

# *The Collapse of Democracy in Chile*

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**Abstract:** The study of the de-democratization occurring in emerging democracies is one of the key research topics in comparative political science. Some scholars have found that the breakdown of democracy is related to some social structural factors. For example, the inequality of economic development, the degree of political fragmentation of the electorate, and the political institutional arrangements of democracies. Other scholars argue that the collapse of democracy is the result of the actions and choices of political elites. In order to preserve their wealth and status, political elites formed powerful coalitions to undermine democracies, which led to the reversal of democracy into authoritarian regime. Yet there is no single explanation for Chile's democratic collapse. Therefore, this study reviews the literature on the theory of democratic collapse, and analyzes the causes of the democratic collapse in Chile by combining the economic and social conditions of Chile in 1973. The research finds that Chile's democratic collapse is the result of a combination of elite revolt behavior and centrifugal political institutional arrangements. The intense class conflict violates the interests of the political elite and causes the political elite to rebel. At the same time, the centrifugal arrangement of the political system has left the state and the government lacking the ability to effectively counter the revolt behavior of the political elite.

**Keywords:** Chile, democracy breakdown, political system arrangement, elite revolt behavior

## 1. Introduction

A democratic collapse is a reversal of the democratization process, the process of changing from a democratic to a non-democratic regime. With the advance of the democratization wave, many countries have embarked on the path of transition to democracy. However, in the process of democratic transformation and democratic consolidation, many emerging democracies have experienced democratic breakdown. According to Bao Gangsheng, democratic collapse is a political historical event with great influence, which changes the fate of millions or even hundreds of millions of people by changing the polity of a country [1]. The research on the collapse of the political system in democratic countries is one of the hot topics in the field of comparative politics. Some scholars have put forward a wealth of theoretical explanations by studying the cases of democratic collapse in different countries. These theories mainly explain the democratic breakdown from the structural factors of society. When there is a high degree of inequality, a low level of economic development, a high degree of political cleavage among voters, and the constitutional design and political institutional arrangement of a country show obvious centrifugal characteristics that make the effective capacity of the state inadequate, democratic institutions tend to collapse [1]. Some scholars believe that the

collapse of democracy is in line with the logic of class conflict, elite revolt and democratic collapse [2]. Democracy is a top-down political process and a political system designed by authoritarian elites to ensure their own interests [3]. When the political preferences of the lower classes threaten the wealth status of the political elites through procedural competitive elections, the political elites tend to form coalitions to bury the superior democratic regime. Starting from 1932, Chile established a competitive political system after a long period of political chaos and conflict, and later improved citizens' political participation through the expansion of universal suffrage, thus achieving democratization of the political system [1]. However, after a long period of stable democracy, Chile's democracy collapsed in 1973. Although there are abundant country studies on the cases of democratic collapse, there is no systematic theoretical explanation for the democratic collapse in Chile in 1973. An exploration of Chile's de-democratization could give similar democracies policies to improve democratic stability. Based on the literature survey method, this study attempts to make a comprehensive explanation of the democratic collapse in Chile. This research will first collect the theoretical research literature on the collapse of democracy, and then make a reasonable explanation of the collapse of democracy in Chile by using the existing theoretical explanations according to the political and social situation of Chile in 1973.

## **2. Description of the Collapse of Democracy in Chile**

The collapse of democracy in Chile is a complex historical event, involving domestic political, economic and other factors. After the middle of the 20th century, Chilean politics was largely dominated by class conflict. The vast wealth gap and strong dissatisfaction for economic inequality after the lower classes gained universal suffrage gradually tore the country apart [1]. In the 1970 presidential election, Salvador Allende, a leftist politician who represented a united front, won the presidency, becoming the first socialist leader in Latin America to be elected to power. After Allende came to power, he proposed to take the socialist road through peaceful means. In response to the demands of the lower classes, Allende's government introduced a number of radical socio-economic reforms. However, Allende's policies were against the interests of Chile's upper class and political elite, and were opposed by right-wing forces in the United States and Chile itself. At the same time, the shortcomings of the Allende government's radical economic reform policies were becoming apparent. Allende's economic reforms led to massive inflation in Chile, causing the cost of living to rise sharply. The shortage of necessities makes it impossible for Chileans to maintain the most basic needs of life. As a result, Allende's radical reforms brought the Chilean economy to the brink of collapse. Because the Allende government's policy of nationalizing large enterprises had confiscated the copper mines of American multinational companies in Chile, the United States government secretly colluded with the Chilean reactionaries in an attempt to overthrow the Allende government. On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military staged a coup and overthrew Allende's government. During the coup, the military used violent means, including bombing the presidential palace and other government buildings, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Allende was shot dead during the coup, and military leader Augusto Pinochet became Chile's new leader. Pinochet's government then imposed a harsh military dictatorship and suppressed all political opposition, including left-wing politicians, trade unions, and student movements. Under Pinochet's government, Chile's Congress was shut down, political parties were dissolved, and democratic institutions were completely destroyed.

