Framing Police Violence: Repression, Reform, and the Power of History in Chile

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State violence against protests often backfires, spurring greater mobilization and demands for police reform. Yet major reforms rarely materialize. How can activists frame contentious events to build support for their policy goals? We examine whether historical frames that draw parallels between past and present episodes of state violence make people more likely to support police reforms. We test our theory with a survey experiment in Chile 15 months after security forces cracked down on protesters in 2019, randomizing whether text and visual primes about recent repression were juxtaposed against primes about repression under Chile’s 1973–90 military dictatorship. We found that left-leaning and older respondents who experienced the dictatorship firsthand were more responsive to historical frames than right-leaning and younger respondents. Results suggest that historical framing can boost support for police reform but must be carefully targeted.

 Violence by state agents has recently ignited protests in democratic as well as autocratic countries, and authorities have often responded with even more excessive force. For example, the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman sparked Black Lives Matter mobilizations across the United States. Police and National Guard units subdue the protesters with tear gas, bayonets, flash-bang grenades, and rubber bullets that can maim and kill (Szabo 2020). In Uganda, officers killed 45 people in November 2020 unrest surrounding the arrest of opposition leader Bobi Wine (Ntale et al. 2020). The same day, French police beat demonstrators who tried to stop them from razing a migrant camp (France 24 2020). Hundreds of demonstrators have died at the hands of state forces in Nicaragua, Haiti, and Colombia in recent years (GIEI 2018; Human Rights Watch 2019, 2021). Accordingly, activists have often made police reform a central demand in protests.

High-profile incidents of police brutality often backfire against the state, outraging the public and spurring greater popular mobilization, at least in the short term (see, e.g., Aytaç, Schiumerini, and Stokes 2018; Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003; Francisco 2004; Kurtz and Smithey 2018; Pierskalla 2010). Yet meaningful police reforms rarely materialize.1 In Minneapolis, a city council resolution promising to “end policing as we know it” quietly collapsed as public opinion turned against the proposal (Herndon 2020). Despite initial outrage over police brutality, the French government passed a sweeping bill expanding police powers in April 2021 (Breeden 2021). On occasion, though, police reform movements succeed. In Colombia, public anger after police raped and murdered a young girl in 1993 led to a nationwide push for police reform. The pressure was especially successful in Bogotá, where mandating regular publication of crime statistics increased accountability (Moncada 2009). A

1. We theorize protest duration and windows of reform in app. G.

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mass protest movement beginning in 2017 forced Nigeria’s government to disband the notoriously abusive Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) police unit in October 2020 (Childs Daly 2020).²

Without widespread advocacy by individuals and groups, morally shocking events like George Floyd’s murder rarely translate into policy outcomes. Recent studies emphasize that popular perception of protesters and their goals depends on many factors, including whether protests are peaceful or violent (Wasow 2020), whether they were conducted by majority or minority ethnic groups (Manekin and Mitts 2022), and how media portray them (Arora, Phoenix, and Delshad 2019; Edwards and Arnon 2021; Wasow 2020). These prior observations motivate our central research question: How can activists themselves frame contentious events to build support for their policy goals?

We develop and test a theory about the effects of historical frames on public responses to state violence against protesters. Sociologists and psychologists define frames as “interpretive schemata” that simplify a complex world by “encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment” (Snow and Benford 1992, 137). Frames allow people “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” events within their life space or the world at large (Goffman 1974, 21). This article explores how framing works in a specific context: when frames draw parallels between past and present injustices committed by the state. We hypothesize that reminders of historical state and police violence will make people more likely to support protests and to advocate for present-day police reform.

Our empirical strategy consists of a survey experiment we conducted in Chile during the run-up to the May 2021 election for members of the Constitutional Convention. The election was called after massive street protests rocked Chile from late 2019 to early 2020. The violent police and military response, leaving over 30 people dead and thousands more injured, provoked widespread outrage at the time. We randomized visual and textual frames that juxtaposed these recent events with state repression of protestors during General Augusto Pinochet’s 1973–90 military dictatorship. Our goal was to see whether historical frames caused respondents to feel more sympathetic toward the protesters and increased their intended donations to an organization working on police reform. While we do not find that historical frames affected sympathy and advocacy in the nationally representative sample, we did find that left-leaning respondents and older respondents who experienced the dictatorship firsthand were more responsive to historical frames than right-leaning and younger respondents. This shows that collective action frames based on history can influence substantive policy preferences, but in ways that depend on the experiences and beliefs of the target audience. Our results also corroborate research on the United States (Reny and Newman 2021) showing that protests surrounding police brutality can be polarizing along left-right lines.

Our study makes three contributions. First, we explore a solution to the problem of tepid public interest in police reform, revealing historical frames as a promising tool that activists can use to build support among older populations that are sometimes characterized as resistant to police reform. Second, we contribute novel data gathered at a historic moment in Chilean politics. We discuss our theory and results in comparative perspective, highlighting parallels between popular responses to state violence in Chile and in other countries. Finally, we show that historical legacies of state violence consist of not just political institutions and economic conditions but also the cognitive frameworks with which individuals make sense of the world. In employing experimental methods to explore the effects of historical memory on a nationally representative sample, we are able to demonstrate how historical frames alter public opinion differently in different subgroups. This study can thus serve as a reference point for future research seeking to bridge political science and memory studies (see app. K).

