Public Participation, Political Institutions and Democracy in Chile, 1990-1997

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Abstract

Beyond the broadest mechanisms of democratic participation (voting and political parties) there are a vast array of different ways that citizens can participate in the business of making decisions that will affect their lives. This article examines some of those mechanisms in Chile through the lens of citizen participation. The paper develops-and then critically analyses, within the context of Chilean politics- three broad categories of institutions: legislative branch inclusion (the institutional arrangements and mechanisms which provide access points for non-state actors into the legislative process); executive branch inclusion (ways in which citizens can interact directly with the executive branch); and legal institutions (laws and legal rules which promote monitoring of public activities, transparency and participation through legal channels). In addition, two final categories touch upon questions of access to information; and what are called here "soapbox rules", or institutions which foster the use of public spaces. The discussion of each of the categories begins with a general description of how it fits into any democratic system, but quickly moves into a discussion of the ways in which Chileans have worked to expand or democratize these areas. The article concludes that Chilean democracy can be deepened by institutional changes which provide channels and mechanisms for increased participation, and it seeks to specifically outline what some of these changes might include.
Presentation

The participation of citizens in defining, assessing and critically inspecting public policy is a central element of democratic practice. FLACSO-Chile, with the support of the Ford Foundation, has established a research program on participation in the creation, evaluation, development and critical analysis of public policy. Marcela Noé has been in charge of this project and has sought to generate knowledge on this subject with, as a backdrop, a dynamic conception of citizenship. The work of Louis Bickford analyses the institutional framework of the Chilean political system and how to establish conditions for citizen participation in the nineties.

To explore the character and meaning of citizen participation means to examine the quality of democracy and the role that institutions have in each particular political system. The work of Louis Bickford emphasizes how political institutions impact the lives of citizens in the sphere of public policy.

This work contributes to the analysis that FLACSO-Chile is carrying out concerning this subject and its focus on case-studies referring to policies in education, gender, health, citizen security, housing and local/municipal government.

FLACSO-Chile would like to extend its gratitude for this special contribution by Louis Bickford and his work "Public Participation, Democratic Institutions, and Democracy in Chile, 1990-1997", which we now publish in the New Series collection of the institution.