

THE FORMATION OF CROSSMOVEMENT COALITIONS AND THE CHALLENGES TO THEIR ENDURANCE: THE RISE AND FALL OF UNIDAD SOCIAL IN CHILE*

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While recent scholarship has increasingly examined social movement coalitions, unanswered questions remain about crossmovement coalitions, which are composed of organizations from various fields. The case study of Unidad Social in Chile enhances our understanding of both the formation and the challenges that crossmovement coalitions face to endure. Unidad Social emerged just months before Chile's 2019 social uprising, playing a pivotal role in early mobilization efforts before gradually losing influence. Using process tracing and triangulating interviews, press data, and organizational documents, we identify key mechanisms explaining its rise and decline. While coalition brokerage, threat and opportunity attribution, and frame bridging facilitated the creation of Unidad Social and its initial expansion by integrating new SMOs, these mechanisms proved ineffective in sustaining cohesion amid shifting political dynamics. Instead, frame dilution and polarization deepened internal divisions, ultimately leading to the collapse of the coalition. Our mechanism-based approach advances research on the formation and endurance of crossmovement coalitions.

Mobilization processes are often led by social movement coalitions composed of different activist groups that agree to cooperate to attain shared goals (McCammon and Moon 2015). In recent decades, protest waves have been spearheaded by crossmovement coalitions, that is, alliances between SMOs from different movements that choose to collaborate in pursuit of a common agenda (van Dyke and Amos 2017: 2). Examples of crossmovement coalitions that expand over national borders include the global-justice movement (della Porta 2006; della Porta 2007; Beamish and Luebbers 2009) and the anti-free-trade mobilizations in the Americas (von Bülow 2010, 2011). These coalitions resulted from joint efforts by SMOs from different sectors but with the collective objective of addressing the faults of neoliberalism. This multisectoral nature has also characterized national crossmovement coalitions in Latin America. In the last decades, protest waves against neoliberal and austerity reforms have prominently featured crossmovement coalitions such as the Coordinadora de Movimientos Sociales in Ecuador, the Frente Nacional de Defensa de los Bienes Públicos y el Patrimonio Nacional in Paraguay, and the Frente Nacional por la Defensa de los Derechos Económicos y Sociales in Panama, amongst others (Almeida 2023: 147).

Drawing on the recent case of Unidad Social in Chile, this article aims to advance our understanding of crossmovement coalitions. Unidad Social is a coalition of SMOs formed in June 2019, which, at its peak in December 2019, brought together more than 200 organizations

* This research was funded by the Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo (ANID), Chile, and through the following research grants: Anid Fondap #1523A0005, Fondecyt Regular #1240960, and Núcleo Milenio #NCS2024_019. The authors thank Maddalena Fiore, Catalina Riquelme, and Fernando Soto for their valuable contributions as research assistants. They are also grateful to the editorial team of *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* and the anonymous reviewers, whose insightful and constructive comments significantly contributed to the development of this article.

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from various fields. Unions, students, human rights, environmental, feminist, and housing organizations, among others, gathered under the slogan, “Tired of it, we have come together.” The formation of Unidad Social was the culmination of more than a decade of social mobilization, driven by SMOs advancing diverse causes. In the early 2000s, following significant demobilization throughout the 1990s, large-scale social movements led by high school and university student organizations began to shape public opinion and influence the education agenda (Donoso and von Bülow 2017). The sectoral character of subsequent movements was repeated. They were always tied to specific fields, such as the No+AFP and the system of pension capitalization in 2016 (Rozas and Maillet, 2019, 2024), and the 2018 feminist movement (Palacios-Valladares, 2022). Unidad Social can be considered an anomaly within this context.

The formation of Unidad Social preceded Chile’s most significant wave of protests since the return to democracy in 1990: the October 2019 social uprising. This wave began on October 14 with massive fare evasions, led initially by high school students, in response to a price increase for the subway fare. Protests continued, and by October 18, the metropolitan region’s metro and public transport systems had collapsed (Somma et al. 2021). The nationwide spread of protests, culminating in a historic gathering of over a million people in the capital on October 25, and the escalating sense of crisis compelled the government to reach an agreement with the opposition on November 15. This agreement paved the way for a binding national plebiscite to determine whether and how to draft a new constitution.

The 2019 social uprising arguably brought a social fervor that was instrumental to, and in line with, the spirit of Unidad Social’s foundation. Its leaders and members recognized this as an expansion of political opportunities. Yet, it also involved important threats. The government’s response to increasingly radical protests was forceful. Both national and international organizations documented human rights violations by the police (Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020). There was, therefore, a risk that clashes with the police would scare off protesters. There was also a fear that the social uprising would end without any substantive policy change, or that Sebastián Piñera’s center-right government would attempt to channel the crisis through a top-down institutional arrangement that excluded civil society actors, such as those participating in Unidad Social. On November 12, a shared threat of attribution motivated the launch of the most significant general strike since the restoration of democracy. During the uprising, Unidad Social also organized citizens’ councils (Unidad Social, 2021) and played a pivotal role in advocating for a constitutional assembly with strong grassroots participation as a means of resolving the political crisis. However, as we demonstrate in this article, the political dynamics triggered by the social uprising presented significant challenges to the coalition’s endurance, ultimately leading to its decline.

The period covered in this article concludes in March 2020, marking the onset of the health crisis triggered by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Following the efforts to articulate collective action during the social uprising, Unidad Social weakened and remained primarily active online during the pandemic. It gradually scaled back its on-site and online activities, eventually ceasing them entirely by 2022. The disappearance of Unidad Social from public debates during the 2020–2023 constitutional process is particularly striking, as it represented a missed opportunity to influence policy areas they had long championed.

The case of Unidad Social in Chile raises many empirical and conceptual questions that remain unanswered, despite the growing scholarly attention to social movement coalitions over the past decade (van Dyke and Amos 2017; McCammon and Moon 2015). Furthermore, although much attention has been paid to the creation of social movement coalitions, we know less about how they endure. How are crossmovement coalitions created, and what explains their endurance or eventual decline? We trace the rise and fall of Unidad Social to evaluate the importance of different mechanisms that have traditionally been relevant for social mobilization and coalition building: brokerage (von Bülow, 2011), opportunity and threat attribution (Almeida, 2019), and frame bridging (van Dyke and Amos, 2017; Snow et al., 2019). Through a process tracing design, we examine whether the mechanisms that extant scholarship highlights

as relevant to explain coalition building between SMOs also apply to more complex alliances such as crossmovement coalitions.