FRAMES, MOBILIZATION, AND RESPONSES TO REPRESsion

Scholars emphasize that state repression of peaceful protest often backfires, provoking moral indignation borne out of a sense that the government has betrayed its duty to the public (Brockett 2005; Hess and Martin 2006). Repression varies contextually in form and level (see Davenport 2007; Earl 2011). Even subtle, targeted repression like surveillance can provoke increased protests (Hager and Krakowski 2022), but state attacks on protesters are especially visible and occur across regime types (e.g., Aytac, Schiumerini, and Stokes 2017; Earl 2011; Francisco 2004). Yet even though state violence against protesters is common, widespread public outrage against it does not always emerge. The public may not side with protesters against the state. Observers may have trouble making sense of sudden, unexpected events and may encounter differing interpretations of protesters’ goals, identities, and use of peaceful or violent tactics. In these circumstances, whether state violence provokes backlash mobilization and support for protesters’ policy demands or produces quiescence theoretically depends on how activists, state representatives, media, and others frame ongoing events (e.g., Aytac et al. 2017;
forces in our experiment may have reasoned that state analogical reasoning. Accordingly, individuals who viewed the history and thereby promote a normative judgment based on protesters had provoked a justi

ed response. This uncertainty provides an opportunity for activists to frame events using slogans, symbols, or practices to help people connect the past to characterize the present. In our Chilean case, it might not have been clear to many observers of the 2019–20 mass protests whether security forces had used excessive force in protest policing or whether unruly protesters had provoked a justified response. This uncertainty offers an opportunity for activists to frame events using history and thereby promote a normative judgment based on analogical reasoning. Accordingly, individuals who viewed the treatment in our experiment may have reasoned that state forces’ repression of protests under Pinochet was illegitimate; therefore, state repression of protests under then-president Sebastiñ Piñera is illegitimate. The judgment that present-day repression is illegitimate in turn leads individuals to support policy change.

Not all historical analogies are equally likely to resonate. Historical memory varies across people within a country or a movement, and understandings of history are always socially and politically constructed (see Olick and Robbins 1998). Yet if the public is broadly aware of a particular event or wave of contention or repression, it becomes “sedimented” in collective consciousness (della Porta 2020, 565–68) and available as a mobilizing tool for activists and groups advocating for political change and institutional reform. If a police crackdown features similarities to a past wave of repression, activists can use slogans, symbols, or practices to help people connect the past and present events and, potentially, to mobilize opposition to police violence. This is because people are psychologically inclined to use historical knowledge and previous experiences when trying to understand new and unexpected political events. Occurrences that evoke the political past, such as the assassination of a social movement leader or the declaration of a state of emergency to suppress protests, can provoke “irruptions of memory” (Wilde 1999, 475), leading the past to become politically salient again among a wide population. These triggering public events can transform political preferences and behavior and spark revolutions (e.g., Mosinger et al. 2022). Going from event to mass action, however, requires shared interpretations of historical events and the political status quo (McAdam and Sewell 2001). Activists therefore strive to forge a collective understanding of, as Lenin (1969) put it, “what is to be done” and to mold how individuals evaluate the costs and benefits of different options for action or inaction (Kahneman and Tversky 1984). Activists may use widely shared historical memories to frame current events and how people respond to them, trying to align others’ frames with activists’ own diagnoses and prescriptions (e.g., Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986). To successfully mobilize the masses, activists need to ensure that the frames they promote have “narrative fidelity” (Benford and Snow 2000, 622), resonating with collective beliefs, identities, and knowledge of history (Petersen 2001; Shesterinina 2016; Simmons 2016).

Protest leaders and heads of social movement organizations can use historical frames to legitimize their contemporary struggles, painting particular “repertoires of contention” (Tarrow 1993) as “politically thinkable” (Schatzberg 2001), logical, and even obvious given past events (Tilly 2006). Examples abound of activists using frames of historical episodes of state violence and public protest to mobilize popular support in the present. Hungarian opposition groups in 1989 organized events around the anniversaries of the crushed 1848 and 1956 revolutionary uprisings and the memory of executed 1956 uprising leader Imre Nagy (Oberschall 1996, 107–8). In 2008, online activists in South Korea “reconstructed memories” of the 1987 June Democracy Movement, seeking to legitimize the ongoing candlelight protests by comparing contemporary protesters and victims of police violence to the demonstrators and martyrs of 1987 (Lee 2014, 66). After 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teacher’s college in Mexico disappeared in 2014, activists who suspected government involvement mounted exhibitions and made statements pointing out parallels to the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, when state forces shot hundreds of student protesters (Campbell 2015). Early in the Black Lives Matter movement, organizers drew connections to the US civil rights movement, organizing “freedom rides” akin to the famous 1960s activist trips into the segregated South that faced police and vigilante violence (Moore and Cullors 2014). Haitians protesting against then-president Jovenel Moïse in 2020 and early 2021 used signs, slogans, and social media to compare his rule to the violent Duvalier family dictatorship (John 2021).

