



Presidential Palace, Santiago. Top: September 11, 1973. Bottom: 2005

From Polarization to Consensus: The Story of Chile's Long Democratic Transition

Vision and Motivation

On September 11, 1973, Chile's military forces bombed the presidential palace in a military coup that overthrew the elected government of President Salvador Allende. The coup was preceded by years of increasingly severe political polarization. Since Allende's election in 1970, however, both polarization and social conflict dramatically worsened, fueled by the president's efforts to establish a socialist economic system in Chile. In the year prior to the coup the country was rocked by increasingly frequent and intense clashes between supporters and opponents of Allende, raising fears of civil war.¹ Chile had one of the longest histories of democratic governance in Latin America. But as the economy deteriorated, strikes and social mobilization intensified, and efforts at compromise failed, the military took matters into its own hands.

The 1973 coup was the beginning of almost seventeen years of rule by a military junta headed by General Augusto Pinochet. In attempt to "re-found" Chilean politics and give the military regime a veneer of legitimacy, the junta drew up a new Constitution which was adopted in 1980. The constitution established the junta's control over the government, but it also provided for a plebiscite to be held in 1988 to determine the regime's continuation. The plebiscite would ask citizens whether or not they agreed that the military's candidate for President, General Pinochet, should remain in office for ten more years. If a majority voted "no" and Pinochet was defeated, open elections for a new president and legislature were to be held.

The plebiscite provision offered Chile's democratic opposition a chance to begin a process of restoring civilian rule. That Pinochet might lose the vote was considered highly unlikely. The General himself felt he was invincible. Despite the risks, the center-left democratic opposition took the gamble, participated in the plebiscite, and won. Their surprise victory in 1988 began Chile's political transition to democracy. After the vote, graffiti was seen on the streets of Santiago declaring "We threw him out with a pencil!"²

The first free elections in seventeen years were held the following year, in December of 1989. The candidate of the center-left Concertation for Democracy, Patricio Aylwin, won the presidency. The Concertation also won a majority of seats in the lower house of the legislature and a plurality in the Senate. Aylwin's inauguration in March 1990 ended authoritarian rule, but the junta's constitution gave political power to military leaders and tied the hands of democratically elected officials in various ways. Winning the plebiscite was the first, critical step that began the transition to democracy, but fifteen years would go by before full democracy would be restored.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of the democratic opposition was to restore democratic government in Chile. Their first step toward achieving this goal was to organize a campaign advocating a "no" vote in the 1988 plebiscite on Pinochet's continuation in office. Following the military regime's surprise defeat in the plebiscite, the opposition's next goal was to win the 1989 elections. At the same time, the opposition also wanted changes to be made to the 1980 Constitution, which established a "controlled" democracy with a special "tutelary" role for the military. The constitution contained provisions that gave military officials predominance over the president in certain areas and empowered military and other non-elected figures to constrain the decisions of elected political representatives. The constitution also restricted political participation by banning "antidemocratic" – meaning Marxist – parties, and had

1. Valenzuela, Arturo. *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Chile*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. p.78.

2. Barros, Robert. *Constitutionalism and Dictatorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p. 307.

extremely difficult amendment procedures. The opposition's goal of restoring Chilean democracy required not only free elections but also the elimination of these so-called "authoritarian enclaves" that the military junta implanted within the constitution.

Leadership

The transition was led by center-left opposition parties working closely with think tanks and research institutes. The most striking characteristics of the opposition's leadership during the transition were their moderation, pragmatism, and commitment to forging consensus. This contrasted starkly with the period before the 1973 coup, when political life was marred by ideological rigidity and an aversion to compromise that, in the end, tore society apart and ended Chilean democracy. The prevalence of decision making by inclusion, negotiation and compromise continued during the successive Concertation governments in power throughout the long transition period. Because of these characteristics, Chile became known for its consensual democracy or, as Chileans refer to it, *democracia de los acuerdos* ("democracy of agreements.")

