a new constitutional process to replace the existing constitution that had been implemented during the dictatorship. A political deal on November 15, 2019, unlocked the way for a referendum to change the current constitution, but protests did not abate for 5 months. The intensity eventually dropped not because of the duration of the process: the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 demobilized protesters. All the same, as we can observe in Figure 1, the protests diminished but did not disappear.

7.2 | When the Shock Absorbers Also Fail

As described by Mahoney and Thelen, "institutional change occurs precisely when problems about the interpretation and application of rules open a space for implementing existing rules in other ways" (Mahoney and Thelen 2009, 4). As of 2019, patronage or, more broadly, informal institutions were unable to contain a situation that was bursting at the seams. The outbreak deepened the economic slowdown that had been brewing since 2014, further degrading urban centers. The COVID-19 crisis was well managed in health terms by the second government of Sebastián Piñera (2018–2022) which proactively made early purchases of Chinese vaccines, but the response was unsuccessful in economic and social terms. In fact, the government refused for several months to deliver social benefits to the population despite a very severe lockdown. The mayors lobbied to open more and new channels for the delivery of these benefits to the population, but initially, they did not get more funds, despite hunger riots in May 2020 on the outskirts of Santiago. Because of the confinements, the public sector could not offer more jobs outside the health sector.

This also shows the limits of patronage and client politics in the face of a crisis of this magnitude. The price for the government was very high and Congress partly took control, exerting pressure and passing laws for the population to be able to withdraw from pension funds to ease the crisis. This pressure responds directly to populism and clientelist networks described above, which have benefited congressional representatives in recent decades. Under populist pressure for their reelection and in the face of a government stunned by the magnitude of the crisis, they voted in favor of the pension withdrawals on three occasions. This eased the effects of the crisis for many households (Barozet et al. 2021), but it was the very families that paid the cost of the crisis in the first few months while sacrificing their future retirement options. Finally, the government had to accept the distribution of social benefits far beyond targeting vulnerable sectors, delivering direct subsidies to almost the entire population under new populist pressure in Congress. Although Sebastián Piñera's administration resisted, it ended up moving toward a universal social policy which, when combined with the withdrawals of pension savings, put previously unseen levels of liquidity in the market, driving inflation that has been difficult to control to date.

8 | Conclusion

In this article, we show how patronage in Chile functions as a buffer for social demands and conflicts in some sectors; in

those cases where it does not intermediate, social movements are more likely to exist. Although the sectors may vary in other countries according to their history and their social movements and actors, this reveals a relationship that is not well documented in the literature. This also explains why problematic public policy areas manage to be contained for a time until social upheaval occurs. Theoretically, informal institutions help to explain the relationship between social movements and public policies. The empirical analysis of how states frame the relationship with their citizens requires a reflection on the degree of formality or informality. For example, institutional analysis focuses on the incentives and coercion that social and political actors employ to achieve their goals. However, this type of analysis has been less successful in demonstrating the multidimensionality of the forces that influence political and social actors. Indeed, institutionalist explanations cannot perceive various informal dimensions, partly because they rely on a narrow definition of what a movement or an institution is, and they fail to take a deeper look at how informal institutions can limit or enhance the incentives offered by formal institutions.

In practice, the Chilean case illustrates several aspects of this relationship between public policies and social movements. Patronage networks partially compensated for the privatization of basic public services. In addition, the provision of employment controlled by local and regional authorities has partly cushioned social conflict, until the worsening of the crisis toward the end of the last decade overwhelmed even the most efficient networks of containment. We have demonstrated that, considering the joint cycle of mobilizations and change in public policies in Chile, informal institutions had a dampening effect on social protest from 2006 until 2019 in certain areas. However, the economic and social situation had become unsustainable partially because of the economic slowdown that began in 2014, but also because neither social movements nor informal institutions could pacifically channel social conflicts.

The current government of Gabriel Boric (2022–2026) seeks to deliver more benefits to the population to ease the economic crisis, while also anticipating the financing of a progressive agenda that embraces the universality of rights. However, the economic crisis, combined with the failure of two constitutional processes, hinders the government's capacity to implement significant reforms and contain social malaise.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] In Spanish, patronage and clientelism are two distinct concepts in the analysis of exchange systems based on informal reciprocity.

[2] This period covers five presidential mandates: the first term of socialist Michelle Bachelet (2006–2010), the first term of independent and liberal right-wing Sebastián Piñera (2010–2014), the second term of Michelle Bachelet (20114–2018), the second term of Sebastián Piñera (2018–2022), and leftwing Gabriel Boric (2022–2026).

[3] The years 2022 and 2023 are still being collected and coded.

[4] "The methodology is data collection through press analysis. Articles related to some types of conflict are identified and coded following the instructions designed for this purpose. National newspaper reports are covered, as well as regional newspapers, to include local conflicts that are not reported by national media." (http://www.coes.cl).

[5] Fondecyt Regular 1030243, 1120846, 1160984, and 1211099.

[6] Interviews were conducted in six regions: Magallanes, Bío Bío, Araucanía, O'Higgins, Metropolitan Region, and Tarapacá.

[7] We conducted focus groups in 2023 and 2024 with public officials and stakeholders in two municipalities in the Araucanía Region and the Metropolitan Region to understand under which situations it is acceptable for rules to be relaxed in the delivery of public services and jobs, even if it contravenes regulations.

[8] The results are grouped into two areas: (1) description of how informal networks function in Chilean politics, from the local to the national level and (2) analysis of discursive justification for the flexibilization of rules and regulations for the delivery of social benefits and public employment.

[9] President Piñera came to power in 2010, but the protest did not start until 2011 because of a national emergency brought on by the 8.8-magnitude earthquake of February 28, 2010, just before he took office. This changed the priorities of all social and political actors that year, with a large part of public policy and investment focusing on the reconstruction of the areas affected by the disaster.

[10] The AFP is Chile's private retirement system, introduced under the dictatorship, into which workers' pay through mandatory deductions in their salary. The "No+AFP" movement was a protest against this system.

[11] Except in the defense sector, which continued to be largely financed with public funds and reserved expenditures.

[12] Chile has the world's largest copper resources.

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