

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

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Nueva Serie Flacso

REG. 5208

CUT. 3528

BIBLIOTECA - FLACSO

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321.4(83) Bickford, Louis; Noé, Marcela, eds.
B583 Public participation, political institutions and
democracy in Chile, 1990-1997. Santiago,
Chile: FLACSO-Chile, 1998
60 p. Nueva Serie FLACSO
ISBN: 956-205-125-0

1. POLITICAS PUBLICAS 2. INSTITUCIONES POLITI-
CAS 3. PARTICIPACION CIUDADANA 4. DEMOCRA-
TIZACION 5. SOCIEDAD CIVIL 6. PARTICIPACION
SOCIOPOLITICA 7. CHILE

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Editado por FLACSO-Chile, Leopoldo Urrutia 1950, Ñuñoa.

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Diseño de portada: A•Dos Diseñadores

Diagramación: Marcela Contreras, FLACSO-Chile

Impresión: LOM Ediciones

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Civil participation in social policy making

Marcela Noé E.¹

The article written by Louis Bickford entitled “Public Participation, Democratic Institutions and Democracy in Chile, 1990-1997”, analyzes the institutional scenario of the political system that establishes conditions for civil participation in the nineties. This New FLACSO Series study contributes to the discussion of currently-existing possibilities for constructing an institutional polity with strong societal stability. This study investigates the modernization of the state with a focus on understanding democracy in Chile.

The major challenge of the article is to link the workings of the state with civil sector participation in formulating public policies. The article postulates that a good path to amplify and deepen democracy is one that incorporates policy making with those who are directly affected. In this perspective, democracy should establish institutional mechanisms for public participation. In particular, democracy should include some degree of civilian representation in the formation of policies. The author states that democracy is strengthened through the incorporation of ideas and opinions of citizens. His argument promotes the idea that the civilian must be part of the process and play a critical role in the decision making process. This offers legitimacy and a feeling of self importance for civilians included in the political forum, and leads to greater commitment towards improving the policy making of the state.

The opening of the political system to the participation and the consequential argumentation of democratization can surge from two sources. First, the dynamics of civil society can demand the liberalization of the state system and public space towards civil control. The other source comes from the state’s own political institution that formally invites or encourages citizens to participate in policy making. Bickford’s study positions itself on the latter source.

The Chilean experience shows that the character and sense of civil participation in the different phases of development and democracy has changed. This depends on the roles that the state, market, and the civil society play in societal development. Norbert Lechner² notes that the historic weight of the Chilean state is extremely determinant. In the XIX century the state was the axis of the constitution and development of the nation. It had become the center and motor of industrial and social development since the last half of the XX century until the rupture of the political system with the coup d’etat of 1973. From the

1 Coordinadora proyecto Participación ciudadana en políticas públicas. FLACSO.

2 Lechner, N. “Modernization and Democratization. a Dilemma of the Chilean Development”, in: Estudios Públicos, N° 70. otoño. 1988. Centro de Estudios Públicos. Chile.

military regime to the present, the implementation of a new market society and the dismantling of the benefactor state in Chile have been predominant in mercantile relations. These relations cross over the field of the economy to penetrate the sphere of politics. In the course of the last two decades, politics have been constituted in a sphere of exchange between agents that pursue private interest and that instrumentalize the state in function of the strengthening of the market.

The turn to democracy demands that the state redefine its roles as constructor of common good and as the conductor of economic and social development. Nevertheless, the reconstitution of a political state must take place in the context of a Chilean society that is increasingly differentiated and segmented. In reality, the political sphere is no longer the forum for civilian construction or community development. Citizenship has lost its normative potency. In this context where the market and relations of exchange have priority, it is extremely difficult for the democratic regime to defy the challenge of developing the modernization of the country. In effect, the movement to democracy offers to rebuild goals for a country where all citizens have equal rights to participate in the decisions concerning the basic objectives and strategies of development. Nevertheless, given the loss of political capacity to articulate social concerns, it is not only in the political sphere where the game of power is settled between the forces that control the process of development.