We highlight the following findings, which contribute to both the social movement literature and our understanding of contemporary social mobilization in Chile. First, brokerage, frame bridging, and the attribution of opportunities and threats functioned as key mechanisms in the formation of *Unidad Social*, facilitating the construction of internal cohesion. Second, the 2019 social uprising required constant evaluation of various opportunities and threats, which brought divisions to the forefront. Consequently, the coalition's attribution of opportunities and threats, which initially fostered cohesion during its formation, failed to sustain this unifying effect in the later stages of *Unidad Social*'s development. Furthermore, the social uprising led to more SMOs joining the coalition, triggering two other mechanisms that we argue led to the coalition's weakening and final decline: frame dilution and polarization. These mechanisms undermined opportunity and threat attribution, frame bridging, and brokerage, which initially had facilitated the creation of *Unidad Social*. Hence, our findings show that the mechanisms that set in motion the creation process of a crossmovement coalition are not necessarily the same that allow them to endure.

The article is structured as follows: the theoretical section examines the mechanisms of brokerage, opportunity, and threat attribution, and frame bridging, highlighting their analytical potential for understanding crossmovement coalitions. Second, we outline the methodology and present a process-tracing strategy based on the triangulation of different sources (interviews with leaders of the coalition's SMOs, press data, and organizational documents) to analyze the case of *Unidad Social*. Third, we present a causal narrative of the coalition-building process that facilitated the rise of *Unidad Social*, distinguishing between the stages of creation and gradual decline. We conclude by examining the analytical value of the proposed mechanisms for understanding both the formation and long-term sustainability of crossmovement coalitions. Additionally, we contextualize our findings by comparing *Unidad Social* to other cases explored in the literature.

CREATION AND ENDURANCE OF CROSSMOVEMENT COALITIONS

As McCammon and Moon (2015: 2) note, social movement coalitions “might be said to reside on a continuum between mergers and networks, as a midrange relationship entailing cooperative joint action while distinct organizational identities and structures remain intact.” Studies of coalitions primarily focus on coalitions of organizations in the same field (van Dyke and Amos 2017). Some research has been undertaken on coalitions between organizations from two fields, where labor organizations play a pivotal role in building coalitions with women's or environmental organizations. Other studies examine coalitions of organizations belonging to more than two fields, a type of coalition that van Dyke and Amos (2017: 2) termed a crossmovement coalition. As previously mentioned, this is the focus of this article.

An important part of the empirical studies on crossmovement coalitions has centered on transnational contentious politics. The global-justice movement (della Porta 2006; della Porta 2007; Daphi et al. 2022; de Vries-Jordan 2014), along with the World Social Forum (Byrd and Jasny 2010), the anti-free-trade agreements movement (von Bülow 2010, 2011), and the Global Peace Movement (Reitan 2012) have been extensively analyzed in the literature. All these examples share the common feature of transnational platforms that bring together diverse SMOs from different fields, each with its own distinct demands and identity. There are also examples of crossmovement coalitions at the national level, with several cases from the Latin American context highlighted in the introduction. Beyond Latin America, a notable example is the Raging Grannies in Canada, a group of older women collaborating with various organizations, including indigenous and feminist movements (Chazan 2016). Another case that has shaped this debate is the crossmovement coalition led by college students in the United States, which united

peace activists, Black organizations, women's groups, LGBTQ+ advocates, labor unions, political organizations, and student activists, among others (van Dyke 2003).

Research has drawn on classical concepts from social movement scholarship to explain the creation of social movement coalitions, and we will explore the extent to which these concepts also apply to crossmovement coalitions. In particular, the literature has engaged in the discussion of mechanism-based accounts of social phenomena when analyzing coalition building in social movements (Wang et al. 2018; van Dyke and Amos 2017; Beamish and Luebbers 2009). The scholarly debate has produced multiple definitions of "mechanisms" (George and Bennett 2005; Beach and Pedersen, 2019). In this article, we adopt one of the most widely used definitions in social movement research, according to which they constitute "a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations" (Tilly 2001: 25). In McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's collaborative work (2001), a distinction is made between relational, environmental, and cognitive mechanisms. A relational mechanism is one that "alter[s] connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks" (McAdam et al. 2001: 26). An environmental mechanism, in turn, is defined as "externally generated influences on conditions affecting social life" (McAdam et al. 2001: 25). Finally, a cognitive mechanism "operate[s] through alterations of individual and collective perception" (McAdam et al. 2001: 26). Importantly, different mechanisms concatenate and form a process. By isolating each mechanism within the process, mechanism-based accounts of collective action help identify recurring processes across various instances of contentious politics (McAdam et al. 2001: 27).

The first mechanism that we extrapolate from the literature to analyze crossmovement coalitions is that of brokerage. The formation of links between activists is generally a result of previous mobilization processes (van Dyke and Amos, 2017). These links can generate histories of interaction based on trust and respect between the activists, which contributes to the gradual emergence of leaderships that then become coalition brokers (Wang et al. 2018; van Dyke and Amos 2017; Beamish and Luebbers 2009). These are activists that link several actors from different SMOs of the same or other fields, reinforcing connections and eventually creating an alliance that is strengthened by previous histories of interaction (van Dyke and Amos 2017). For example, de Vries-Jordan (2014), in her study on the convergence between the global-justice movement and Occupy Wall Street, argued that a key global-justice leader played a pivotal role in formulating an income inequality slogan for Occupy, which helped global-justice members to join the campaign. In this way, brokers also play a central role in strategically emphasizing specific ideas that help advance shared frames.

Early debates broadly defined brokerage as a relational mechanism through which a third party facilitates connections between two previously unlinked SMOs (McAdam et al. 2001, 26). Recent scholarship, however, has sought to refine this concept. von Bülow (2011) advocates for a broader understanding of why and how individuals or organizations become brokers, their diverse strategies, and the conditions under which they may fail to mediate or intentionally use their position to demobilize. Specifically, von Bülow (2010) shows that brokers can act as translators (diffusing knowledge), coordinators (organizing the distribution of resources, responsibilities, and information), articulators (bridging across cleavages to bring together actors and negotiate common positions), and representatives in relevant events and meetings.

Specifying these roles involves recognizing that brokerage goes beyond temporary and circumstantial roles played by informal brokers (von Bülow 2010; Gurza Lavallo and von Bülow 2015). The concept of institutionalized brokers, defined as "organizations formally empowered by a more or less bounded group of collective actors to fulfill specific and pre-determined intermediation roles" (Gurza Lavallo and von Bülow 2015: 157), points in this direction. Crucially for the argument presented in this article, "institutionalized brokerage roles do not emerge out of thin air but are part of open-ended processes of negotiation of differences and the development of common understandings" (von Bülow 2011: 166).