The strategic decision of center-left opposition parties, after intense debate, to participate in the 1988 plebiscite was a watershed event. Many wanted to boycott the plebiscite rather than legitimize Pinochet's constitution and his plans for a controlled democracy under the military's supervision. As one opposition leader explained, however, the point was not "that we should recognize the constitution as being legitimate, but that we should recognize it as being." The plebiscite was a crack in the regime's structure that could be exploited to tear down the whole facade.

But to win, the opposition had to unify. There were eight different factions within the socialist party alone during the 1980s. Socialists and Christian Democrats shared a historic enmity. The extreme left wanted armed insurrection. By 1988, however, **pragmatism won out among center and left wing groups and seventeen parties formed the "Concertation of Parties for the No" to contest the plebiscite.** After winning this vote, center-left parties joined together in the electoral coalition "Concertation of Parties for Democracy." At the core of this coalition were the Christian Democratic Party and the Socialist Party. The Concertation chose Christian Democratic leader Patricio Aylwin, who had coordinated the plebiscite campaign for the "no," as their presidential candidate. The coalition also drew up a single slate of candidates for almost every elected office and hammered out agreements on a broad range of policy and strategic issues. Aylwin won the 1989 election and was inaugurated President in March 1990.



Pinochet and Patricio Aylwin

Conservatives were found primarily in two right wing parties, the moderate National Renovation (RN) and the more hardline conservative Independent Democratic Union (UDI). These groups

formed the core of a right wing coalition, Alliance for Chile, created to contest the 1989 elections.

Leaders within RN worked with moderates within the military regime, helping to advance the democratic transition. For example, when the regime balked at negotiating constitutional reforms with the Concertation after the latter's victory in the plebiscite, an RN member negotiated a series of possible compromise proposals with Pinochet's Minister of the Interior. The interior minister threatened to resign if Pinochet rejected the proposed reforms he had negotiated.³ Commissions created by the Concertation, the main conservative parties and the regime subsequently continued negotiating, resulting in 54 reforms adopted by a plebiscite shortly before the 1989 elections.

While each of the opposing groups made concessions, each also got something they valued in return. As a result, all sides had a reason to support the constitution and the transition process was able to move forward, albeit with considerable limitations imposed by the former regime. The constitution remained riddled with provisions that gave the military and other non-elected individuals power over the decisions of elected political figures. As long as these authoritarian enclaves remained, the transition to democracy could not be considered to be over.

The Concertation won the presidential elections throughout the transition period. Their leaders were pragmatic and sought to address pressing social concerns and avoid overly antagonizing the military and their conservative supporters. In areas of special importance to the military and conservative elites, such as prosecution for human rights abuses and management of the economy, government leaders adopted moderate stances. Each Concertation president also tried to convince the legislature to vote to eliminate the constitution's remaining authoritarian enclaves. The lack of sufficient votes to overturn these provisions meant that progress was slow.

Patience and respect for constitutional procedures paid off in the end, however. The military stayed in the barracks, the economy prospered and in 2005 the legislature finally voted out the remaining vestiges of authoritarianism. The non-elected senators were abolished, the president was given the power to appoint, fire and promote high level military officials, and the National Security Council became a purely advisory body subordinate to the president. Reacting to the vote, President Ricardo Lagos proclaimed, "Fifteen years ago Chile returned to democracy and now we can say that the transition is complete."⁴

The leadership strategy and pragmatic decisions of the democratic opposition and the Concertation governments elected after 1989 reflected political learning since the time of the coup. **Political actors came to understand that human rights and freedom would be best protected by a functioning democracy, and that the survival of democracy requires negotiation and compromise among opposing groups.**

