If the Government Won’t, Then We Will: A Comparative Study of Social Movements in Chile and Guatemala

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Abstract

Much of the current research on social movements in Latin America concludes that large-scale political mobilization has stopped following neoliberal reform in the 1980s. With the exception of the 2011 Chilean student uprisings against neoliberal education reform, the existing literature fails to identify mobilization efforts among peasants in Latin America. By using the Chilean student protests as a baseline, and conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Guatemala, including semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I found that marginalized communities in Guatemala successfully organize themselves to deal with problems either caused by or neglected by their government. These efforts are overlooked because the literature does not account for low levels of government receptiveness or efficacy discouraging social movement participation. This has powerful implications regarding the way we understand social movements, and recognizing these efforts has the potential to empower indigenous peoples and legitimize their ongoing struggle.
Introduction

The effects of neoliberalism in Latin America are usually correlated with a decline in political mobilization and protests (Kurtz, 2004, Pickvance, 1999, Foweraker, 2001), which causes us to stop looking for them. In the case of Latin America, what is happening on the ground is not always congruent with the literature. As a result, we may be missing out on the stories of powerful community leaders and the social change they are making. Additionally, the framework by which we operationalize political mobilization has been limited to political participation, like voting or running for office, and protest and uprising (Campbell et al., 1954, Kurtz, 2004, Sjoberg et al. 2015). This leaves us with a lacuna where social movement strategizing has the potential to be taking place, but we are too focused on the poles to fully understand the activity going on between them. In this study, I aim to uncover how marginalized people use the tools they have to affect change in their own communities in Latin America, using Guatemala and Chile as comparative case studies, and to examine the factors that lead a population to decide which tools to use.

My sample consists of two groups of Maya1 organizers in Guatemala, as well as secondary research about the success of social movements in Chile. I use ethnographic research with my sample in Guatemala, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I also use analyses by Freedom House to measure the receptiveness of governmental institutions in both Guatemala and Chile—both of which I theorize are factors that determine how a population will affect social change—to understand why the people choose to either protest and go through the state, or use community organization and go around the state. I find that there is

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1 According to the Open School of Ethnography and Anthropology (OSEA), the word Maya is a noun and also an adjective, that is, a qualifier that is used to name things that belong to the Maya culture. The word Mayan is often misused as an adjective in English.
evidence to suggest that small-scale, community organizing is taking the place of large scale protest when citizens feel that their government is not receptive and therefore do not feel efficacious. Only when levels of efficacy and perceived government receptiveness are high will people feel motivated to protest. When they do not, they will instead work within their community to address problems they face. Neglecting to understand the detrimental to the continued survival of marginalized people across the globe.

**Neoliberal Reform in Latin America**

As a region, Latin America is booming with neoliberal development, and it has been since the 1980s (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2012, Kurtz, 2004). The neoliberal development policies imposed on states within Latin America have been subject to scrutiny due to the often times harmful effects on peasant populations. Neoliberalism is defined by Brown (2003) as

“A radically free market: maximized competition and free trade achieved through economic deregulation, elimination of tariffs, and a range of monetary and social policies favorable to business and indifferent to poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long-term resource depletion, and environmental destruction.”

Despite deteriorating standards of living, neoliberalism has been linked to a decrease in mobilization and social movement organization throughout Latin America (Kurtz, 2004). While this is a bleak look at neoliberal reform, it is not too far off what is often observed in Latin America. Introduced throughout the 1980s as an intended solution to Latin America’s debt crisis, neoliberal reform is directly causing inequality, poverty, and lack of access to social safety nets through state sponsored programs throughout Latin America (ECLAC, 2010, Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2012, Kurtz, 2004).

**The Intended Goals and Unintended Consequences**

Income inequality has been exacerbated in most nations in Latin America that have implemented the reforms (Bray, 1999). Also throughout Latin America, unemployment rates
soared due to the sale of state run enterprises and the scaling back of public service (Kurtz, 2004). Because of the removal of subsidies on necessary items such as fuel, food, and social services, prices have increased (Crisp & Kelly, 1999). While its implementation was supposedly intended to alleviate debt through loans in exchange for initiating structural adjustment, it left the majority of those in need worse off economically.

Munck (1994) further defines the goals of neoliberal reform, or structural adjustment, as providing “(1) a halt to inflation, (2) state reform and deregulation, and (3) increased investment leading to sustained economic growth.” He then points out that the third stage has largely failed to materialize in Latin American countries (Munck, 1994). Additionally, Munck (1994) states that this is largely due to the fact that under this type of reform, deregulation and privatization take the state out of its central role in the economy, but it fails to replace it with anything else. Instead of sustained economic growth, Latin America has seen an accumulation of wealth in the elitist class and a stagnation and decline of wealth in the working and peasant classes (Munck, 1994).