A second mechanism influencing coalition building is the attribution of threats and opportunities. Since its inception, political process theory has focused on how opportunities and

threats can trigger mobilization (Almeida 2019). Such attribution operates as a cognitive mechanism based on how SMOs perceive that the political system responds to their demands. This perception depends on the political allies of social movements and the state's capacity and inclination for repression (McAdam et al. 2001). Elite alignments and responsiveness can shift in various directions depending on the context, and repression is a recurrent government response to increased radicalization. SMOs may interpret the evolving environment differently, resulting in varying assessments of threats and opportunities. The construction of a shared vision of whether a situation is considered a threat or an opportunity depends, in part, on SMOs' prior interaction with the institutional terrain. Consequently, a coalition's trajectory can have a substantial effect on the attribution of threat or opportunity.

While the possibility of repression is easily recognized as a threat, Almeida (2019, 2023) argues that economic problems, public health and environmental decline, and the erosion of rights can also be perceived as threats by SMOs. Recent waves of protest in Latin America have been driven by privatization and austerity measures that have rolled back hard-won rights (Almeida 2008). While the perception of economic threats can catalyze mobilization, it can also suppress collective action due to the substantial costs and risks involved, particularly for marginalized populations. Research emphasizing the significance of economic threats provides a necessary counterbalance to the predominant focus on political opportunities in social movement studies (Almeida 2008, 2019, 2023).

Frame bridging represents a third mechanism that we envision as crucial for forming crossmovement coalitions. This relational mechanism involves creating connections between two or more ideologically congruent but typically disconnected collective action frames (Snow et al. 2019). In protest cycles, collective action frames are strategically crafted to align with public opinion and mobilize SMOs from diverse social movements (Snow et al. 2019). SMOs construct shared meanings and symbols by defining a problem and exploring possible solutions (Snow et al., 2019). In this endeavor, institutionalized brokers play a central role. As noted, part of the roles played by institutionalized brokers is to translate and thus diffuse knowledge, coordinate information, and articulate different factions to arrive at common positions, all of which are central to the construction of a shared understanding of the problem to be addressed. Brokerage thus facilitates frame bridging. In turn, the attribution of threats and opportunities shapes social movements' collective action frames by reflecting SMOs' perceptions of the political system's response to their demands (Almeida 2019).

Frame bridging as a mechanism enables the alignment of discourse among different SMOs, thereby supporting both the formation and consolidation of complex coalitions (van Dyke and Amos 2017). Moreover, frame bridging is fundamental to maintaining the cohesion of coalitions (Beamish and Luebbbers 2009). This cohesion challenge is particularly relevant in coalitions comprising SMOs from diverse fields (van Dyke and Amos 2017), as it can both dilute the shared frame and weaken the leadership of brokers. For example, research by Daphi et al. (2022) and de Vries-Jordan (2014) coincide in highlighting the importance of common frame construction for building the GJM and maintaining it across time. These studies highlight that a shared diagnosis of neoliberalism and various dimensions of inequality was essential in uniting organizations across different sectors and regions. Reitan (2012) contends that frame extension, rooted in an imperialism-oppression diagnosis and a global-justice-peace prognosis, was crucial in transforming the global-justice movement into a global peace movement by shifting focus from issues of redistribution and democracy to antiwar demands. As in the case of brokerage, frame bridging involves strategic decision making by social movement leaders.

As discussed, existing scholarship identifies key mechanisms that contribute to explaining the formation of crossmovement coalitions. Yet, the factors that sustain these coalitions and enable their endurance are less well understood. To address this question, we examine relevant literature on the decline and disengagement of social movements. Fillieule (2015) argues that many of the processes explaining recruitment also apply to individual and collective withdrawal from social movements. For example, collective demobilization and individual disengagement might result from an exhaustion of the rewards of involvement. Also, the loss of ideological

meaning, that is, the erosion of shared beliefs and the rupture of the consensus within the movement, lowers the sacrifices activists are willing to make for the cause at stake (Fillieule 2015). Finally, collective and individual withdrawal from social movements occurs when the relations of sociability change (Fillieule 2015). When a group within a movement is under-represented, it has less access to informal friendship networks, which can create feelings of exclusion and drive demobilization and disengagement.

Focusing on the relationship between social movements and the institutional terrain, Koopmans (2004) analyzes what he refers to as contractive mechanisms. The first such mechanism is the process of “restabilization and reroutinization of patterns of interaction within the polity,” through which the relations between social movements and their adversaries become more stable (Koopmans 2004: 37-38). Another contractual mechanism is conflict mediation and resolution, which often involves the participation of a somewhat neutral and mutually respected third party (Koopmans 2004: 37-38). Finally, Koopmans (2004) argues that third parties might react to the protest wave and seek to end it. Hence, this external influence may also contribute to the decline of social movements.

By examining both internal coalition dynamics and their interaction with the political context, the literature identifies polarization as another key mechanism in the evolution of social movements. Polarization creates a clear-cut distinction between “us” and “them,” or, alternatively, fosters an oversimplified, black-and-white perspective on events that shapes the collective action frames of social movements (McCaffrey and Keys 2000: 44). Yet, protest waves often also polarize social movements internally, compelling different SMOs to take a stance on unfolding events and the adversary’s response to the movement. This process tends to emerge when the mobilization peaks and the SMOs and activists are divided between two options: (1) institutionalization, reaching an agreement with the authorities to achieve part of the goals that the SMOs follow, or (2) radicalization, adopting more disruptive tactics and pressing for more profound changes, assuming a maximalist approach (Jung 2010; Tarrow 2011). The polarization between moderate and radical factions undermines cohesion between SMOs, as neither group fully aligns with the movement’s chosen direction. Regardless of the path the organization decides, collective action often declines or even leads to demobilization following the peak of the protest cycle (Davenport 2015; Tarrow 2011).

In this article, we analyze how the mechanisms reviewed in this section function in the formation and evolution of *Unidad Social*, focusing on their role in shaping organizational dynamics, fostering alliances, and influencing collective action. By examining the interplay of these mechanisms, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of how *Unidad Social* emerged, consolidated its structure, and adapted to changing political and social contexts.