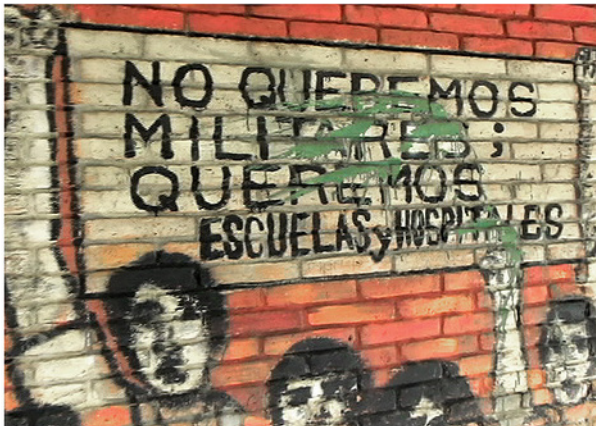
Civic Environment

Brutal repression against supporters of the Allende government had followed immediately after the military takeover. Thousands were detained, tortured, and executed. Thousands more disappeared. The political opposition and civil society were quiescent for most of the next decade. The Catholic Church was virtually the only institution active in aiding persecuted citizens through its Vicariate of Solidarity. Political parties were outlawed until 1987, and then only non-communist parties were allowed. The press was censored and associational life was tightly controlled.

3. Constable, Pamela and Arturo Valenzuela. "Chile's Return to Democracy." *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 65 Winter 1989-90: pp. 169-86.

4. Gustavo Gonzalez "Historicas reformas ponen fin a la transicion" Jul 14, 2005 <http://archive.is/20120703141018/ipsnoticias.net/interna.asp?idnews=34483>

The military junta had radically restructured Chile's economy with extensive privatizations and a drastic reduction in the government's size. After an initial period of economic growth, an economic crisis in 1983-1984 saw unemployment skyrocket to 24%. The economy's collapse led to popular protests and the democratic opposition came back to life. A "National Day of Protest" convened



"We don't want the military, we want schools and hospitals"

by the copper miners' union in 1983 signaled to the regime the extent of popular dissatisfaction for the first time since the coup. The Catholic Church instigated the creation of a moderate "Democratic Alliance" in 1983. In 1985, another new group, the National Accord for a Transition to Full Democracy, called for immediate elections. This organization united the moderate wing of the Socialist Party with Christian Democrats for the first time ever, and laid the groundwork for broader coalitions among center-left groups in the future. The regime stood firm, however, and hopes for political change evaporated.

During the mid-1980s, many in the opposition argued against participating in the 1988 plebiscite because they did not want to legitimate Pinochet's constitution. Although civil society was severely weakened after the military takeover, research institutes and think tanks were quite active. Their work was pivotal in convincing center-left parties to unite to contest the plebiscite. Survey data suggested that a divisive electoral campaign by a fragmented opposition would play into Pinochet's hands by reinforcing his argument that only he could prevent chaos. When the decision was made to make use of the potential for change the plebiscite offered, think tanks came up with strategies and policies that helped the democratic opposition work together effectively and win the plebiscite.⁵



"Plebiscite Now"

Message and Audience

In the first stage of the transition, prior to the plebiscite, the center-left democratic opposition sought to convince Chileans to vote against Pinochet. They mounted a nationwide campaign carried out by the "Concertation of Parties for the No," and coordinated with civil society groups and think tanks to attract voters' support. A grassroots movement, the Crusade for Civic Participation (Civic

5. Constable and Valenzuela 1978.

Crusade), registered voters and put on free rock concerts to attract young people. Seven million out of a potential eight million voters were registered. The “Command for the No” set up offices around the country and developed promotional spots shown on the free TV time that was provided in the month before the vote. The opposition’s catchy theme song declared “Happiness is coming!” With a turnout of over 90%, Pinochet was defeated by a vote of 55% -43%.

Between 1990 and the end of the transition in 2005, Concertation governments had two principal audiences: the military and their conservative supporters, and Chilean citizens. Concertation leaders were skillful in developing messages that re-assured both groups. The first president, Patricio Aylwin, realized the importance of maintaining a healthy economy – a key concern of both the military and conservative



The symbol of the campaign for the No



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Protesting in support of torture victims

elites. He and his successors largely maintained the junta’s free market economic orientation. At the same time, Aylwin responded to public demands and center-left parties’ concerns about poverty and inequality. He framed his economic program as the pursuit of “growth with equity,” reached out to business elites to help formulate an important tax reform, and enacted policies that led to a reduction in poverty. His successors carried on his responsible stewardship of the economy.