**Decreased Grassroots Participation**

*Transition to Democracy and Liberalization*

While neoliberal development often disadvantages peasant populations in Latin American states where it is implemented, the research tells us that people do not rise up to demand change. This is true even in instances where the same people mobilized under statist regimes to protest their poverty and marginalization (Kurtz, 2004). Although protesting under the more democratic regimes that adopt neoliberalism is easier and more tolerated, in Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru “political protests were reduced to less than 20% of what they were
under previous authoritarian regimes (Kurtz, 2004) and that in general, protest is reduced following the transition to democracy under neoliberalism (Pickvance, 1999).

**Decentralization and the Proliferation of Non-Governmental Organizations**

Authoritarian regimes are an easier target to protest despite organizing being more difficult, whereas under neoliberal, democratic regimes, the blame is shifted solely from the state to numerous other institutions and actors (Kurtz, 2004, Pickvance, 1999). So, while mobilization under a democratic state is easier to enact, it is more difficult to agree where to place the blame and how to organize most effectively. The decentralization of the state and the removal of its regulatory role in the economy makes it more difficult for people to target the government (Kurtz, 2004). In this space, non-government organizations (NGOs) can replace protest.

The proliferation of non-governmental organizations is another reason scholars cite as to why neoliberal reform leads to a decrease in peasant mobilization (Foweraker, 2001). Foweraker (2001) argues that social movements have noticeably declined in Latin America due to a new emphasis on negotiation that pushes direct-action mobilization to the sidelines as a result of the rise of NGOs. Although Foweraker is careful not to undermine the few successes seen by social movements, particularly in Chile, he implies that NGOs have largely taken the place of mobilization efforts and are often more effective. Because NGOs have taken center stage of political activity in Latin America, Foweraker (2001) states that traditional forms of grassroots mobilization have become ineffective, further leading to their decline. NGOs have also been able to monopolize on state funding, leading traditional grassroots organizers to leave behind their prior methods to develop their own NGOs (Foweraker, 2001).

**The Exception**

*Chilean Uprisings*
The mass uprisings of students in both 2006 and 2011 in opposition of neoliberal education reform in Chile occurred after most of the research on the decline of mobilization in Latin America was published. These uprisings do not fit the pattern identified in that research. Bellei, et al. (2014) call the 2011 Chilean student movement, “the most relevant social mobilization to have emerged in Chile since the end of Pinochet’s dictatorship in 1990.” Students organized massive marches over a seven-month period, with the largest demonstration consisting of more than 100,000 people. Nothing of this scale had happened in Chile’s twenty years of democracy. Not only were the student movements in Chile huge, but they were effective. Bellei et al (2014) state that these movements ultimately changed the public education agenda at an institutional level. This begs the question: What led people to mobilize against the state in such large numbers? The answer lies people’s perceptions of government receptiveness and efficacy.

**Institutional Receptiveness, Efficacy, and Participation**

Receptiveness of the institution of government is defined as congruence between community preferences and public policies, wherein the activities of the institution are valued by the public (Cook and Sverrisson, 1999, Fried and Rabinovitz, 1980). This means that the public views institutions as receptive when they believe that the institutions adequately consider and respond to the needs they express. Existing participatory democracy literature assumes that levels of participation are linked to responsiveness in that the more responsive government is, the more likely citizens are to participate (Sjoberg et al. 2015).² When citizens participate and their government is receptive to them, they feel a sense of political efficacy.

²Among the literature, responsiveness and receptiveness are used by different authors to mean the same thing. For consistency, I will use receptiveness from this point forward.
Political efficacy is a concept first used by Campbell et al. in 1954 in *The Voter Decides*. Campbell et al. (1954) define political efficacy as a feeling that political actions taken by individual citizens can have an impact on the political process. Finkel (1985) further defines it as “the sense of being capable of acting effectively in the political realm.” When people feel efficacious, they perceive that their political actions are making a difference, so they will continue to participate. Therefore, receptiveness, participation, and feelings of efficacy operate in a cycle. If perceptions of efficacy and government responsiveness in a given Latin American country are high, then, we would expect citizens to feel motivated to participate in the political process through actions like voting, campaigning, and even running for local office.

**Freedom House Analyses**

*C* **Chile**

To confirm that Chile is a country with high levels of perceived institutional receptiveness and efficacy and therefore congruent with my argument, I use data from analyses done by Freedom House. Freedom House gives Chile a freedom status of Free, and rates their freedom, political rights, and civil liberties ratings all at a one out of seven, with one being the best score (Chile Profile, 2017). Chile’s aggregate score is a 94/100 (Chile Profile, 2017) which is eight points above the rating of the United States as of 2018. According to these measures, Chile has “a wide range of political rights, including free and fair elections,” and “candidates who are elected actually rule, political parties are competitive, the opposition plays an important role and enjoys real power, and the interests of minority groups are well represented in politics.

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3While scholars, such as Campbell, A., Gurin, G., & Miller, W. E. (1954), and Finkel, S. E. (1985) differentiate between internal and external efficacy, for the purpose of my study I will largely focus on external efficacy, the perception that individual actions matter to the political process.