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS, AND DATA

The case of *Unidad Social* is a fruitful avenue for studying how social movement coalitions, in general, and crossmovement coalitions are created and later unfold. On the one hand, the foundational process of *Unidad Social* is a typical case of movements from different sectors coming together to overcome their individual limitations. In this sense, the case is well-positioned to enhance our understanding of crossmovement coalition formation. On the other hand, regarding its prospects for endurance, the specific circumstances of the 2019 social uprising presented significant challenges to the coalition, making it an extreme case, particularly considering the rapid changes in the political environment and the critical decisions the coalition had to face. We argue that this specific context also contributes to explaining the coalition’s limited lifespan, particularly when compared to other crossmovement coalitions that have demonstrated greater durability. In line with a dynamic and interactional approach to the study of social mobilization, where processes are fundamental (Tilly 2001; McAdam et al. 2001), we examine the emergence and challenges faced by *Unidad Social* using a process tracing methodology. This method enables us to account for a complex outcome by employing a causal and plausible narrative situated historically and grounded in the interaction of causal

mechanisms (Beach and Pedersen, 2019). In this article, we aim to describe the specific relationships between the mechanisms and their effects on the outcome at two stages of the process: the creation of Unidad Social and its efforts to sustain itself.

Following González-Ocantos and Laporte (2019), making the data-generation process transparent and defining the analytical relevance of the causal paths are crucial steps in narrative construction for process tracing research. In the spectrum between minimalist and maximalist process-tracing approaches (Beach and Pedersen 2019), our study positions itself between these two poles. In our narrative, we unpack mechanisms that approach a maximalist understanding, but our ultimate goal is to analyze the combination of these mechanisms that characterizes the entire process of coalition formation and decline, as illustrated in figure 2 on page 314 before the conclusion. Consistently, our process tracing is based on qualitative data from various sources and techniques. First, we examined press outlets. In our analysis, we combined a traditional media organization, *La Tercera*, with an independent digital source, *El Desconcierto*. Both are general informative media sources with national reach. *La Tercera* is one of Chile's most widely read media outlets (Newman et al., 2020), and *El Desconcierto* provides complementary information due to its connection to social movements (Jara et al., 2023). The primary objective of using press sources was to construct a timeline of Unidad Social's formation and its key milestones as a crossmovement coalition, as framed and highlighted by the media, to aid our research. At the same time, it served to structure and triangulate the information gathered through the interviews. The data were also complemented with primary sources tied to the movement coalition, such as the websites of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) and Unidad Social.

Second, between December 7, 2020, and January 15, 2021, we conducted twenty-two semi-structured interviews with social movement leaders associated with Unidad Social. We conducted all the interviews remotely using the Zoom platform because of the COVID-19 sanitary emergency. We anonymized the interviewees, following ethical research guidelines, to protect their identities by replacing their names with an identification number based on the date of the interviews. We structured the interview into two main sections. We focused the first section on the emergence of Unidad Social, asking for the objectives for constructing the coalition and the role of specific actors in the coalition formation. In the second section, the interview questions centered on the internal organization of Unidad Social, their decision-making processes, and the challenges they faced in consolidating.

We designed our interview sample to ensure it reflected the diversity within Unidad Social. As mentioned below, following the 2019 social upheaval, Unidad Social established an organizational structure comprising fourteen "blocks" (corresponding to specific fields), within which the different SMOs were coordinated. The sample considered nine of the organizations' blocks (see table 1); we excluded the other five blocks because the formation of some blocks (think tanks and nongovernmental organizations, Chileans abroad, and small and medium businesses) occurred late, so they were not influential during the period our study addresses. Also, we ensured an equal representation of male and female participants. Women's perspectives were central, considering the prominence of feminist organizations within Unidad Social.

Table 1. Descriptions of Interviewees

Field	Total	Women	Men
Student	3	2	1
Feminist	4	4	0
Union	5	1	4
Territorial	3	1	2
Human rights	2	2	0
Anti-trade	1	0	1
Culture	1	0	1
Popular sector	2	1	1
Social-environmental	1	0	1
Total	22	11	11

The interviews were analyzed using NVivo 12 software, beginning with a code tree that related to the causal mechanisms identified as relevant. We mainly constructed the codes deductively oriented to our mechanisms. Since our research questions relate to two distinct moments, creation and endurance of Unidad Social, we replicated the same codes for these two moments, thereby temporarily differentiating the analysis. Then, we triangulated the information compiled with organizational documents. This strategy helped identify similarities and differences in the statements made in the interviews, press, and public discourse of the different SMOs comprising Unidad Social. To strengthen the causal narrative, we compared the three sources, seeking data saturation within and between them. We considered the expected causal mechanisms to be valid only when the different pieces of evidence were congruent.

THE CREATION OF UNIDAD SOCIAL AND CHALLENGES OF ITS ENDURANCE

The landmark for the creation of Unidad Social was the invitation to form a broad alliance that the Coordinadora de Trabajadores No+AFP, the main SMO pushing for reform of Chile's pension system (Rozas and Maillet 2019, 2024), sent in June 2019 to many SMOs from different policy fields (No+AFP, personal communication, June 10, 2019). The Coordinadora played the role of coalition broker in Unidad Social, as accounted for by our interviewees. A No+AFP activist states:

We created Unidad Social. . . . It [No+AFP] called the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), the Asociación Nacional de Empleados Fiscales (ANEF), Colegio de Profesores, the Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile (CONFECH), UKAMAU, the Movimiento por la Defensa por el Acceso al Agua y la Protección del Medioambiente (MODATIMA). We invited the Coordinadora Feminista 8 de marzo (CF8M). . . . the Asamblea Coordinadora de Estudiantes Secundarixs (ACES), and we had a sit-down with the Federación de Estudiantes de Chile (FECH) (interview 1, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Following von Bülow's (2011) typology, the SMO acted as an articulator that constructed bridges across cleavages to bring together actors and negotiate common positions.

The context that enabled the brokerage mechanism to operate is crucial. No+AFP served as a broker due to its longstanding recognition and leadership, which had been built over more than a decade of recurring protest waves. This cycle can be traced back to the 2006 penguin movement (named after the black-and-white high school uniforms) and includes the student and socioenvironmental movements (HidroAysén) of 2011, No+AFP in 2016, and the feminist movement in 2018 (Donoso and von Bülow 2017, Rozas and Maillet 2019, 2024, Palacios-Valladares 2022). Interviewees from Unidad Social's different fields (union, feminist, popular sector, culture, student, and socioenvironmental) agree on the importance of previous mobilization campaigns. In the words of a leader of MODATIMA, an environmentalist SMO:

We had previously worked together; we all knew each other from before. I think we shared certain work logic and goals. For example, we reported on politicians and conflicts of interest, proposed different economic and development models, had leaders with a national presence, and had international collaboration (interview 8, personal communication, December 16, 2020).

These histories of interaction, based on trust and respect, which are central to generating ties between SMOs and activists (van Dyke and Amos 2017), were often translated into friendships and mutual recognition between leaders, facilitating the initial construction of Unidad Social. The testimony of the spokeswoman of the Coordinadora Feminista 8 de Marzo (CF8M) illustrates this process:

Long-standing shared trajectories enabled the development of collaborative relationships, confidence, and mutual recognition. This, in turn, made us realize that the people we interacted with in open assemblies were the same ones we encountered in the streets. (interview 22, personal communication, January 19, 2021).