Frames based on historical analogy are likely to resonate with the public, because, barring extreme censorship, knowledge of the past transmits widely through social ties, national educational systems, mass media, and popular culture. Traumas such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots or the disappearances of
dissidents in Argentina’s Dirty War root themselves in collective memory (Chayinska and McGarty 2021; Enos, Kaufman, and Sands 2019) and sometimes resurface in the future. Ethnographic research suggests that such “collective memory anchoring” may prolong a social movement by helping people interpret current events (Gongaware 2010; Messer, Shriver, and Adams 2015). Persuaded by a historical frame, individuals may come to understand an incident of state violence as fundamentally similar to violence deployed by a now-hated past regime. They may associate contemporary political actors with historical figures who are now widely praised or reviled. Accordingly, individuals may wish to cast themselves in new versions of heroic roles—what Roger Petersen (2001) calls “paradigmatic roles”—like civil rights marchers, anti-Nazi partisans, or Catholic martyrs. Historical frames also offer examples of collective action employed in the past, such as protest, revolution, or legislation, that people can emulate in the present.

Historical frames are useful heuristics for understanding and responding to acts of state violence because such events are open to many different interpretations. State violence does not always lead to widespread public condemnation. After US National Guardsmen killed four students at a 1970 protest at Kent State, a Gallup poll found 58% of Americans blamed the Kent students for their own deaths, while just 11% blamed the National Guard (Perlstein 2009). By contrast, protests erupted across Nicaragua in 2018 after police and paramilitaries gunned down demonstrating students. Different historical frames may help explain these different outcomes. Whereas many Americans in 1970 might have looked to World War II as a historical referent that justified state violence (Schuman and Scott 1989, 374–75), Nicaraguans saw echoes of the hated 1936–79 Somoza dictatorship, infamous for its massacres of students (Mosinger et al. 2022). These examples suggest that which historical frames are available and which become widely accepted as the appropriate reference point for ongoing events could have a major impact on mobilization. However, the causal effects of historical frames on reformist attitudes and behaviors remain uncertain.

This article investigates the extent to which historical frames persuade individuals to advocate for policies to constrain state violence. We turn to Chile to examine how historical framing might cause some people to advocate for police reform. Chile is an appropriate case for studying the impact of historical frames because of its history of state violence and mass mobilization. However, neither state violence nor mass mobilization are uncommon in cross-national perspective. While our experimental treatment and the memories it invokes are specific to Chile, our results suggest that activists elsewhere may draw on context-specific historical memories to build support for policy changes.

**CONTENTIOUS POLITICS IN CHILE, 1970–2019**

Chile’s 2019–20 protests were the largest mass uprisings in the country’s history, but they were by no means the first. Here we discuss precursors to the recent unrest and how those past events influence ongoing responses to state repression.

Chile’s 1970 elections installed the socialist President Salvador Allende, whose left-wing political and economic agenda sparked a right-wing backlash. In 1973, the military launched a coup that swept General Augusto Pinochet into power, initiating a 17-year dictatorship (see, e.g., Collier and Sater 2004). After the coup, security forces imprisoned and tortured Allende supporters and built up the domestic secret police, making it difficult to resist the new regime (Remmer 1980). Nevertheless, the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) launched an armed struggle against the dictatorship, and lower-class activists took to the streets (Garcés Durán 2017; Schneider 1995). This contestation escalated into the nationwide Jornadas de Protesta Nacional of 1983–86 (Quiroga 1998; Vargas 2017), culminating in a successful 1988 referendum on ending military rule. Throughout this period, the military, secret police, and Carabineros (the militarized national police force) harshly repressed the opposition and protesters, including extrajudicial killings and torture (Esberg 2021; Policzer 2009).

Chile officially democratized in 1990, but the military placed strong conditions on posttransition political institutions, preserving significant “authoritarian vestiges” (Loxton 2021a). Most importantly, the dictatorship’s 1980 constitution remained in place, impeding legislative reforms and effectively locking in Pinochet’s neoliberal economic policies. The 1988 plebiscite brought no major reforms to the military or Carabineros (Bonner 2014; Garretón 2003; Linz and Stepan 1996; Loxton 2021b). Constitutional reforms in 2005 removed key institutions entrenching right-wing power (Fuentes 2012; Huneeus 2014), and diverse social movements and new generations of activists continued to challenge the state with evolving demands, repertoires, and coalitions (see esp. Donoso and von Bülow 2017). However, dissatisfaction with the state of democracy and economic policies remained high through 2019, when a new wave of mass protests broke out (Castiglioni and Kaltwasser 2016; González and Le Foulon Morán 2020; Somma et al. 2020).

**THE ESTALLIDO SOCIAL, POLICE VIOLENCE, AND REFORM EFFORTS**

In October 2019, students began a fare evasion campaign to protest a 30 peso subway fare increase in the Chilean capital, Santiago. As protests intensified on October 18, police confronted demonstrators, following the Carabineros’ pattern of “escalating force” (Bonner 2014) against protesters. This
coercive response only seemed to multiply protest participants, expanding beyond students and Santiago residents. Conservative president Sebastián Piñera declared a state of emergency and deployed the military against protesters for the first time since the dictatorship. Despite the government cancelling the subway fare increase and extending some other economic concessions, protests spread nationwide. Over 1.2 million people demonstrated peacefully in central Santiago on October 25, representing “all classes, ages, and ideas” (Guerra 2019). Scapegoating the coalition of protesters as criminals, anarchists, and outside agitators, the Piñera government doubled down, broadening police powers in the process (Dammert and Sazo 2021; Somma et al. 2020).