4For information on the methodology used by Freedom House, visit this link: [https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2018](https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2018)
and government (Freedom in the World Methodology, n.d.). Chile also has “a wide range of civil liberties, including freedoms of expression, assembly, association, education, and religion. They have an established and generally fair legal system that ensures the rule of law (including an independent judiciary), allow free economic activity, and tend to strive for equality of opportunity for everyone, including women and minority groups (Freedom in the World Methodology, n.d.).” All of these factors contribute to the high levels of perceived government receptiveness and efficacy. But what happens when these perceptions are low?

Guatemala

In order to craft a comparative case study, I look at Guatemala as a country where citizens are likely to report low levels of government receptiveness and efficacy. I chose Guatemala as comparative case because it has one of the lowest Freedom House ratings in Latin America\(^5\). It is also one of the few countries where the indigenous population possibly outnumbers the non-indigenous population,\(^6\) and this fragmentation contributed to genocide in the country in the late 20\(^{th}\) century that left more than 200,00 Maya people dead (The World Fact Book: Guatemala, n.d.).

According to Freedom House, Guatemala has a freedom status of Partly Free with freedom, political rights, and civil liberties ratings all coming in at four out of seven, again with one being the best score. As of 2108, their aggregate score is 56/100, with 100 being the most free. (Guatemala Profile, 2017). Using these measures, Guatemala has a government that either “moderately protects almost all political rights, or strongly protects some political rights while neglecting others (Guatemala Profile, 2017).” It also has “slightly weaker political

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5 They are ahead of only Honduras (48), Nicaragua (44), and Venezuela (26).
6 Official measures state that around 40% of the population of Guatemala is indigenous, but the Maya themselves claim that at least 60% of the population is Maya.
rights…because of factors such as political corruption, limits on functioning of political parties and opposition groups, and flawed electoral processes (Freedom in the World Methodology, n.d.). Guatemala also has its freedom undermined by factors such as “limits on media independence, restrictions on trade union activities, and discrimination against minority groups and women (Freedom in the World Methodology, n.d.).” All of these factors mean that we should expect to find low levels of perception of government receptiveness and efficacy.

Using the inverse of the relationship between reception of government and efficacy, and levels of political participation, we would expect that low levels of perceived efficacy and government receptiveness would lead to decreased levels of political participation. This helps explain why prior research on Latin American social movements has found low levels of political mobilization among marginalized populations; it is probable that these populations would not view their respective governments as receptive, and would not view themselves to be efficacious when utilizing traditional participatory strategies. While this could lead us to conclude that these populations have become complacent, I do not believe this is the case.

Theory

According to anthropologist J. C. Scott, small scale community organizing and subtle forms of day-to-day resistance negate the need to revolt or mobilize in a manner than garners any attention (Scott, J. C. 1985, 1992). As Scott (1992) states, “Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites. The prior research has examined only those two polar opposites, and therefore missed the efforts that take place in the vast territory in between. This begs the questions: what is happening in this vast territory?
I theorize that the causal mechanism that determines what strategies a given population in Latin America will utilize in order to affect change is that population’s perception of government receptiveness and efficacy. While we know that when these levels are high people feel motivated to participate in the political process, I argue that this relationship applies to mobilization strategies as well. That is to say, when levels are high, people will feel motivated to mobilize using traditional social movement strategies. This could mean using the courts and legal system, lobbying the legislature, or making formal demands aimed at the head of state through protest. When levels of perception of government receptiveness and efficacy are low, citizens instead will use community level organizing. These strategies will not target institutions, nor will they operate using institutional channels. The courts, the legislature, and the head of state will not be seen as viable options. Rather, these populations will organize around community level concerns, and work independent from institutions to make changes directly.

**Methodology**

In order to test my theory, I used the protests in Chile in opposition to neoliberal education reform as the baseline, and compared it my sample in Guatemala. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with Maya community organizers, which included participant observation and twelve semi-structured interviews. My participant observation consisted of living with community organizers in their homes, watching them work, and meeting with them to discuss their work in an informal setting. I wrote field notes throughout the entire process to keep track of my observations. In each interview, I asked a series of questions to gauge the levels of perceived government receptiveness and efficacy among my participants, and learn how these

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7 Informed consent was given prior to each interview.
perceptions effected the strategies they chose to use in their activism. While I came prepared with fifteen questions, I revised these by skipping questions, adding questions, or carrying out additional dialogue depending on where the responses guided the conversation.

**Sample**

I use samples from both Chile and Guatemala. In Chile, I derive my sample from the protests that took place between 2006 and 2011 against neoliberal education reform. This sample was then compared to my sample from Guatemala, which consists of twelve Maya community organizers in San Lucas Toliman, Sololá, Guatemala and Quiacquix, Totonicapán, Guatemala. They are local leaders and all work to alleviate and eliminate problems that plague their respective communities. The group of organizers in San Lucas Toliman work on a reforestation project where they grow and distribute seedlings all over the community, as well as all over the country. This effort is in attempt to reforest the land and solve the many problems associated with deforestation, such as run off into bodies of water, reduction in the absorption of carbon dioxide, and landslides. They also engage in activism in their community.