Louis Bickford's article on the political institutionality and public participation in Chile is complemented by FLACSO's recent research on social participation in public policy. This research examined case studies in education policy, gender, municipal government, health, social security, and housing. Louis Bickford's article is from the perspective of the currently-existing political institutions whereas FLACSO's investigation took the perspective of the actors involved in policy making. Both studies, however, conclude that civilian control of public policies is not an existing practice in the country; rather, opportunities for public participation acquire a slanted attitude in favor of the social and political elites.

Although Chile has re-established a democratic system of government, some institutions created by the authoritarian military regime continue to operate without fundamental changes. In particular, the composition and attributions of legislative power in the electoral system act as potential mechanisms of counterweight to the popular sovereignty. They do not allow an effective representation of the preferences, interests and projects of the public. The extremely executive-centered regime accentuates the historic tendency for the closing up of the state and the adoption of political decisions by a political class that tends to ignore outside influence.

Bickford assumes that civil participation is not restricted to the state and that it does not need to depend entirely on its form or function. However, potentially, political institutions could impinge strongly against the intervention by citizens in the public political forum. In this perspective, the present article provides an analysis about which institutions encourage political participation in the executive, parliament, legal realm, and in mass media.

Bickford highlights the problems in the legislative branch that derive from the absences of democratic channels in its composition. Certain subject matter may be susceptible to being thrown out as parliamentary initiatives and there is an inherent parliamentary capacity of striking the legislative agenda which both compromise democratic policy making. On the other hand, he examines the possibilities and limitations of the mechanisms of direct participation of the citizens in the legislative branch, such as the participation in the commissions that elaborate laws, transparency and propaganda of the legislative branch, and accountability activities.

With respect to the modalities of participation in the executive branch, he compares the roles of the task forces, advisers, and suitable commissioners to mechanisms sufficiently lacking civilian participation. He later examines the legal mechanisms and political institutions that could empower the participation of the civil society. Finally, he describes the real process by which decisions are adopted.

The author observes the probable incidence of various structural characteristics in the current political institutionality. Predominantly, the highest leaders decide policy and exclude participation from other sources. In addition, there is inadequate representation by stakeholders in the political system and apathy is therefore more widespread. There is also a lack of active questioning of certain political measures and a stagnation of political action by the political instruments and institutions that have traditionally represented and articulated the demands of the citizens (parliament and political parties). In addition to the constriction of political mechanisms negating broader participation from a greater social sphere, Bickford adds that there are deficiencies in civil society that impel their own projects independently. For example, most of the public is unable to pressure the state to broaden democracy to include civil society.

Bickford concludes that if Chile is a democracy, it remains far from the implementation of a political style that encourages public participation as a counterweight to the political class. This could only be achieved through the inclusion of citizens in the governmental processes involved in the formation of policy.

The studies concerning civil participation have led FLACSO to adopt a dynamic notion of society, assuming that Chile can achieve further democratic development if there are mechanisms that allow the citizens to be active stakeholders in the continuous determination of political content. This concept of active civilians involves the recognition that public policy making includes difficult power struggles among diverse interest groups. It is implicit to recognize, at the same time, that active participation from civilians can create problems of governability and may lead to increased complexity for the protection of general interest. In conclusion, FLACSO proposes that civil participation must be implemented through mechanisms or instruments that regulate which areas of decision are open to participation, which actors will participate, what mechanisms will be able to express and give priority to civil demands, and how to incorporate them in decision making and open pathways to exercise social control.

An approximation of civil participation in public policymaking

The focus on public policy for the study of civil participation makes sense, since public policy is the most direct point between the citizen and the state. In this forum, the citizen can ask questions regarding the limitations of public influence and the public's capacity to access and evaluate policy. These represent current research challenges in the study of Chilean democracy.