On November 15, Chile’s Congress agreed to hold a constitutional reform referendum in April 2020. Still, protests persisted countrywide through early 2020, until subsiding around the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March. The height of the protest wave, from October 18 to late November 2019, became known as the estallido social (social outburst). This was a time of peak protest participation and violence committed by law enforcement, the military, and a fringe of protesters and unknown actors. Authorities and human rights groups documented at least 31 deaths, around 3,000 injuries, and 20,000 arrests; protesters or other actors attacked over 300 police stations (Amnesty International 2020; Dammert and Sazo 2021, 122). Carabineros were confirmed to have intentionally injured protesters and were blamed in 75% of registered complaints of state violence (Amnesty International 2020).

Protesters were motivated by a variety of economic, political, and social grievances (González and Le Foulon Morán 2020; Somma et al. 2020). Throughout the estallido, however, protesters and observers drew parallels between the contemporary government and security forces’ behavior and the past dictatorship, highlighting continuities in economic policies and political institutions frozen in place by the 1980 constitution (Badilla Rajevic 2021; Bruey 2021). Activists tried to accentuate these historical frames to push for an immediate end to state violence and longer-term economic change, constitutional revision, and reforms to the Carabineros. The estallido’s most iconic slogan was “No son 30 pesos, son 30 años” (It’s not 30 pesos, it’s 30 years), reframing the protests as a response to the legacy of Pinochet, not to the subway fare increase that ostensibly sparked the uprising. Chants like “La dictadura aún dura” (The dictatorship endures) and “Piñera, asesino igual que Pinochet” (Piñera, a murderer just like Pinochet) were common (Badilla Rajevic 2021, 127). Protesters used signs with phrases like “2019 = 1973,” “If you want normalcy, get rid of the military,” and “Game over Piñechet” (combining the leaders’ names; Goldschmidt 2019). Protesters revived dictatorship-era resistance songs, with Victor Jara’s “El Derecho de Vivir en Paz” (The right to live in peace) becoming the movement’s anthem (Pizzaro 2019).

Historical memory of the Allende period, coup, and Pinochet dictatorship has been sustained and contested since 1990 via truth commissions, publications, museums, educators, and civil society organizations that have documented, commemorated, and sought accountability for human rights violations (see app. E). Moments like Pinochet’s 1998 arrest prevented people from forgetting the past (Stern 2010; Wilde 1999). The government itself offers constant reminders: every Chilean president from 1990 to 2021 was related to the dictatorship as a victim, opponent, or supporter (Bautista et al. 2023, 114). Yet until 2019, no mass mobilization had so thoroughly repudiated the political, economic, and martial vestiges of the dictatorship. A Chilean photographer covering the protests spoke of seeing “the new face of Chile. It’s as if the mask fell off overnight. . . . It’s the face of young people who fearlessly challenge the military curfew. It’s the fearful face of our parents and grandparents who remember when the military took over the streets in September 1973 and committed all kinds of atrocities” (Maciel 2019).

Before 2019, relatively few protests in Chile focused on abusive policing and the Carabineros’ impunity (see app. F). The Carabineros remained popular among the majority of the population, carefully managing their image with a coordinated public relations strategy (Bonner 2014; Dammert 2016; Fuentes 2005). In 2019, however, the government’s heavy-handed response to protests seemed to jolt many Chileans into noticing parallels between their current government and the dictatorship; police reform became a central demand for civil society, alongside economic justice and constitutional revision. The journalistic collective Migrar Photo noted how “images of students bloodied by Carabineros’ repression ignited popular fury, and that same night a massive cacerolazo broke out in Santiago.” Below a photo of a protester in a Pinochet mask, they reported that “references to the dictatorship were common. The presence of soldiers in the streets and the curfew revived the memory of a dark past” (Migrar Photo 2019). A 54-year-old protester said that seeing soldiers in the streets “was like a slap in the face for all of us. This history is still alive and we haven’t forgotten what happened when the military took over the streets. It was a very hard time—many died. We do not want the same thing here” (Sutherland and Reeves 2019). Anthropologist Pablo Ortúzar (2019) remarked that “every police abuse

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3. Jara was tortured and murdered by the military days after the 1973 coup.

4. Cacerolazo is the now-common Latin American protest method of banging pots and pans.
turns into hundreds of people prepared to give everything against them.5

Violence perpetrated by the Carabineros inspired vociferous calls for reform during the run-up to the constitutional referendum (e.g., Bartlett 2020). According to Plaza Pública polls, public approval of the Carabineros dropped from 61% in early October 2019 to 36% a year later (half of what it had been five years before); 71% of respondents supported forming a new institution to respond to unrest and preserve public order (Cadem 2020).