The organization in Quiacquix is called the Ajpu Association, and they build and install improved wood burning stoves, sanitary composting latrines, and bio-sand water filters to poor rural Maya in their community. This is not only to improve the lives of the recipients of the products, but also to reduce the amount of trees being deforested to burn in order to cook and boil water to drink, and stop human waste from running off into bodies of water.

**Measures**

The dependent variable I measure in this study is the type of strategy utilized by people in order to address problems faced by them and their respective communities in Chile and

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8See Appendix A for the complete set of interview questions
Guatemala. The two strategies I assess are small scale, community based organization and large scale marches and protests. The former seeks to make change through the work of individuals in the community, while the latter seeks to make change by targeting the institution of government.

The independent variables I measure are perceptions of government receptiveness and efficacy among citizens of Chile and Guatemala, respectively. I operationalize receptiveness of the government as how often, how well, and in what ways the state responds to demands made by its constituents. I also look for citizens being motivated to participate in the formal processes of social movement organizing, like lobbying, protesting, and making institutional demands. Efficacy cannot be disentangled from government receptiveness, as we know they operate in a cycle. This means that feelings of efficaciousness correlate with levels of government receptiveness. In order to determine levels of receptiveness, participation, and efficacy, I use the analyses done by Freedom House.

Using data sets from Freedom House, I determine that the Guatemalan state is not receptive to its citizens’ and their demands, deeming efforts to protest and make formal requests of the government futile, especially for groups like women, minorities, and indigenous people. Further, based on the Freedom House analyses, I gather that marginalized populations in Guatemala do not feel efficacious, which discourages political participation. I also ascertain that the Chilean state is mostly receptive to its citizens’ demands, meaning that protests and social movements are likely to yield positive results, providing people with a sense of political efficacy, and thus encouraging participation.

**Results**

Through participant observation and interviewing participants, I found that community organizers in Guatemala effectively work to alleviate the problems that they face every day. All
of the participants in my sample are local activists, and they believe that they most efficient way to make change is to do it themselves.

**Local Organizations**

During my fieldwork, I was able to observe local organizations in action. As I theorized, I found that community members are extremely active in local politics and activism, as they work to diminish problems faced by their community, usually divorced from the government.

**The Ajpu Association**

The Ajpu Association is an organization in Quiacquix, Totonicapán, and is made up of K’iche Maya who work to resolve problems effecting their community that the state neglects to handle. They take their name from the Maya day spirit “Ajpu,” and it references the Maya creation story. The word Ajpu is also associated with family, leadership, and service, making it a good fit for their organization. They organize following a non-hierarchal structure, utilizing local leadership and the equal division of labor. The Ajpu Association works to provide the rural poor of the Guatemala Highlands with improved wood burning stoves, sanitary composting latrines, and bio-sand water filters that allow people to purify water in their homes.

They have partnered with a Canadian NGO, Help for the Highlands, through which they receive grants that they use to purchase the materials needed to construct the stoves, latrines, and water filters. The system in which they operate consists of exchanging their services and products with those in poverty in return for things like the unused firewood that that the recipient would have otherwise used to boil water in order to purify it, or that would have been used in older, less efficient stoves. This way, they are able to let people feel like they are investing in something rather than receiving a handout, which is said to lead to higher rates of maintenance and use by recipients.
The Ajpu association installs all of their products into the homes of the recipients of the items. After having the product installed, members of the Ajpu Association return to their client’s home to check on the product and how it is performing. They also assess the maintenance of it. When I was there, members of Ajpu and of our team went to several the homes of several families who has received products previously and we interviewed them about how the stove, latrine, or water filter had helped them. Every person was extremely grateful—often times brought to tears—for what they had received. They all said it helped them and their families immensely, and they praised the Ajpu Association for what they were doing.

**The 48 Cantones**

Also in Totonicapán is the organization of the 48 Cantones. The 48 Cantones are 48 individual villages within Totonicapán. Each village is represented in this organization through an elected member, and one member is elected as president. According to one participant of my study, Santos Norato, who served as president of the 48 Cantones in 2001, they have a long history. In the 1960s and 1970s, these representatives served to assist state authorities as a middleman between the community and the state government, but they had no real power. Later, they moved away from the state government and instead started to maintain their own community level legislative power.

In the 1990s, the 48 Cantones began handling community issues like water, mining, deforestation, and taxes. Today, they take on the role of an official local government separate from the state sanctioned local government, and citizens of Totonicapán rely on the 48 Cantones to organize community activism efforts, resolve conflicts, and keep the community informed about current issues.