Bickford's focus puts the principal responsibility on the state to open its doors for civil participation. By adding a different and complementary approach to the state as the center of the political system, we have analyzed the state's action as the center of public policymaking. From this perspective our studies point out that the government conceives of civil participants as users of state administration. The most frequent argument is that participation is a factor for the improvement of the effectiveness and efficiency in the proceedings. This measure can be used to design and apply the suitable instruments to achieve better and more timely satisfaction of citizens' necessities and demands. In general, this vision conceives the public as user-clients and only some rights are awarded to them. Nevertheless, this view has not necessarily taken into account the common elements of a democracy that should also consider the citizen as a shareholder because of the contribution that each person makes to the constitution of society as a whole. This last point demonstrates that control and inspection should be inherent rights of an active citizen.

A more important field for democratization is that of civil participation in the services of public policymaking³. Although these decisions may not affect the general interest of the country, they do represent political proceedings in which

3 This point is based on the essay by Celedón, C. and Noé, M., presented to the XII competition of the CLAD on Modernization of the State and Public Administration. July 1998.

citizens are directly tied to the process of generation of public services and goods-provision. In other words, the objectives and priorities that are defended in the political sphere operate through an efficient proceeding of the public services. In this sense, civil participation can be viewed as a way of improving the administration's functioning.

The modern vision of public policymaking tends to replace the public administrator and the bureaucracy which-with respect to only itself-has taken charge of public administration (through management), and drives the attention of the user with a greater weight on the results rather than in the control over the processes. Therefore, the new model of process centers its action in the citizen and encourages the generation of new mechanisms of social participation.

A detailed view of this perspective brings us to define different visions or concepts of civil participation in public proceedings. Specific rights of the citizen are associated with means of participation: specifically, in the determination of the characteristics of the products of a public service, or in the process of making decisions for the services' proceedings. A limited vision of citizens with respect to public proceedings defines the citizen as a beneficiary, chooser, client, or simply a consumer. This means that the citizen recognizes the existence of an exchange relationship between himself or herself and the public services that assigns him or her greater rights with respect to product characteristics and services. In conclusion, a more advanced vision of citizenship recognizes each individual as users-shareholders of public services and as a result he or she has the right to choose and control the proceedings.

In this way we can distinguish the levels and ways of civil participation depending on its boundaries. In the scope of the definition of the services and products and their characteristics, civil participation can extend itself from mere information, its reference, the right to reclaim, the right to appeal, and the right for compensation. In the scope of decision making, on the other hand, participation can extend itself from the most basic level. This includes the right to be informed, to achieve a higher incidence of decision making opportunities, to be consulted for advice, to participate in the decisions (shared or delegated power), and to participate in the evaluation and control over different aspects of the proceedings.

The nature of the citizen-public service relationship is different from the relation between client-provider in the sense that the citizen, as a contributor, is the main owner of these services. Traditionally, in the scope of making decisions, the citizen has been considered citizen-voter. The citizen sees his or her rights as essential in political power. This last point defines the priorities and assigns the responsibilities over the public administrators' proceedings. Under this vision, civil participation acquires a special relevance in different aspects of the proceedings of a public service. These aspects include the determination of

priorities, the evaluation of process efficiency, and in the prosecution and control of public policies or programs.

FLACSO emphasizes that in a modern democracy the social or civil control should ensure that public proceedings use due diligence in outlining citizens' interests. Nevertheless, the studies based on the Chilean experience show that the current modernization strategy is being impelled by an elite political class and mainly from the executive state power. Dominant groups of economic power, knowledge, culture, and information are also strongly influential in political life. Nevertheless, the majority of the citizens remain left out. In general, they do not perform an active role in the decisions that involve society -they only perform subordinated roles that are indispensable for the unfolding of social life, but still insufficient to be able to achieve a modern and democratic society. In other words, even though the market in Chile has been largely extended and despite the rearrangement of the state, those processes still do not have a strengthening effect and have not resulted in a larger participation by the majority of the population. The unbalanced relation between the levels of participation of the citizens and the degree of modernization that the country is reaching is reason for concern. This leads to questions and doubts as to how essential, balanced, and systematic the current platform of modernization operates in this country.