In the referendum on October 25, 2020, 78% of voters favored drafting a new constitution and 79% preferred doing so through a constitutional convention (voter turnout was 51%; BBC 2020). People’s attention since the estallido had turned toward the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impacts (Mac-Clure, Barozet, and Conejeros 2020), although police abuses continued.6 The most notorious case occurred in October 2020, just before the referendum, when a Carabinero threw a 16-year-old boy off a bridge. Public approval of the Carabineros remained low at 43% in March 2021, compared to around 70% five years earlier (Cadem 2021). Notwithstanding occasional flare-ups in anger toward police, interest in the estallido and police violence or reform was considerably lower than in October the year before, when the estallido first broke out (details in app. J).

With elections for delegates to the constitutional convention approaching in April 2021, could historical framing spur members of the public to advocate for police reform?7 We designed our experiment to answer that question.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN
We fielded an online survey experiment in March 2021, on the eve of Chile’s constituent assembly election. Our sample comprised 1,900 Chileans who opted into a panel that the survey firm Dynata then balanced to closely match the national population.8

Intervention
The intervention consisted of text alongside images of protests (fig. 1). We randomized whether the text simply described recent protests or included a historical frame comparing violence against protesters in 2019–20 to repression under the Pinochet regime.8 We included two “doses” of historical framing: a low dose in which only the text referenced earlier repression and a high dose in which the text as well as the images referenced earlier repression.

More specifically, in the control condition (fig. 1A), respondents read the following description: “During the estallido social beginning in October 2019, the carabineros committed many acts of violence against unarmed protesters, including beating, blinding, and even killing some protesters.” An image of recent protests accompanied the text, depicting police crackdowns on demonstrators.

In the low-dose treatment (fig. 1B), the image remained the same but respondents read an embellished description: “During the estallido social beginning in October 2019, the carabineros committed many acts of violence against unarmed protesters, including beating, blinding, and even killing some protesters, reminding some people of violence committed by security forces under the Pinochet regime.” (Text was not bold in the survey.)

The high-dose treatment (fig. 1C) used the same text as the low-dose treatment but added a second image alongside the first, depicting a similar police crackdown during protests under the Pinochet regime.

Outcomes
The outcomes of interest were support for the recent protests and for police reform, which we operationalized using four survey questions that respondents answered after seeing the experimental treatment. Following Bonilla and Tillery (2020), we included attitudinal and quasi-behavioral variables. The first two dependent variables, Support of Goals and Perceived Effectiveness, measured attitudinal support for protesters.

Support of Goals: Thinking about the protests that swept Chile in recent months, how much do you support the protesters’ goals? [Responses: strongly support, somewhat support, neither support nor oppose, somewhat oppose, strongly oppose]

Perceived Effectiveness: How effective do you think these protests are at achieving their goals? Please rate the protests on a scale of 0 to 7, where 0 is completely ineffective and 7 is completely effective.

The second two dependent variables, Financial Investment and Letter of Support, were quasi-behavioral measures of how

5. In the first few days of protests, a demonstrator noted that “people are no longer afraid to face the military. They lost the fear” (Vergara 2019).
6. See Piquer (2020). Polls by the Centro de Estudios Publicos found that trust in the Carabineros rose from 17% to 30% between December 2019 and April 2021, while negative assessments of the economy increased from 56% to 70% (González 2019; Le Foulon 2021).
7. In early April 2021, after our survey, the elections were postponed by five weeks because of a surge in COVID-19 infections.
much respondents were willing to invest in advancing the
nominal demands of protesters (i.e., reforming police brutality
and reducing income inequality).

Financial Investment: Imagine you had 40,000 pesos
you were planning to donate to a cause or causes you
care about. How much, if any, money would you
donate to the following activist groups? Please enter
any amount from 0 to 40,000.

• Comisión Chilena de Derechos Humanos, which
focuses on documenting and advocating for ac-
countability for state violence and human rights
violations.
• Fundación Superación de la Pobreza, which fo-
cuses on addressing economic inequality.

Letter of Support: Once delegates are chosen, they will
have the job of communicating citizen concerns to the
constitutional convention. Would you be willing to write
a message to the delegate or delegates from your district
expressing the reforms you hope they will pursue? Please
enter your brief message below.

We describe these latter two outcomes as quasi-behavioral
because, for ethical reasons, we did not actually collect do-
nations or send letters to delegates. The two Financial In-
vestment outcomes reflect two demands that emerged in the
2019–20 Chilean protests: reducing inequality and reducing
state violence. While we expect the framing treatment to in-
crease investment in both initiatives, donations to reduce state
violence should be especially sensitive to historical frames
emphasizing police brutality.

Hypotheses
Given the theory outlined earlier, we expect that historical
frames drawing parallels between security forces’ violence in
2019–20 and state violence during the 1973–90 Pinochet
dictatorship will make individuals more willing to support the
2019–20 protests and the issues animating them. We also
anticipate different effects at different treatment doses:
**H1a.** Support for protests and for police reform will be higher among respondents receiving the historical framing treatment than among respondents in the control group.

**H1b.** Support for protests and for police reform will be higher among respondents receiving the high-dose historical framing treatment than among respondents receiving the low-dose treatment and higher still than among respondents in the control group.