## **3. Analysis of the Collapse of Democracy in Chile**

### **3.1. Class Conflict**

Chile's democratic collapse is the result of elite revolt, and fits the logic of class conflict-elite revolt-democratic collapse. Latin America is a region with extremely high income inequality and very low

social mobility. It has experienced several bouts of economic stagnation and was plagued by hyperinflation from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s. Chile's economic inflation reached 600% in 1973 [4]. Economic determinism holds that democratic regimes are less likely to survive in economically underdeveloped societies, economically unequal societies, and those with low economic performance. When reviewing the research literature on democratization, Geddes found that almost every scholar who studies democratization has evidence that democracy is easier to achieve in more developed countries [5]. Chilean society had significant socioeconomic inequality prior to the 1970s, and this inequality led to high levels of social stratification and clear class divisions. Oppenheim divides Chilean society at the time into three classes: a large underclass dominated by farmers, urban and rural workers; a complex middle class consisting of teachers, white-collar workers, administrators, small businessmen and other professionals and the like; and finally, an upper class composed of the big landowners and the big bourgeoisie [6]. Social division is a concept that highly coincides with the political division of the electorate. Lipsat was one of the first scholars to systematically discuss the effect of social fragmentation on the stability of democracies. He believed that the center-periphery regional fragmentation, church-state religious and secular fragmentation, land-industry sectoral fragmentation and capitalist-worker class fragmentation existing in developed industrial democracies in Europe and the United States directly affected a country's political system and democratic stability [7]. Bao Gangsheng further defined social fragmentation as the political fragmentation of voters in view of the fragmentation of political participants and voters in the political field. According to Bao Gangsheng, when the degree of political fragmentation of voters is high, serious political confrontations and conflicts may be triggered, thus leading to the collapse of democratic government [1]. The three classes are in different social and economic status, so they have different political positions and preferences on many major issues. As a result, class division manifests itself in intense class conflict in political life.

### **3.2. Elite Revolt Behavior**

The behavior theory of political elites focuses on explaining democratic breakdown from the choices and behaviors made by political elites. According to the theory of political elite behavior, the democratic collapse in Chile was the result of revolt of the political elite. When the political organizations based on the lower masses began to demand redistribution policies, in order to protect wealth and social status, the political elites would choose to subvert the democratic regime and eliminate the possibility of redistribution [2]. When Allende, who represented the lower class, was elected as the president, he proposed to move towards socialism through democracy. Allende's path toward socialism consisted of several radical social reform policies. The most important of these were: accelerated land redistribution and agricultural reform, nationalization of copper mines and large enterprises, and comprehensive economic intervention including income redistribution [1]. These radical reform policies threatened the interests of the upper class political elite, prompting the United States and the domestic political elite to form a strong coalition. Finally, Chile's democracy ended in a military coup. One of the reasons for the collapse of Chile's democracy was the revolt behavior made by the democratic elite in order to protect its core interests.

### **3.3. Centrifugal Degree Arrangement**

From the perspective of constitutional design and institutional arrangement, the democratic collapse in Chile was a result of the centrifugal political institutional arrangement weakening the effective state capacity and failing to ease political conflicts. The theory of political institutional arrangement emphasizes that the constitutional design and institutional arrangement of a democratic regime directly determine the effective state capacity, which is an important condition for easing political

