



Brown Bag Series #2

Date: May 22, 2015

Time: 12 : 20-14 : 30

Venue: Building 8, Room 206, Komaba Campus, UTokyo

Language: English

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Deepening Democracy? Sub-national Politics and Civic Participation in Chile



After transition to democracy in 1990, Chilean civil society has been called "invisible"; social movements have disappeared due to the increasing atomized and uninterested people. However, this view cannot explain recent protests such as student movements and against hydroelectric projects. The problem lies that the "invisible" view focuses only on a national level; within a county, a level of participation is various, particularly ones in municipal neighborhood councils that have historically united residents across class, gender and party affiliation as an important base for social movements. In this regard, this paper asks: why some municipalities in Chile still show active participation in neighborhood councils while others do not?

This paper examines the effect of party politics on the level of participation in neighborhood councils at a municipal level. Previous studies focus mainly on the role of coalition of center-left and right-wing parties at a national level, and in municipal-level studies they tend to overlook the changes outside the coalition, such as revival of the Communist Party and the foundation of regionalist parties which encourage participation in neighborhood councils. This paper hypothesizes that where the regionalist and Left parties predominate, a higher level of participation in neighborhood councils is observed.

To support the argument, this study analyzes a participation level in neighborhood councils of 345 municipalities from 2002 to 2014, using the Undersecretary for Regional Development data. Though the analysis, this paper intends to show the characteristics of participation in each municipality and offer a different perspective on Chilean politics.