However, the treatment effects should be moderated by individuals’ political ideology and age. Chilean political views today are deeply polarized along left-right lines, especially on policing (Bonner 2014). Such polarization has lasted from Allende’s presidency through the dictatorship and transition, with family attitudes passed down across generations (López and Morales 2005; Tironi 2002; Valenzuela and Scully 1997).10 After a period of relative centrism in the late 1990s and 2000s, Chilean politics since the 2010s have become increasingly polarized once more (Fábrega, González, and Lindh 2018). Political cleavages and voting continue to reflect opinions about the Allende and Pinochet governments (Boas 2016; Visconti 2021). Self-reported political ideology remains correlated with trust in state security forces, with Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey data from 2018 showing left-leaning Chileans with lower trust in the Carabineros and armed forces than their right-leaning compatriots.11 The 2019–20 protests were likewise polarized along left-right lines and along attitudes toward the military regime and its legacies (Somma et al. 2020). We therefore expect that historical framing will have smaller effects on support for police reform among self-identified right-leaning individuals.

**H2.** The historical framing treatment will increase support for protests and for police reform more for left-leaning respondents than for right-leaning respondents.

The effects of historical framing should also vary by age. Older Chileans are more likely to have firsthand memories of police abuse under Pinochet. Periods of upheaval can shape a person’s political socialization and subsequent preferences (see, e.g., Sapiro 2004), with victims of repression and their families and communities more likely to reject and mobilize against the ideology or successors of their oppressors (Balcells 2011; Lawrence 2017; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov 2019). Chileans who experienced direct repression are especially engaged around human rights issues and combating the legacies of the dictatorship (Bautista 2016), so historical frames related to state violence may be particularly resonant.12 Younger Chileans do study in school about the dictatorship’s human rights abuses (Magendzo and Toledo 2009), and such learning may increase their willingness to challenge authoritarian legacies (Balcells, Palanza, and Voytas 2022). However, older Chileans’ suffering at the hands of Pinochet’s security forces and their presumably greater historical knowledge leads us to expect that historical framing will have stronger effects on support for police reform among older individuals.

**H3.** The historical framing treatment will increase support for protests and for police reform more among older respondents than among younger respondents.

### RESULTS

#### Main effects

We used ordinary least squares regression to test the effects of historical frames on the dependent variables described above. To ease comparison across outcomes, we rescaled all dependent variables to range from 0 to 1. Figure 2 summarizes average treatment effects for attitudinal outcomes (fig. 2A) and quasi-behavioral outcomes (fig. 2B), with points denoting regression coefficients and bars showing 95% confidence intervals (50% confidence intervals are superimposed in bold).13 On the whole, neither the low-dose nor the high-dose treatment had any discernible effect on support for protesters or their demands, with the exception that high-dose historical framing increased the number of words that respondents wrote to prospective delegates at the constitutional convention.14 This implies that subjects seeing the high-dose frame became more invested in the constitutional revision process.

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10. Intergenerational transmission of political attitudes is especially common where there has been conflict and repression (Balcells 2011; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017; Rozenas and Zhukov 2019).

11. This is consistent across eight waves of LAPOP surveys from 2004 to 2018.

12. Given the online, impersonal nature of our survey, we did not ask questions about personal or family experiences of repression, to minimize risks of retraumatization.

13. See app. C for full tables of all regression results. Figures in this section show results without controls, but estimates were robust to controlling for age, ethnicity, education, income, religiosity, party preference, urban residence, and whether respondents changed their support for protesters since the estallido ended. Appendix C describes these variables in more detail.

14. We believe these to be precise null effects rather than noisy estimates. Continuous dependent variables enhance our ability to detect small differences, and our preregistered power calculations indicated that we should be able to detect an effect size of .12 (a “small” effect according to Cohen [1988]) with a probability of .8 (one-sided test, α = .05). The fact that we detected significant effects on words written to delegates suggests that our analysis was not underpowered.
perhaps because they felt greater appreciation for its historical importance.

Curiously, though, historical frames did not affect the content of letters that subjects wrote to prospective delegates—only the length. We hand coded every open-ended letter according to whether it advocated for progressive reforms to (a) the economy (reducing inequality, increasing social services, etc.) and (b) state violence (constraining the police, improving human rights, etc.). The following quote illustrates a pro-economic-reform letter: "I hope they carry out reforms for equality, gender equality, to eliminate poverty, free education, free healthcare, recover our natural resources, improve living standards, the minimum wage, rights to water and electricity, social security, eliminate the AFP [privatized pensions], etc."

And this quote illustrates a letter advocating for solutions to state violence: "Police reform, as the Carabineros’ protocols are too aggressive and the majority tend to be people without experience in policing."

Each response received a binary indicator for both categories, so it was possible for a single response to mention both types of reform. Overall, 28% of letters explicitly mentioned economic reform, and 5% mentioned reforming state security forces. Most letters were very general, along the lines of, “Work for the good of Chile and not your personal interests.” Figure D.1 shows no treatment effects on the likelihood that someone mentioned progressive reforms to either the economy or state violence. Historical frames increase broad engagement with the constitutional convention (measured by words written to a delegate, as in fig. 2B) but not engagement with specific issues of debate.