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9 Canton in English, meaning an administrative division of a country that is typically smaller in area and population that a county, department, or province.
While the state government of Guatemala claims to respect the authority of the 48 Cantones, my participants informed me that in October of 2012, thousands of people from Totonicapán led by the 48 Cantones protested at several locations along the Pan-American Highway. They were making demands regarding several issues, and six K’iche Maya were shot and killed by police, and more than 40 K’iche were injured. The police went to trial, but it was dismissed in the end. This could lead them to believe that protest and traditional social movement strategies are dangerous and potentially life-threatening, which I discuss in more detail later.

The Reforestation Project

Finally, the Reforestation Project is a local organization in San Lucas Toliman, and is made up of a group of Kaqchikel Maya organizers. They work together to grow and distribute tree seedlings throughout their community, as well as all over the country, in attempt to reforest the land. Their goal is to alleviate the many problem associated with deforestation in Guatemala, such as polluted water running off into their lakes, rivers, and ocean, reduction in the absorption of carbon dioxide by plants, and landslides, which often time kill people living at the edge of mountains. Toribio and Edgar, leaders of the reforestation project, obtain seeds and grow them into seedlings until they are mature enough to transplant. Their goal is to enable the seedlings to grow quickly, but deeply. Deep, widespread roots allow the trees to stop soil erosion and water runoff into drinking water sources.

Along with working to reforest their land, activists at the reforestation project also pursue education of the local school children. They bring in kids from schools in the area to learn about the importance of trees, and the kids are taught how to better stewards of their environment through things like recycling paper and plastic. Children also get to help by sanding wooden
spoons and other utensils that are carved from reclaimed wood during the reforestation process. This allows the children to be excited about what they are learning, feel connected to it, and use their knowledge in their daily lives. They also report that children often share their newfound knowledge with their parents, creating an even more environmentally aware Guatemala.

They are also working on creating a system to catch rain water before it flows down the mountains into their lakes. The streets of Guatemala are littered with garbage and other waste because their government does not regulate or supply any form of garbage collection service. Because of this, when rain water travels into lakes and rivers, it carries with it all sorts of pollution.

**Interview Responses**

With my interview questions, I attempt to gauge the level of responsiveness and receptiveness of the government to these communities, and to figure out how they feel they can most effectively get problems solved. One of the most telling examples from the responses was given by Romeo Tiu, a community organizer in Totonicapán. The struggle over clean drinking water resources is an ongoing problem in Totonicapán, and Tiu explains why. He says,

“The government was never responsible for providing water to people and so the community members had to climb up to the mountains to get their own water system and they invested a lot of money. They created a permanent system to keep water running from the mountains to their homes, keeping it nice and clean.”

Community members had to mobilize in order to secure a right as basic as clean drinking water, and they constructed and continue to maintain the infrastructure needed to ensure they all have clean water in their homes. This clearly demonstrates the divide between the needs of the people, and what they government chooses to respond to, as well as how effectively community

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10 Direct quotes were taken from interview transcriptions translated to English from Spanish, so any grammar mistakes are likely a result of translation.
members organize and mobilize to alleviate problems they face. This sort of government neglect
would likely not be as prevalent in Chile. High levels of efficacy and perception of institutional
receptiveness mean the government works to alleviate these issues, and if they do not, then
people protest until they do.

Jose Santos Sapon further emphasizes the role of the community by saying,

“"We have organized the community to introduce water. They were not asking if you were
a teacher, a doctor, or a philosopher. What was important is that you were a member of
the community and you had to help with community work. Community leaders will tell
you how many meters you are responsible to build, how much money you need to give.
They are not asking if you want to contribute. You are obligated to contribute because
this work will benefit everybody in the community. The same happens with other projects
like cleaning the community. Even if you are a professional, you are obligated to
contribute. Here it does not matter if you have a profession, money, or even the age.
When you turn fifteen years old, you start having responsibilities.”

In these communities, being involved in collective action is essential. During my participant
observation, I heard a story about a family who was not involved in the construction and
maintenance of the water infrastructure in Totonicapán. This family was benefitting from the
community’s hard work by having access to clean water, so the community decided to
disconnect their home from the water supply. This is to say, the community finds ways to
enforce participation. The collectivist mindset is prevalent among the Maya and promotes the
kind of community level organizing that we see them engaging in.

Perceptions of Government

To understand my participants’ overall attitudes towards the government, I begin my
interviews by asking them how they view the government in their lives, and suggest they speak
on either the municipal, state, or federal depending on whichever they view as the most relevant.
One participant, Ronnie Lec, summed up the attitudes of many Maya activists by saying, “the
government in my life has been detrimental and destructive ever since I was in my mother’s womb.” He goes on to say,

“We work independently as a non-governmental organization because we know nothing good will come from them (the government). Therefore, our work is to focus on local people making their own decisions.”

Olga Marino, a women’s rights activist, speaks about her feelings toward the government, saying,

“Awful. It is bad. In 2012, I was chosen to be the representative for women organizations (sic) at a departmental level; here we have governor and nineteen mayors from the whole department of Sololá, as well as the government and non-governmental institutions. Unfortunately, I had a very bad experience. My job there was to keep track of the public politics for women. However, they did not allow me to make any decision because I was a woman, especially an indigenous woman, and they just made fun of me. Consequently, we had no results whatsoever for our necessities.”