With respect to relations with the military, governments had to proceed with caution. With the end of the dictatorship there was a pressing need to deal with the issue of human rights violations by the military regime, but fear of military intervention was high. Pinochet, who remained head of the Armed Forces until 1998, warned that “on no account will the (armed forces) allow any of their members to be vilified and humiliated for their actions aimed at saving Chile.”⁶ President Aylwin and his successors walked a fine line between pursuing justice and avoiding triggering military action. Shortly after he took office, Aylwin formed a truth and reconciliation commission to uncover information about the fate of people who had disappeared. He also publicly rebuked Pinochet for the military’s threats to his government. Nonetheless, Aylwin’s appreciation of the need to handle human rights questions firmly but delicately is reflected in the slogan he adopted to explain his government’s position: “justice within the possible.” Questions such as the transfer of human rights trials from military to civil courts continued to be debated for more than a decade and were ultimately addressed without provoking military intervention. As President Michelle Bachelet noted, “[b]ecause democracy is the enemy of

6. “Pinochet Issues and Ultimatum.” Latin American Weekly Reports. Sept. 7, 1989 available at: <http://www.latinnews.com/search/80.html?archive=101991&search=pinochet>

vengeance, progress in matters of human rights must always be made within a framework of the rule of law, although it takes time.”⁷

Outreach Activities

Chile's democratic opposition received important support and advice from international governmental and nongovernmental actors. In 1986, former Spanish Prime Minister Adolfo Suarez came to Chile to discuss his experience in negotiating the pacts between Spain's authoritarian government and its political opposition that led to Spain's 1973-2005 democratic transition. Governmental and nongovernmental actors from the United States and European countries gave advice and financial backing to the center-left opposition. The German social democratic Friedrich Ebert Foundation, for example, played a crucial role in the opposition's victory in the plebiscite by encouraging moderate socialists to move away from street protests and radicalism and instead combat the dictatorship by using the regime's institutions, starting with the plebiscite.⁸ International organizations also provided critical financial support to Chilean think tanks and research groups, many of which helped the opposition craft strategy and policy positions.

Looking back, President Ricardo Lagos emphasized that a **“transition from authoritarian rule requires every group to understand that it cannot demand everything it wants. That is a transition: talking with those who think differently, even if they have been defeated.”**⁹ This is what Chileans did – talk to each other, build trust and forge relationships with opponents—Chile went from polarization to consensus, establishing a stable representative government and economic growth.

Timeline

- 1973 President Salvador Allende was overthrown in a military coup. A military junta led by General Augusto Pinochet takes power and governs until March 1990.
- 1980 Adoption of a new constitution drawn up by the Pinochet regime.
- 1985 Center-left democratic opposition groups create the National Accord for a Transition to Full Democracy
- 1987 Center-left opposition parties form the Concertation of Parties for the No.
- 1988 Plebiscite on Pinochet's continuation in office fails to pass. The Concertation of Parties for Democracy, a center-left coalition, forms to contest the upcoming elections.
- 1989 Elections are held for president and legislature. Concertation for Democracy's presidential candidate, Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin is victorious.
- 1990 Patricio Aylwin inaugurated president.
- 1995 Concertation of Parties for Democracy candidate, Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei is inaugurated president.

7. Speech delivered by Michelle Bachelet at the seminar “International Forum on Pathways of Democratic Transitions,” organized by the United Nations Development Program, Cairo, June 5, 2011, available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2011/6/pathways-of-democratic-transitions-reflections-on-the-chilean-experience#sthash.WLka1GZQ.dpuf>

8. Weyland, Kurt. *Making Waves: Democratic Contention in Europe and Latin American since the Revolutions of 1848*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014. p.181.

9. <https://news.usc.edu/87719/world-leaders-reflect-on-transitions-to-democracy/>

- 2000 Concertation of Parties for Democracy candidate, Socialist Ricardo Lagos is inaugurated president.
- 2005 The transition ends with the passage of constitutional reforms in August.

Learn More

News and Analysis

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Videos:

"NO." A 2012 movie about the media campaign carried out by the opposition to Pinochet prior to the 1988 plebiscite <http://dvd.netflix.com/Movie/No/70243255?trkid=222336>

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