The broker role is integral to the process of constructing a common understanding (von Bülow 2011). In the case of *Unidad Social*, it facilitated a frame-bridging mechanism that emerged from the experiences of previous protests. In the “long shared trajectories” mentioned in the quote above, a common collective action frame was also constructed based on defining a problem and possible solutions (Snow et al. 2019). This shared understanding was captured in the slogan “tired of it, we’ve come together,” which was part of the manifesto of *Unidad Social* (2019), a statement signed by fifty-two SMOs.

This slogan acknowledged the frustration stemming from a decade of significant movements across diverse fields, including education (both high school and university levels), pensions, healthcare, labor relations, environmental issues, local development, and gender equity, among others. All these mobilizations shared a common demand: opposition to the market’s dominant role in providing public goods and services across various policy areas and the resulting inequalities (Roberts 2014). On one hand, “tired of it” encapsulated a shared diagnosis that sectoral mobilization had been ineffective in driving political change within an economic system that had commodified various aspects of life. Thus, the collective action problem lay in the fact that each SMO had been mobilizing independently. On the other hand, “we’ve come together” highlighted the proposed solution (prognosis): uniting under a broad coalition, *Unidad Social*, to enhance the collective impact on the political system. This was expressed in the manifesto of *Unidad Social* (2019) and in the interviews. The manifesto stated,

The social movements and organizations that endorse this manifesto are determined to change this situation [commodification of life]. We refuse to remain inactive and resign, nor will we each continue to march separately with limited or no results. We want a different society—one with more freedom and democracy, more equality and justice, more solidarity and fraternity. We are all in agreement on this, which is why we have decided that the time has come to act in unison. . . . Only by joining our wills can we build a better present and future, overcoming despair and frustration, and fostering the trust and strength needed to secure the rights that are currently denied to us (*Unidad Social* 2019).

An interviewee from a participating feminist organization also highlighted the shared criticism of the functioning of democracy: “The core idea, I believe . . . can be summarized as the effort to unite social movement forces into a bloc that positions itself politically as anti-neoliberal and opposed to the 30 years since the transition to democracy” (interview 4, personal communication, December 4, 2020). A critical stance toward both democracy and the neoliberal model enabled the formation of linkages between sector-specific yet ideologically aligned SMO frames. The assessment of the democratic era was a central element of the shared collective action frame that emerged through the frame-bridging mechanism. *Unidad Social* held the *Concertación*, the center-left coalition that governed from 1990 to 2010, responsible for maintaining the neoliberal model and failing to address the social demands advocated by SMOs. In the words of Esteban Maturana, leader of the *Confederación Nacional de Funcionarios de la Salud Municipal*: “They [the *Concertación*] have no moral authority. They are people who we consider as part of the problem and not part of the solution. From their position of power, they have kept intact the [economic] model imposed by the dictatorship” (Jara, 2020).

In a similar vein, a member of the *Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos* stated:

Unidad Social was established as a coordinating entity, bringing together organizations that . . . [upon] realizing the necessity of linking one fight with another . . . putting at the center . . . the terms of the [neoliberal] model . . . and the construction of a democratic Chile very different from that imposed by the dictatorship and administered up to this day. Previously, they [politicians] divided us, and today, we understand that this fight must be undertaken together (interview 14, personal communication, December 30, 2020).

Finally, for the SMOs involved in *Unidad Social*, the rise to power of Sebastián Piñera’s center-right government (2018-2022) marked an intensification of neoliberal dominance, which they perceived as a significant threat. This shared attribution of a threat also served as a unifying

mechanism. This larger-scale threat facilitated the construction of a coalition of social movement organizations from different sectors (van Dyke 2003).

Brokerage, frame bridging, and attribution of opportunities and threats contributed to the creation of Unidad Social. All three mechanisms were enabled by a prolonged cycle of mobilization, during which activists and organizations forged relationships. In the initial stage of creating Unidad Social, threat attribution played a secondary role, as all governments since 1990 were perceived to have adopted neoliberalism. The relative importance of perceived threats as a mechanism would change considerably after the October 2019 social uprising, producing what we identify as polarization and frame dilution.

Struggling to Persist: Confronting the 2019 Social Uprising

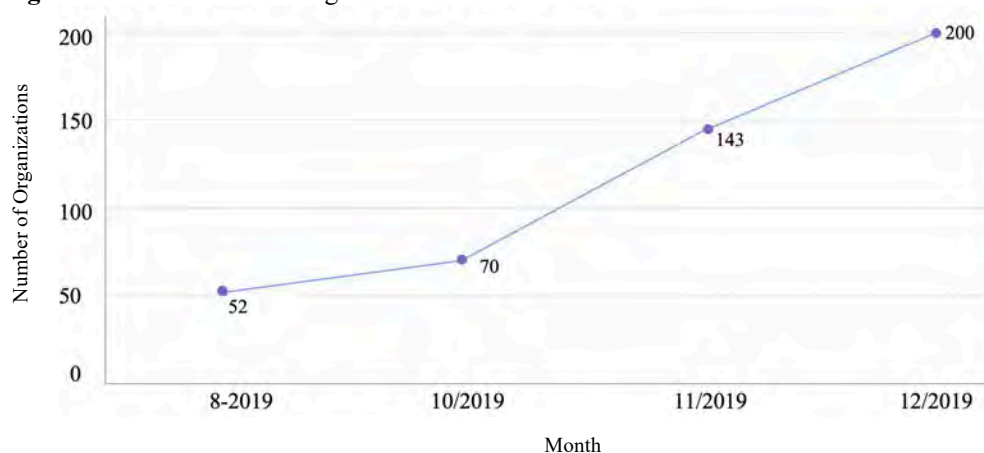
Just two months after its formation, Unidad Social faced a significant shift in Chilean politics (Somma et al. 2021). The social uprising that began in October 2019 was a transformative political event (Sewell 2005; Basta 2018). The two pivotal moments of the 2019 events were the onset of protests in October and a crossparty agreement on November 15 to hold a plebiscite for a new constitution to address the political turmoil.

In the lifespan of Unidad Social, the social uprising can be seen as an early external shock that destabilized its internal decision-making processes. It triggered a pronounced inter-organizational divide and intersectional competition, which undermined the coalition's frame-bridging efforts and disrupted the previously effective brokerage mechanism. Thus, in this new scenario, Unidad Social struggled to maintain its persistence. We attribute this process to the activation of two mechanisms: first, the reversal of frame bridging, which we term "frame dilution," and second, polarization.