When a government cannot take a woman who was elected to represent her community seriously, and they ridicule her idea simply because she is a woman, it is clear why the government may not be seen as a valuable channel for social change.

Additionally, one of the founders and leaders of the Ajpu Association, Vicente Menchú, says,

“The central government is very far from the situation we live in in the communities, and the local government is poorly aware of our needs. They only help the people who helped them with the elections and political campaigns before they became political leaders. Therefore, what I have seen over the last thirty-six years, there has not been a single government who involves and seeks to help communities and families improve their life condition.”

Menchú discusses a very common feeling among the community, which is that the government cannot even begin to understand these communities and what they need because they are so far removed from the material reality of the marginalized communities they are elected to represent.

Additionally, Rodolfo, the leader of the Reforestation Project, states,
“At first, they (the government) offer and then they cannot fulfill their promises due to the central government interests who are interested in bigger projects. Therefore, our local government focuses more on those projects.”

More succinctly, he says that the government is not concerned with the problems the community faces, and once they win an election, they do nothing. This phenomenon is referred to by Tiu as *politiquería*, which he says is when “the government gives the people what they want to win elections, but in short term only.” The government makes campaign promises they have no intention of keeping, and the electorate is aware of this. Therefore, citizens are skeptical of any promises made by government, and are hesitant to ask things of the government because they know a positive reaction from the government will likely not lead to action.

**Perceptions of Government Receptiveness**

In order to understand perceptions of government receptiveness, I ask whether or not they think the government is concerned with the problems they face in their respective communities. I received very similar responses. One respondent said, “I really doubt it. In Guatemala, we have always protested and institutions are already aware of these demands, however there are no results.” Alfredo Aguilar, one of the founders and leaders of the Ajpu Association answers,

“We do not obtain great help from the government. Usually all the problems we have as a community are solved by community members only...We do all of the paperwork, we raise most of the economic funds, and we manage all of the workforce. Mostly everything is done by the local community. There is little help received from the government.”

A widowed mother of eight, Hilaria Gutierrez, said,

“They do not (care). There are no medicines in the hospitals. There are no medicines in the health centers. There was a women whose child was very sick, (and) when she arrived at the hospital she was told she needed to go out and do some medical tests and wait. The child died in his mother’s arms that day. Why are there no medicines? Because they (the government) stole all the money.”

Another participant who focuses much of her time on women’s rights issues said “We are not a priority to the government.” She said the government does not respect the needs of women,
and that is very hard for a woman to win an election or be considered for public office. Because men make up the majority of the government, it is easy for women’s issues to be overlooked and ignored. Another local activist who works on environmental issues stated, “No, not at all. Even though in the political campaigns they talk about food security, but in reality, we know they do not do anything, neither for the environment (sic).” The feeling that government is apathetic towards these communities is repeated by a participant who says, “Municipality will never ask if a community is in need of new roads or if lighting needs to be installed. They will only say, ‘if you need it, then do it yourself.’”

When asked whether or not the government is qualified to address community problems, one participant said,

“No they are not qualified. Neither the central government nor the local government, not even institutionally. In order to change this, we need honest and qualified people within the government.”

This feeling was echoed by Menchú. He said,

“The central government is not even aware of these problems. The majority of politicians have not had a childhood like ours where we grew up in the countryside and we are closer to the reality, poverty, and extreme poverty.”

Citizens do not feel that they are represented by their government, nor do they feel that the government understands their hardships. They do not believe that politicians are aware nor capable enough to adequately address problems them face, so they choose to bypass the state altogether in their social movement strategies. In Chile, this is not the case, and people feel that they can take to the streets and protest, or go through the state, in order to solve problems. Once again, the high levels of efficacy and perceptions of government receptiveness exist in Chile, making their social movement strategies different.

Potential of Protest
When I ask whether or not changes could be made by protesting given manner in which the state functions today, Pedro Perez says yes, but that “we have to risk our lives to be heard or understood.” Many Maya community organizers can remember the days of hiding in the mountains from a genocidal government in very recent history, and there are still lingering worries of speaking out through protest and social movements. For them, state violence and repression is always a risk taken when publicly protesting. Lec reiterates this thought when he says,

“Right now, there are over 200 conflicts, community conflicts in this country about mining and hydroelectric projects. Most of these communities have a resistance to this, even violently, and nevertheless they have not been heard. All people have voted against these projects and it has not been respected. On the other hand, women in the communities are demanding their rights and they have been criminalized. Activists in different communities are still being murdered.”

Sapon echoes this sentiment by saying,

“People died in the town of Alaska due to the electricity arguments between the community and the government. Nobody wanted to solve this. The local mayor who was then replaced never had the interest to resolve this, not even the current mayor wants to resolve this problem. Has the central government had interest in resolving this matter? No. They do not care about resolving these issues. However, they do care about maintaining this so they have control over the communities; so show their ability to control indigenous people or the population in general.”