conflicts and realizing democratic consolidation. Linz analyzed the reasons for the breakdown of democracy from the differences between presidential system and parliamentary system. He points out that parliamentary democracy is more likely to cause democratic breakdown than presidential democracy. On the one hand, dual legitimacy can easily lead to the struggle between the president and parliament, resulting in political deadlock; On the other hand, the presidential election is a zero-sum game, which completely excludes the loser from the executive power, which may intensify political competition and trigger political conflicts; At the same time, the presidential system lacks a flexible institutional design and cannot provide a platform for political players to resolve conflicts [8]. In Sartori's view, proportional representation tends to lead to a polarized multi-party system. Polarized multiparty systems are less able to cope with major crises, and polarized multiparty democracies are more likely to collapse than two-party systems [9]. Summarizing the views of scholars such as Linz and Liphardt, Bao proposed the concept and dangers of a centrifugal polity. Centrifugal polity is characterized by highly decentralized regionalism, proportional representation, presidential and semi-presidential systems. In a centrifugal regime, it is difficult for politicians and political parties to reach a minimum level of cooperation conducive to democratic stability, and the state will be weak and unable to effectively resolve political conflicts [1].

### **3.4. Proportional Representation**

From the dimension of government-society relationship, the Chilean Constitution stipulates that proportional representation is adopted in the congressional election. Proportional representation makes Chilean party politics characterized not only by ideological differences, but also by a multi-party system [10]. In general, these parties are roughly divided between parties on the right that advocate capitalism, parties in the center that want to achieve fairness within the capitalist system through gradual social reforms, and parties on the left that seek to overthrow capitalism by means of violent revolution or moderate reform. Bornschier argues that the Chilean party system is not only highly competitive, but also highly polarized [11]. Intense ideological rivalries between the left and right parties have given rise to highly polarized political parties. Polarized political parties often need to cater to the political preferences of specific groups, resulting in very different political programs of different parties. When politicians representing different political parties successfully run for the presidency, the policies they enact are difficult to satisfy the parties. As a result, the parties that won seats in Congress engaged in endless partisan contests, weakening the capacity of the Chilean state.

### **3.5. Presidential System**

From the perspective of internal government, the Chilean Constitution provides for the adoption of a presidential system. The problem of this institutional arrangement is the problem of the dual legitimacy of the parliament and the president, that is, the conflict between the executive and the legislative powers. In fact, the political coalition represented by Allende never won a majority in Congress, which was always in the hands of parties of the right and center. Congress often fought political battles by rejecting Allende's proposals and enacting laws. For example, due to the opposition of the Chilean Congress, the government refused to approve price increases to reduce purchasing power, the government failed to reform the entire tax system, and the government refused to fully devalue the Escudos, causing severe economic dislocation [12]. The constant political confrontation between the president and the Congress brought the government's operations to a standstill, leaving the government unable to resolve the growing political crisis.

Chile's proportional representation and presidential system are typical of centrifugal political institutional arrangements. In a centrifugal polity, the effective capacity of the state is low, political

conflicts are difficult to be effectively controlled, and eventually evolve into political violence and political crisis, and democratic polity tends to collapse.

## **4. Suggestion**

### **4.1. Rapid Development of Economy**

After the democratic transition, developing countries should strive to develop their economies and promote the process of social modernization so as to bridge the class conflicts caused by the excessive gap between the rich and the poor, which will lead to the increase of the political division of voters. It is generally believed that the maintenance of democratic political system is highly related to the level of urbanization, the popularization of education, the increase of the proportion of the middle class and the development of modern political culture of a society, and these social conditions are often difficult to achieve in countries with a low level of economic development [1]. Chile started its new democratic transition again at the end of the 20th century, and it has achieved great success. Today, Chile is one of the most stable democracies in Latin America. Chile's successful democratic transition and democratic consolidation cannot be achieved without its rapid economic development. After a referendum in 1988, Chile transitioned to democracy in 1990. In a referendum in 1988, citizens overthrew dictator Augusto Pinochet. Since then, Chile has been governed by four successive governments (1990-2010) under a center-left coalition. GDP growth averaged 5.2% a year (as measured by the World Bank) under these four governments. Four Syriza governments have succeeded in eradicating poverty and modernizing Chile [13]. For the lower classes, Chile's economic miracle raised their income levels, and the government's refinement of the welfare system improved their quality of life. The narrowing gap between the rich and the poor has gradually bridged the class conflict caused by economic inequality, and the political division of voters caused by class divisions has been greatly reduced. Per capita income levels are by far the best indicator of democratic stability in developing countries that have just made the transition to democracy. Therefore, efforts to develop the economy are the most urgent task for maintaining the stability of democracies in backward countries.