At its outset, the social uprising did not directly dismantle the frame of the crossmovement coalition. However, it altered perceptions of political threats within Unidad Social. On one hand, Piñera's government declared a constitutional state of emergency in response to the political turmoil, deploying armed forces across the country. The severity of the situation drew the attention of international human rights organizations, which condemned the human rights violations occurring in Chile (Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020). Within this context, some of the SMOs in the coalition believed it was crucial to negotiate with the government to halt the human rights violations. On the other hand, another faction of Unidad Social advocated for sustained mobilization to demand structural changes, including a constitutional assembly with significant participation from grassroots organizations.

At the same time, the eruption of the social uprising expanded the number of SMOs that wanted to be part of the crossmovement coalition, affecting its organizational structure. As figure 1 shows, the coalition went from 52 organizations in August 2019, the month Unidad Social published its manifesto, to more than 200 in December 2019.

Figure 1. Unidad Social's Organizational Growth



This influx of new organizations increased the coalition's heterogeneity and weakened Unidad Social's cohesion, primarily because the influx of newer, smaller, grassroots SMOs strained the trust among the founding activists of Unidad Social, which had previously been key to enabling brokerage. An interviewed activist emphasized this concern:

Perhaps the mistake happened when Unidad Social expanded too rapidly, bringing in people with whom we didn't share trust, policy preferences, or well-established personal relationships. This created a challenge, and the problems began from that point on (interview 5, personal communication, December 7, 2020).

Tensions and the lack of cohesion were also partly attributable to inadequate organizational structures, which were insufficient to accommodate and reconcile the often-divergent perspectives. One leader of an organization for housing rights spoke of these difficulties:

Unidad Social was established as a grand assembly, but with time . . . we began to see that . . . it had its problems from an organizational point of view. . . . Imagine a very large assembly with hundreds of people and so many voices (interview 15, personal communication, December 31, 2020).

The assembly, the coalition's primary decision-making body, became ineffective in facilitating discussions that could strengthen its collective action frame and establish a unified stance amid a rapidly changing political environment. Disagreements over potential solutions to the political crisis led to frame dilution, that is, a process of disconnecting the understanding of the political scenario from the actions to deploy for addressing this context. For example, as one activist recalls:

One source of tension within Unidad Social, generating frictions that remain difficult to resolve, was the call by numerous organizations to actively support the "mark your vote AC" campaign for the Constituent Assembly (AC). (interview 9, personal communication, December 2020).

This campaign reflected ongoing discontent with the composition and character of the Constitutional Convention established by the November 15 agreement. The "mark your vote AC" campaign thus advocated for the establishment of a constitutional assembly.

Diverging approaches among SMOs to address emerging threats, combined with the coalition's rapid expansion and resulting frame dilution, contributed to internal divisions. The literature has identified this kind of internal dispute in coalitions and social movements as polarization (Jung 2010; Tarrow 2011). This is precisely what occurred within Unidad Social. With the November 15 agreement to hold a plebiscite for a new constitution, many feared that President Piñera would attempt to find an institutional solution to the political crisis that excluded civil society (Escudero and Olivares 2021). The government invited most political parties with parliamentary representation to discuss the possibility of drafting a new constitution. This initiative was met with resistance by specific sectors within Unidad Social. From the point of view of a union leader (Fuentes, 2019):

He [the President] once again wants to negotiate behind closed doors; that is a type of negotiation that the people are tired of; no one here will accept that something like this is done behind the back of the citizens who are mobilizing. They [the political parties] did not call the people to take to the streets; rather, they have been the cause and part of the crisis. Therefore, they cannot lend themselves to a new operation; they will be repudiated by the organizations and, above all, by the citizens.

In the lead-up to the negotiations between the political parties and the government, Unidad Social called for a nationwide general strike on November 12, 2019. Part of the call expressed the inspiration behind it: "Chile woke up, millions of Chilean men and women have mobilized to express their indignation and rejection of abuses, increases, and the current neoliberal model" (El Desconcierto 2019a).

The unprecedented constitutional process deepened polarization within the crossmovement coalition, creating a divide between those advocating for institutionalization and those favoring

radicalization. It produced what Jasper et al. (2022: 6) term “the engagement dilemma,” the choice between entering a new arena in hopes of achieving favorable outcomes or avoiding the risks associated with such engagement. Some SMOs saw the constitutional process as an opportunity to advance social rights and reduce government repression (Griffero Pedemonte 2020; Cáceres 2020), aligning with the coalition’s institutionalization wing. In contrast, others perceived it as a tactic to stall social mobilization and maintain existing institutions without achieving the sweeping changes they sought (El Desconcierto 2019b), a view associated with the radical wing of Unidad Social. The first group consisted of social movement members affiliated with the center and left-wing political parties, including the Frente Amplio, a left-wing political coalition led by former student movement leaders. This group also had a strong presence of trade unions. The second group was represented by the SMOs linked to smaller, recently formed political collectives and movements. These divergent perspectives highlight how SMOs continuously assess their political context, reevaluating threats and opportunities in response to elite alignments and shifts in governmental responsiveness.

These tensions between SMOs of different fields had implications for Unidad Social’s strategic decision making. The divisions became public by the end of November 2019. Despite the agreement for a constitutional process, mobilization continued across the country. In this context, a group of union SMOs, known as the Union Block, met with the Minister of Internal Affairs at the presidential palace to demand progress on the labor rights agenda. The Union Block’s decision to meet with government officials in November 2019 illustrates their intention to adopt a more representative role rather than an articulating one (von Bülow 2011). A leader of a feminist organization criticized the union leaders’ decision: “An issue that also was incompatible with our participation was the moment when it was decided, once again, from this Union Block—because it was the only block that took these initiatives, arrogating to itself the representation of Unidad Social when there were many other sectors involved.” (interview 8, personal communication, December 2020).

The criticism of the Union Block’s decision also underscores the conflicting approaches within the coalition, contrasting the top-down decision-making style of larger blocks with the more horizontal, collective approach favored by smaller SMOs. An interviewee belonging to a local SMO that works on heritage protection referred to the Union Block in the following terms: “The Union Block . . . made some decisions without consulting the assembly and from there an important tension was generated about, well, who we are . . . and who makes the decisions” (interview 18, personal communication, January 7, 2021). This statement illustrates how polarized Unidad Social had become.

The meeting with the government resulted in what Unidad Social members referred to as an “accountability problem” of the Union Block towards the rest of the SMOs belonging to the coalition. Specifically, prominent members of Unidad Social were upset about the lack of transparency surrounding the discussions with the government (El Desconcierto 2019c). As one leader, belonging to the more leftist sector of Unidad Social and a feminist organization, argued: “The meeting yielded no tangible results except to discredit these leaders, as it merely served to legitimize the government as a seemingly valid interlocutor” (interview 22, personal communication January 19, 2021).

