

What Caused the Chilean Winter?
Social Movement Emergence and the Chilean Student Movement

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Honors Capstone, Spring 2013
University Honors in International Studies

ABSTRACT

Beginning in May 2011, the Chilean student movement emerged as a nationwide effort with massive demonstrations, public strikes, and international renown in just a few short months. Initially calling for education reform, the students' agenda has grown to incorporate the demands of discontented groups throughout the country, and now seeks a complete restructuring of the neoliberal model that has been held up as the dominant model for economic growth and political stability in Latin America. Although media attention has often cited the profound income inequality and high financial costs of the privatized education system in Chile as root causes of the student movement, the question of what ultimately sparked the mass mobilization, known as the "Chilean Winter," has remained a puzzle. This study investigated the case of the Chilean student movement through the lens of social movement theory in order to explain the root causes and underlying conditions that gave rise to the ongoing student protests in Chile. Using a descriptive case study method, the research applied qualitative analysis to analyze primary sources, including official rhetoric and documents of the student movement organizations and leaders, the response by government officials to the students' demands, and Chilean and international media surrounding the movements' emergence from May 2011 to August 2011, when the Chilean student movement emerged with a national and international force. Analysis revealed that the emergence of the Chilean Winter cannot be explained through any one single theory, but rather there exists an interactive relationship between the political processes model, resource-mobilization theory, and framing strategies contributed to the sudden emergence of the student movement.