Marino also suggests that there is danger in protesting when she says,

“It is very difficult. It is possible, but it takes many risks and since we are much divided, it is very difficult to succeed. The whole population would need to protest, but we are very far to get there because we have many organizations with different interests. We are not united to protest together. We could change many things together; however, we are not ready for that. Today if we protest we become enemies of the government and certain organizations and we can even lose our lives.”

In addition to threats of state violence, marginalized communities are also discouraged from protesting because they view it as ineffective and futile. One participant said,
“Sometimes they (problems) can be resolved but sometimes they can get worse. It requires a lot of resistance and incidence with a large group of people. However, in my situation we have not been able to progress.”

Juan Francisco Hernandez reiterates this point when he says, “We have done it (protesting) here and all over the world. Protesting is not the way to resolve problems.” I then ask Hernandez to discuss situations he may be aware of in which Maya people requested help or made demands of the government, and he says,

“The petitions are there, but they have not given them priority. The petitions are not incorporated in the congress, therefore indigenous people cannot pronounce themselves with their needs (sic)…when people request for something, they refuse to help.”

Sapon goes on to say that protest is a good way to create pressure, but it does not always have good results. I asked if he was aware of this approach working before, and he said, “Never. The same problems we have had since colonialism are the same problems we still have today.” Later, he says, “I do not participate in protests very often because I think this is not the solution to our problems, besides it has not been effective so far.” Menchú shares a similar feeling, saying “We have had many protests. We have claimed many times for equal rights, but we never see any results. There is always separation between social classes.”

Because much of the literature on Latin American social movements states that peasant populations are largely uninterested in protest, I pose a question asking whether or not my participants would engage in protest if they knew the government would listen and respond accordingly. In other words, if reform was made and the institutions were receptive, would people protest? One participant says, “Yes, of course. As a citizen with a positive vision, I will do what it takes to stand up.” Another says, “Yes, I would. We want good things to happen and we want the government to listen. We are people as well.” Menchú reiterates this and says,
“Yes. We have always supported different mobilizations in the country. We have protested for equal rights, demanding a better life condition, especially in the rural areas where we still live with a lot of poverty.”

Nonetheless, he says, these protests result in nothing.

Not only do some of the participants indicate that they would use traditional social movement strategies, but they also say they would like to be able to engage in traditional political participation. Marino says,

“Today we are working with indigenous people, both men and women, teaching them about legal pluralism, territory defense, public and political participation. What we are seeking is to empower people, educate them about laws that support them in their participation and on their decision making process. Moreover, what we are looking for is to empower people to have access to the land and defend it due to the government and Guatemalan Oligarchy trying to take control over the land and wanting to take possession of everything. We want both men and women to have access to the system and be able to make decisions. For instance, have them working not only at the community but also at a departmental level and a municipal level, especially at a national level. We would want indigenous men and women to be part of the congress and to be able to change and suggest new laws for the indigenous communities.”

Based on this discourse, it is apparent that marginalized communities in Guatemala are aware of the potential of political participation, and they also know the obstacles that are in their way.

While they spend much of their time going beyond the state and organizing around community level issues, they too work to break down these barriers in the hope that one day mainstream political participation will be possible. *They are not complacent; rather, they are strategic.*

In Chile, citizens are not obstructed by the same barriers to participation, and they can protest and go through the state to solve problems. High levels of efficacy and perceptions of government receptiveness motivate citizens to participate in a way that marginalized communities in Guatemala are discouraged from doing. This was evident in the success of the student uprisings against neoliberal education reform in Chile, where citizens made demands of the government and were listened to in the form of policy changes. New government agencies
were created, regulation of private universities was implemented, and a new system of student financing was formed. As a result, full scholarships are now available to students in the poorest 60% of the population, and credits for those who do not qualify for full scholarships are offered by a public agency with government oversight (Bellei et al., 2014).

Effectiveness of Community Organizing

I end by asking if people think their work, primarily community organizing and local activism, is effective, and the responses are almost always yes. Tiu says yes, and that local Maya governments are being respected by the state, and are willing to engage in dialogue with them. Moreover, another participant states, “Yes because we are addressing the necessity directly, and we are responding to the family’s needs. We are receiving positive feedback from the families and they are very grateful. Aguilar says, “Yes. I know what I do is effective because the community is very grateful with our job, and not only grateful but they can see the changes and the results of our work.” Furthermore, Marino says,

“Community organizations are definitely more important. Again, if we can have more people with social consciousness in charge of some political positions where decisions are made, then we could see a change. For instance, we started with one municipal office for women and today we are achieved by law to have an office for women in each town at a national level. This was approved back in 2010 and today we have established municipal offices for women all over the country. However, the big problem with this law is that the mayor is in charge of deciding who the coordinator is. Instead of choosing someone with the abilities and the leadership, he hires his sister, his cousin, his sister-in-law, and therefore she will only respond to the mayor’s interests and she will not properly fulfil her duties.”