Addressing the threats posed by the political events described required both a shared strategic assessment and effective decision-making capacity. However, internal relationships had deteriorated, and No+AFP’s ability to function as a broker had weakened. The primary leader of No+AFP, Luis Mesina, withdrew from active participation within Unidad Social and began pursuing parallel initiatives, particularly in negotiations to select candidates for the constituent assembly. As a result, brokerage, a key mechanism for coalition-building during the formation of Unidad Social, became less effective in fostering internal unity.

Thus, the emergent polarization mechanism fragmented the coalition, undermining broker leadership and its articulating role. This finding contrasts with Beamish and Luebbers (2009), who argued that when an alliance between different SMOs is facilitated through brokerage, the coalition typically strengthens its ability to navigate organizational challenges and conflicts. The

case of Unidad Social highlights that the significant shifts in the environment where the coalition operated challenged its organizational capacity to respond to changes, opportunities, and threats.

A constantly changing political context, such as the social uprising and the subsequent constitutional process, also complicated the consolidation of the shared collective action frame that initially served as a source of internal cohesion during the creation of Unidad Social. In part, this was due to the challenges to deliberation inherent in the way the coalition was organized. As one interviewee put it:

This idea of nonverticality and the idea of continuing with the assembly is also a weakness . . . that is, organizations that have a representation of a couple of people had the same capacity to veto or the same weight when voting, or defining certain things, as an organization that had national [representation] (interview 17, personal communication, January 2021).

Tensions between SMOs of national reach and those with only a local presence, therefore, also counteracted the cohesive effect of frame bridging as a mechanism (interview 2, personal communication, December 2, 2020). In other words, prior “common understandings” (von Bülow 2011) began to fragment, specifically in the approach to organizing the crossmovement coalition as a first step toward mobilizing and addressing a solution to the problem of neoliberalism.

This situation motivated an internal restructuring of Unidad Social based on the policy fields to which the SMOs were linked. At the end of 2019, the coalition began organizing in fourteen “blocks” to emulate the approach of trade unions. Each block undertook its own autonomous work, whose decisions and actions were brought to the national coordinating level via the coordinators of each block. A leader of the feminist bloc commented on this change of strategy:

[Before this new organizational structure], apart from being inoperable and long, the meetings were not useful for producing a working plan. . . . So, we said, “It would be better if this type of work, this articulation of work, was done in each group’s own space, and from there, we decided to divide ourselves into blocks” (interview 10, personal communication, December 2020).

However, this was not enough to reduce polarization, consolidate a shared frame, and restore more cohesive coalition dynamics. The tension between the Union Block and organizations such as ACES, composed of high school students, and CF8M, the main feminist umbrella organization, became salient when Unidad Social had to position itself in relation to the political response to the protests. An ACES leader explained:

It was in this context that a first tense assembly took place where the same thing happened: we were not allowed to speak, we were ridiculed for being high school students, we were told that we were childish in our political positions, but we also saw that things were being done underneath: how can it be that a party is being invited [to the assembly] without the full approval of the plenary? (interview 5, personal communication, December 2020).

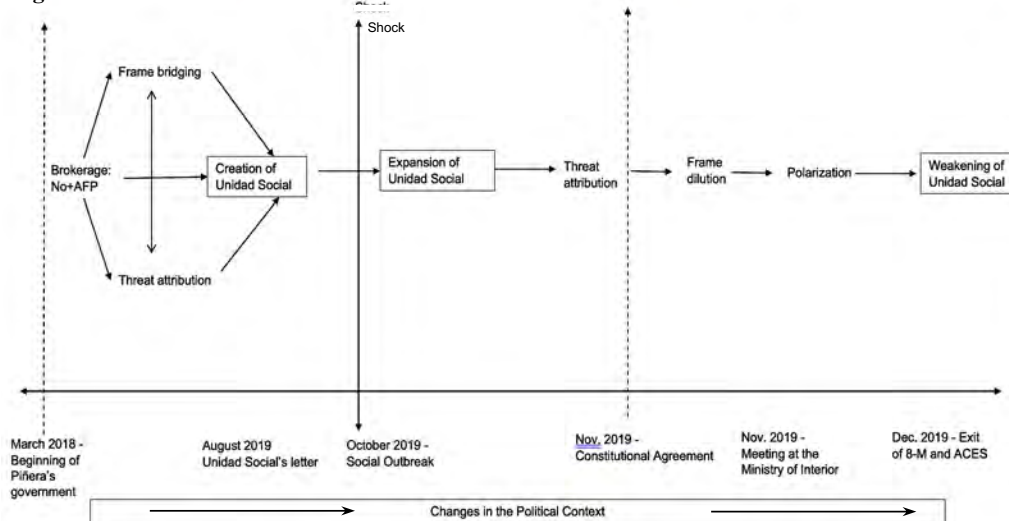
This growing divergence triggered the exit of two of the coalition’s founding SMOs, the ACES and the CF8M. Both groups criticized the Union Block’s leaders for leaving no room for deliberation and frequently emphasizing the perceived lack of experience among the younger and feminist leadership. In their public resignation letter to Unidad Social, CF8M stated: “The Union Block has maintained a path contrary to unity and that resembles exclusion” (Segovia 2020). The spokeswomen of CF8M also signaled that some Union Block leaders exhibited male chauvinistic attitudes (Carrillo and Manzi 2020).

In summary, the opportunities and threats that emerged from the 2019 social uprising initially fueled social mobilization, allowing for the growth of Unidad Social and prompting its call for a general strike, which put significant pressure on the government. However, as the political crisis unfolded, divergent viewpoints weakened the unity of Unidad Social and diluted its collective action frame, which ultimately deterred further joint mobilization efforts. The November 15 agreement, in particular, revealed tensions and conflicts related to distinct organizational cultures that neither the brokerage nor the frame-bridging mechanisms were able to neutralize. Thus, the social uprising proved more detrimental than beneficial for Unidad Social, as the polarization between institutionalization and radicalization strategies weakened its previously shared frame, particularly concerning the solution it should advocate.

No+AFP, the organization that previously served as a broker, lost its leadership, and existing relationships were insufficient to maintain internal cohesion as shifting threats and opportunities altered roles and internal dynamics. No+AFP transitioned from an articulator to a more coordinating role and ultimately took on a representative position within the Union Block, a role that organizations that favored a more horizontal decision-making structure did not acknowledge or recognize. Ultimately, frame dilution and polarization undermined the sustainability of Unidad Social and can be understood as contractive mechanisms, as proposed by Koopmans (2004). As Tarrow (2011) cogently argues, the phenomenon of contentious politics cannot rely on a single mechanism; it requires the interaction of multiple mechanisms to be effective. To analyze processes, such as the formation and evolution of crossmovement coalitions, it is, therefore, essential to identify the underlying mechanisms and examine how they interact and influence one another in the evolution of contentious episodes.