**Interaction effects**

A more interesting story emerges at the subgroup level. We hypothesized that historical frames would have heterogeneous effects on respondents who (a) hold left-leaning political ideologies (hypothesis 2) and (b) are older in age (hypothesis 3). Below, we summarize results supporting those expectations.15

Figure 3 shows the relationship between respondent ideology on a 10-point scale (1 = farthest left; 10 = farthest right) and the predicted donation to a nongovernmental organization focused on reforming police and reducing state violence. The panels show this relationship for the three treatment conditions: control (fig. 3A), low dose (fig. 3B), and high dose (fig. 3C). The more left-wing a respondent, the more that respondent donates to the cause of reforming the police, no matter the treatment arm. This is consistent with what we know about Chilean politics: ideological self-placement correlates with trust in state security forces, with the LAPOP (2018) survey showing left-leaning Chileans to have lower trust in the National Police than their right-leaning counterparts.16

The relationship between left-leaning ideology and larger donations supporting police reform exists in all treatment

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15. Results held up to correction for multiple hypothesis tests with a false discovery rate of 0.08. See app. 1 for details.

16. Respondents rated their trust in the National Police from 1 (none) to 7 (a lot). The average rating was 3.6 among respondents identifying as far left (i.e., those choosing 1 on a 10-point ideology scale, where 1 equals farthest left), compared with 5.1 among respondents identifying as far right (10 on the same ideology scale).
groups, but it is significantly stronger \( (p = .01) \) in the high-dose treatment group.\(^\text{17}\) This suggests, conforming with hypothesis 3, that seeing contemporary protests in the context of historical state violence reinforces left-wing Chileans’ commitment to reforming a status quo in which police violently apply law and order, whereas it reinforces right-wing Chileans’ resistance to reform. However, the historical frame must be sufficiently strong for this effect to occur: the relationship between ideology and donation supporting police reform is statistically indistinguishable under the low-dose treatment and the control condition.

Turning now to the influence of respondent age, figure 4 shows the relationship between age and predicted donations supporting police reform, at different treatment levels. Age correlates negatively with donations supporting police reform under all conditions, suggesting that as people age, they adopt more conservative orientations toward the police. However, the high-dose historical frame (fig. 4C) significantly mitigates this negative relationship between age and donation supporting police reform \( (p = .02) \). This suggests, in line with hypothesis 4, that associating recent police violence with historical instances of police violence makes older Chileans sympathize more with protesters facing repression. Once again, the historical frame must include a visual cue, beyond a textual cue, to produce this effect.

In sum, seeing contemporary protests in the perspective of earlier police violence increases left-wing Chileans’ commitment to police reform (fig. 3) and attenuates older Chileans’ resistance to police reform (fig. 4). However, it also reinforces right-wing Chileans’ aversion to police reform. This implies that reform advocates should carefully consider the target audience of their messaging. Using historical frames to drum up support is a promising strategy when targeting older people, but not when trying to win over more conservative Chileans. Of course, age and ideology are intersecting identities, so organizers may need to judge which identity is more politically salient under the circumstances.

We did not find similar interaction effects on alternative measures of support for protesters (perceived effectiveness, donations to reduce inequality, etc.).\(^\text{18}\) This may be because, compared with other outcomes, donating to police reform efforts relates more directly to the police violence depicted in our historical frame treatment.

The observed heterogeneous treatment effects support a classic claim by Benford and Snow (2000) that collective action frames do not resonate universally (with the rare exception

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\(^{17}\) In this section, \( p \)-values come from coefficients on interaction terms. See tables C.3 and C.5.

\(^{18}\) See app. C for complete results.
of “master frames”) but rather resonate more with some groups than with others. Resonance, they explain, is a function of a frame’s centrality (i.e., its relevance to someone’s life), experiential commensurability (i.e., its congruence with someone’s everyday experiences), and narrative fidelity (i.e., its consistency with someone’s personal ideology). We delve more into these mechanisms in the next section.

**EXPLORING THE CAUSAL MECHANISM BEHIND AGE EFFECTS**

The negative relationship between right-wing ideology and support for police reform in figure 3 is unsurprising. Left-right polarization has featured consistently in Chilean politics since Pinochet’s military dictatorship and its prelude under the Allende regime (Tironi 2002; Valenzuela and Scully 1997). The results in figure 3C indicate that confronting historical continuities, in the form of side-by-side images of Pinochet-era and recent repression of protests, merely compounds the pre-existing preferences of right-wing people for law and order (Gerber and Jackson 2017).

Meanwhile, the interaction between age and support for police reform deserves more attention. The general pattern, of more advanced age corresponding with less support for police reform (fig. 4), corroborates earlier findings that older people express more confidence in police (Bridenball and Jeslows 2008; Cao and Stack 1998; O’Connor 2008). But why would older Chileans become less opposed to police reform when seeing contemporary police violence in historical perspective (fig. 4C)?