While Marino may appear to be contradicting herself and the success she sees, she is actually getting at the heart of the problem. Consciousness raising and education at the community level allowed women the success of being able to have representation in each town, but once the institutional forces acted on this success, it was halted by nepotism and greed.

Limitations and Future Research
Given the small sample of my study, it is hard to make the findings generalizable. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, a large sample is difficult to obtain. I would like to continue this research with more organizers in order to expand the sample size, and want to find participants in the capital, Guatemala City, to see if their experiences are any different given that they work in such close proximity to the central government. It would also be beneficial to conduct a qualitative study in Chile in order to observe whether or not there are small scale mobilization efforts being missed there as well. In the future, it would be beneficial to conduct the same study using Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela as countries where we would expect to see low levels of efficacy and perceived government receptiveness due to their Freedom House ratings being lower than Guatemala’s rating.

**Implications and Conclusion**

Using both the Freedom House analyses and responses from my interviews, I found that feelings of efficacy and perception of institutional receptiveness are low among marginalized communities in Guatemala. This means that they are more likely to rely on tools such as community organizing and small-scale acts of resistance to solve the problems they face. Meanwhile, these levels are high in Chile, where we see citizens utilizing protest and uprising as tools to make social change. While the strategies and tools used are different, neither one is better nor more correct than the other. This gives us a reason to re-evaluate the way we operationalize political mobilization, making room for the work that is done between political participation and protest.

The failure to account for community organizing in our analyses of political mobilization in Latin America has led to a stagnant view of the state of social movements. In a world that constantly changes, the tools that people use to navigate their own realities changes, too, and
neglecting to adapt to this is a detriment to social science. As social science researchers, we owe it to our both our field and our research subjects to tell the most accurate story about them. The existing literature on social movements in Latin America creates a false dichotomy wherein citizens either protest to solve problems, or they do nothing. Understanding this allows us to tell a more accurate story of social movement organizing in Latin America, where the efforts and powerful acts of resistance by marginalized communities is recognized and celebrated.

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) said in a Ted Talk, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.” The Maya people and many other marginalized populations across the globe have been maligned through the telling of inaccurate stories by the elites who benefit from keeping them disempowered. By forming real relationships with the people I studied, I was able to uncover the hidden stories of those using the forms of everyday resistance that make their survival possible in a world that makes it extremely difficult. By doing so, I was able to listen to the true stories of Maya activists from the people themselves.

Through this study it has been possible to uncover the hidden transcripts of the lives of marginalized people. A hidden transcript, a term coined by James C Scott in Domination and the Art of Resistance, is “discourse characterized as that which takes place offstage, beyond direct observation by powerholders.” It is discourse made up of “speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript.” Uncovering the hidden transcripts of subordinate groups is powerful and allows us to better understand the ways in which marginalized peoples resist domination.
While prior research has focused on public discourse, or the public transcript, to tell the story of mobilization in Latin America following neoliberal reform, the true acts of resistance rarely take place there, as Scott points out using his own ethnography. The failure to identify this hidden transcript throughout Latin America has led to the undermining of truly powerful mobilization efforts amongst peasants like the Maya people of Guatemala, resulting in a false narrative of the “lazy Indian”, used to dehumanize and disempower indigenous peoples everywhere.

Mobilization efforts in Guatemala, while much different than those in a country like Chile, are extremely effective. Organizers work together to address local problems faced by their neighbors, negating the need to make demands of their government. Once again, stories matter. In this case, the stories of these organizers who work tirelessly in their respective communities were being drowned out by the prominent research that largely ignores the efforts I witnessed in Guatemala. Sharing the accurate story of people like the Maya is of the utmost importance and has the potential to undermine the effort of the elites who work to keep their voices silences and struggles ignored.
Appendix A—Interview Questions

**Historical**
1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What kinds of problems do you attempt to solve in your community?
4. For how many years have you been involved in this work?
5. How did you start with this work?

**Government Receptiveness**
6. How do you view the role of the government in your life—municipal, state and/or federal?
7. Do you think your government is concerned with the problems you face?
   a. Why or why not?
8. Do you think your government would be capable of addressing these problems adequately?
   a. Why or why not?
9. Do you see the government playing a role in the creation of these problems?
10. Do you think there is a difference in how the government responds to your problems and problems faced by Ladinos?
    a. Why or why not?
11. Do you think that any changes would be made at the institutional level if you voiced your concerns via protest?
    a. Why or why not?
12. Do you know instances of Maya making demands of the government?
    a. If so, how were they received?
    b. What came of it?

**Closing**
13. Do you feel that what you’re doing is effective?
14. If the government was receptive to your demands, would you engage in protest or similar activities as a means to solve the problems in your community?
15. Are there any institutions or organizations that you feel play a larger role in the creation of problems or solving problems that you face in your community? Do you have any other insight you would like to offer about this topic?
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