### **4.2. Reasonable Constitutional Design and Political System Arrangement**

The design of the constitution and the arrangement of the political system must suit the national conditions of the country. Choosing a centripetal institutional arrangement will help enhance effective state capacity. In contrast to centrifugal political arrangements, centripetal political arrangements are more conducive to the stability of democratic regimes. Bao Gangsheng summarized Centripetal political system arrangement as centralized state-region system arrangement, government-society system arrangement of simple majority decision system and similar systems, and intra-government system arrangement of parliamentary system [1]. Centralization strengthens national identity, weakens regional identity, centralizes state power and disperses regional power. Centralized institutional arrangements have well reduced the risk of ethnic and regional fragmentation. The first-past-the-post system is conducive to the formation of a two-party system. Duverger's Law is one of the most representative theories in the field of party system. Duverge's law mainly distinguishes the effects of proportional representation and majority rule on political parties: proportional representation tends to form multiple independent parties, while simple majority rule tends to form two large parties [14]. Many independent parties have different representative classes, and political views naturally converge with the political preferences of the voters of the class they represent. As a result, there are irreconcilable differences between the political positions, views and values of different political parties, resulting in the emergence of polarized political parties. Polarized multi-party systems usually lead to turmoil in parliament and the cabinet, to the detriment of democracy.

The opposite happens with first-past-the-post systems. The battle between the presidential system and the parliamentary system goes on for quite a long time. Indeed, parliamentary democracies appear to be superior to presidential democracies in many key respects, especially in their ability to survive under a variety of conditions. From 1946 to 1999, one in 23 presidential regimes died (i.e., became a dictatorship), compared with only one in 58 parliamentary regimes. This fact is often interpreted as proof that the instability of presidential democracies stems from the principle of separation between the executive and legislative authorities that distinguishes presidential from parliamentary systems [15]. Presidential systems cannot usually expect a significant amount of support in parliament, so the political decisions of the president are often at odds with Parliament, and this contradiction is almost irreconcilable, ultimately only allowing Parliament to resort to means outside the constitutional provisions to resolve the conflict. To sum up, the design and institutional arrangements of democratic constitutions need to be adapted to the social structure of the country. Those countries that fail to shape effective state capacity usually lack the means needed to sustain the democratic regime itself [1].

## 5. Conclusion

This paper finds that the collapse of democracy in Chile was the result of two superimposed factors. Class conflicts in Chile intensified the contradiction between the political elite and the people at the bottom, and the political elite formed a powerful counter-coalition in an attempt to destroy the democracy. At the same time, the proportional representation system led to the emergence of a polarized multi-party system in Chile, and parties with different political ideas were locked in long-term party contention. The presidential system makes the party represented by Allende unable to obtain a majority of seats in the Congress, resulting in the president and the Congress often locked in political confrontation due to differences in policies and ideas. Chile's apparently centrifugal institutional arrangement has failed to quell countervailing coalitions formed by the political elite. The collapse of democracy in Chile that the connection between political elites and democracy is fragile, and democracy is only a political system chosen by political elites to protect their wealth status to the maximum extent. In addition, a country's constitutional design and political system arrangement are positively correlated with the stability of democratic polity. When a country's institutional arrangement has the characteristics of a centrifugal polity, the stability of democratic polity will be greatly reduced. For countries in the process of democratic consolidation, efforts to develop their economies are an important means of maintaining democratic stability. The improvement of economic level can effectively bridge the class conflict caused by the wide gap between the rich and the poor. In addition, constitutional design and political institutional arrangements are highly positively correlated with effective state capacity. The choice of a centripetal political system helps to enhance the state's ability to quell political crises. The contributions of this paper is mainly focused on the democratic collapse in Chile in 1973, and the explanation of the democratic collapse in Chile is useful for other countries with similar social environment and political system. At present, only one country, Chile, is selected for the longitudinal study, and there are considerable limitations in the number of cases. The conclusions of this study are based on the social situation in Chile and are not generalizable to democratic collapses that have occurred in countries with different contexts from Chile. Further research is needed on the breakdown of democracy in countries with different contexts from Chile.

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