Following social psychology research (Jennings 1987), we theorize that “generational effects” are driving the interactions in figure 4. Generational effects occur when political experiences in one’s formative years have enduring impacts on one’s responses to new political stimuli. Figure 4 is consistent with this theory, indicating that older respondents have more empathy for victims of police brutality when they are heavily primed to see contemporary repression as repeating the crackdowns that they themselves may have suffered or witnessed in their youth.

We conduct a separate logit analysis (table 1) confirming that older respondents are more likely than younger respondents to have protested against the Pinochet dictatorship. The predicted probability that a male respondent has protested Pinochet rises from 14% to 28% when his age increases 1 standard deviation above the mean of 41, to 56 (holding other variables at their means). A 73-year-old is more likely to have protested Pinochet than not. This is logical given that the youngest respondents were not even alive during that time.

The same analysis reveals that older respondents are also more knowledgeable about protests of that era, being better able to correctly identify 1983 as the first year of the Jornadas de Protesta Nacional and Rodrigo Rojas de Negri as a prominent
Table 1. Older Chileans Are More Likely than Younger Chileans to Have Protested against the Military Dictatorship and to Be Knowledgeable about the Dictatorship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Protested against Military Dictatorship</th>
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<td>(.28)</td>
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Note. Logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. N = 1,676.  
* p < .05.  
** p < .01.  
*** p < .001.

victim of the military dictatorship.19 This is true even after controlling for personal protest experience under the dictatorship, suggesting that “period effects” may be driving the results in figure 4, in addition to generational effects. Period effects are similar to generational effects, except they do not assume that someone directly experienced a traumatic event; it is enough to be aware of the event as a bystander (Rintala 1963).

Providing further evidence of generational effects, the logit analysis in table 2 shows that age predicts the mode through which respondents acquired knowledge about Pinochet-era protests. Namely, older respondents are more likely than younger respondents to say they learned about those protests from personal experience: the predicted probability of learning about the protests through experience is 18% for the average 41-year-old man and 41% for the average 56-year-old man. Older respondents are less likely than younger people to have learned from school, media, or friends and family.20 The caveat to all results in tables 1 and 2 is that questions for measuring the variables may suffer from posttreatment bias.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our experiment investigated whether framing recent episodes of state violence against protesters through the lens of history would make Chileans more likely to support the protests and to advocate for policies that the protesters were demanding. Results demonstrate the efficacy of historical frames as a tool for promoting political change. They imply that activists can mold how people perceive and respond to current events by constructing frames that resonate with public understandings of history. Because historical frames have heterogeneous effects across population subgroups, activists need to be careful about the audience of their messaging. Specifically, frames that point out parallels between past and present episodes of state violence can activate those who tend to be predisposed to support police reform (left-leaning individuals), as well as older voters who experienced repression earlier in their lives. However, such a targeting strategy is delicate, because conservatism and older age often overlap.

Our results also suggest avenues for future experimental research investigating the attitudinal consequences of specific historical memories on different publics, comparing the effects of historical frames with different emotional valences, or testing different primes and mechanisms of memory transmission. Researchers could, for instance, examine variation in responses to historical frames across identity groups or across national borders. Different historical framing primes about the same event, organization, or key figure may have more positive or negative emotional valences, and so scholars can test their relative attitudinal effects. While we used text and photographic historical framing primes, videos or physical exhibits could potentially have more powerful effects, so it is worth exploring different media for sparking historical memory. Finally, we found that older Chileans had more direct experience of protests, and this was associated with a stronger response to historical framing, so there may be opportunities to examine the effects of different pathways of memory transmission and how, for instance, human rights education or memory museums (see Balcells et al. 2022) might lead to greater resonance of historical frames among younger populations (see app. K).

While Chile’s specific memories of state violence and mobilization may not be found in every context, activists elsewhere are likely to identify powerful, contextually specific historical analogies well suited to their goals. Political actors in diverse settings use historical frames related to state-sponsored violence to mobilize mass support. After the 2017 rise to power of President Emerson Mnangagwa, the Zimbabwean opposition began referencing the 1980s Gukurahundi massacres in which he had been implicated (Solidarity Peace Trust 2019, 20). After Myanmar’s 2021 military coup, demonstrators

19. In total, 16% of respondents protested Pinochet, 29% knew the first year of the Jornadas de Protesta Nacional, and 30% knew Negri as the prominent victim.

20. Overall, 21% of respondents learned from experience, 61% from friends and family, 29% from school, and 54% from media.
chose protest dates and tactics to recall earlier repressed uprisings, believing “the past is an asset to be harnessed” (Wittkeind 2021). In July 2021, a year after massive Black Lives Matter protests against police violence, US President Joe Biden lambasted Republican attempts to restrict voting rights as a “21st century Jim Crow assault” (Biden 2021). For their part, Republican legislatures across the country sought to limit what students learn about past state violence against minorities with restrictions on teaching “Critical Race Theory” (Snyder 2021). Whether historical frames resonate, mobilize, or polarize likely depends both on the specific memories being invoked and on activists’ creativity and skill. Yet through their actions, politicians and activists around the world continually demonstrate their belief that history—or, at least, socially constructed memories of history—can affect the present.

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<table>
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</table>

Note. Logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. N = 1,676.
* p < .05.
** p < .01.
*** p < .001.


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