Figure 2 summarizes the process of creation and decline of Unidad Social. No+AFP urged other organizations to come together under a common umbrella to coordinate efforts toward the de-commodification of life. SMOs from various sectors viewed Sebastián Piñera's rise to power as a threat, anticipating a deepening of neoliberalism, though this mechanism was not central to the formation of Unidad Social. No+AFP's brokerage facilitated frame-bridging, uniting SMOs around a shared diagnosis that they lacked the capacity to alter the status quo independently and needed to collaborate to advance their demands (prognosis). The social uprising of October 2019 sent shockwaves through Unidad Social, straining its internal governance and significantly increasing the number of SMOs within the coalition. This upheaval polarized the organization, dividing it between those advocating for a more radicalized mobilization and those seeking an institutional pathway to address social discontent. Simultaneously, the uprising disrupted the strategic consensus previously built through frame bridging, giving rise to divergent views on the coalition's relevance in the evolving political landscape. The constitutional agreement of November 15, 2019, further intensified polarization and frame dilution, ultimately contributing to the decline of Unidad Social.

Figure 2. The Creation and Decline of Unidad Social



CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis of the Unidad Social case, this article aims to contribute to the literature on social movements in general, and to the less studied field of crossmovement coalitions, in particular (van Dyke and Amos 2017). This case provided an opportunity to analyze mechanisms

discussed in social movement coalition theories and to explore the unique dynamics of alliances comprising SMOs from more than two distinct fields. At the same time, this article aimed to advance our understanding of recent political processes in Chile, reevaluating the role of Unidad Social, which, to date, had been overlooked in the analysis of the 2019 social uprising (Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020; Somma et al. 2021).

The creation of Unidad Social is an outcome enabled by more than a decade of diverse sectoral mobilizations. Brokerage and frame-bridging, and, to a lesser extent, a shared attribution of opportunities and threat, were particularly important in creating this crossmovement coalition. In the immediate aftermath of its creation, it had to deal with the social uprising of October 2019. This transformative political event (Sewell 2005; Basta 2018) triggered a process of coalition weakening, ultimately leading to its decline. In a somewhat counterintuitive sequence, the magnitude of the mobilizations and the cycle of protests complicated the pursuit of Unidad Social's shared agenda. This was partly driven by the attribution of threats associated with turmoil and the influx of organizations with diverse structures and cultures, which hindered the consolidation of a collective action frame that could serve as a unifying force for the coalition.

Divergent interpretations of political events following the November 15 agreement ultimately turned the social uprising into a source of polarization for Unidad Social. In this context, prior interactions and shared trajectories were insufficient to facilitate decision making, which had become difficult due to the coalition's growing heterogeneity, nor to sustain a unified stance against the institutional response to the uprising. We conceptualize this process of decline through the interplay of polarization and frame dilution, which gradually eroded the coalition's cohesion and decision-making capacity. As this case shows, it is necessary to examine how quickly contextual conditions can change and the impact they can have on ongoing coalition-building processes. Under the conditions described in this article, the mechanisms of brokerage and frame-bridging, which were crucial to the formation of Unidad Social, were effectively neutralized.

Our study, like most in-depth case studies, exhibits strong internal validity. Our main finding is that the mechanisms at play during the coalition-building process are not constant but vary over a relatively short time (Beamish and Luebbers 2009; Chazan 2016). Unidad Social's rapid rise and decline can be partly attributed to the exceptional political context it faced shortly after its formation. Unlike other well-studied crossmovement coalitions, such as the global-justice movement or the anti-free-trade movement in Latin America, which developed over several years or even decades, Unidad Social's trajectory unfolded within a comparatively short time frame. Hence, a key contribution of this study is its analysis of the interaction between coalition formation and a highly dynamic political environment marked by intense mobilization and an increased number of SMOs joining the coalition. In this regard, our findings resonate with "the extension dilemma" explored by Jasper et al. (2004, 2022), which examines the challenges of agency in social movement decisionmaking. Our case study highlights the critical need to consider the risks associated with uncontrolled expansion, underscoring how rapid growth and increasing heterogeneity can undermine a crossmovement coalition's long-term viability.

The evolution of Unidad Social also shares key similarities with other empirical cases of crossmovement coalitions. For instance, the global-justice movement's mobilization against neoliberalism and its consequences for global trade, human rights, and the environment was facilitated through the construction of activist networks, participation in social forums, and the development of horizontal ties (Daphi et al. 2022). Similarly, the various occupy movements worldwide were united by a shared sense of indignation over the causes and consequences of the 2008 economic crisis (Calhoun 2013). Additionally, research on coalition building (e.g., Li, Bernard, and Luczak-Roesch, 2024) suggests that broad, multi-issue coalitions with diverse ideological perspectives may face significant challenges in effectively mobilizing their core constituencies. The case of Unidad Social reinforces this argument, illustrating how ideological diversity and competing strategic orientations can hinder cohesion and long-term sustainability.

Last, although it falls outside the temporal scope of our research, it is important to briefly address Unidad Social's trajectory following the 2019 social uprising. In March 2020, the Chilean government implemented restrictions in response to the COVID-19 health crisis, posing an

additional challenge to Unidad Social's efforts to establish itself as a relevant political actor. The coalition was forced to shift its organizational structure and decision-making processes to a remote setting, conducting national and block meetings via the virtual platform Zoom. Consequently, most of Unidad Social's activities in the postuprising period, including constitutional seminars and public statements, were carried out remotely.

Regarding the constitution-making process that emerged from the November 15 agreement and the subsequent electoral disputes, Unidad Social played a secondary role. While some SMOs and activists remained engaged in coalition activities throughout 2020, disagreements over the electoral strategy for the constitutional convention led many organizations to act independently. One faction of the coalition endorsed the leftist electoral list "Apruebo Dignidad," which included the Frente Amplio, the Partido Comunista, the Partido Federación Regionalista Verde Social, and other small leftist parties, while other factions participated in competing lists for the Constitutional Convention delegate elections (Rozas-Bugueño 2024; Rozas-Bugueño et al. 2022). Similarly, Unidad Social publicly endorsed Gabriel Boric in the second-round presidential election of December 2021; however, it did not play a prominent role in his campaign. Ultimately, the coalition failed to consolidate itself as a cohesive political actor after the 2019 social uprising.

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