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## Seizing a Window of Opportunity: The Election of President Bachelet in Chile

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I am here as a woman, representing the defeat of the exclusion which we have objected to for so long.

Michelle Bachelet<sup>1</sup>

The election of Michelle Bachelet as president of Chile on January 15, 2006, was an historical milestone for women and gender equity, both in her own country and for Latin America in general, where women have made significant gains in terms of parliamentary representation but continue to confront great difficulties in being elected as heads of state.<sup>2</sup> Bachelet's election as the first female president was astonishing and surprising in many respects. In contrast to the experiences of other

1. First annual address to Congress, May 21, 2006, <http://www.presidencia.cl>. (5 July 2008).

2. Only nine women in all have served as heads of state in Latin America: in Argentina (2), Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru.

societies where women have been competing for high-ranking offices for quite some time (see Holli in this issue), Bachelet was only the second woman ever to run for president in Chile, following Gladys Marin, a longtime Communist Party leader who ran for president in the 1999 election and won less than 4% of the vote.

Unlike most women who have served as heads of state around the world, the current Chilean president was elected directly to an office that has been characterized as one of the most powerful presidencies in the region. This is a break from the more general world trend highlighted by Farida Jalalzai (2008), where women are more likely to be elected in weaker executive positions. Bachelet was elected to occupy a strong executive post in a highly centralized and stable presidential system.

The result of the 2006 election was also astonishing from a political culture perspective. Chile has been considered a relatively conservative country in the Latin American context, a society where the Catholic Church continues to have significant sway over cultural attitudes and political outcomes with respect to women's role in society (Blofield 2006; Htun 2003). Despite this, the electorate overwhelmingly supported a divorced mother of three whose children had two different fathers. Bachelet was a socialist militant since the age of 14, committed to gender equity and women's empowerment, and a self-recognized agnostic whose father was imprisoned and killed during the military dictatorship, while she herself, together with her mother, survived torture, imprisonment, and exile (Ríos Tobar 2008). If her personal trajectory was not enough to make her an unlikely candidate for victory, she followed a political path distinct from that of other women who reached similar posts in the region: Her career was independent of kinship ties to notable male politicians.

Chile was also an unlikely place for electing a woman president because what was once a vibrant women's movement had considerably weakened during the last decades, having little power to influence electoral results (Ríos Tobar, Godoy, and Guerrero 2004). At the same time, and no doubt as a consequence of this, the country continues to lag behind the regional trend of increasing women's presence in electoral positions.

Notwithstanding all these obstacles, Michelle Bachelet secured the nomination of the biggest and most successful political coalition in the country's history, the *Concertacion de Partidos por la Democracia*,<sup>3</sup> and

3. This is the name adopted by the coalition of 17 political parties that joined forces in the late 1980s to campaign against the plebiscite that had been organized by the military regime headed by General Augusto Pinochet to ratify its desire to remain in power for another eight years. Some of these parties merged, while others left the coalition, leaving today a total of four parties: the PS (Socialist Party),

defeated her opponent (the right-wing businessman Sebastian Piñera) with a seven percentage point lead in the elections. What explains this seeming paradox? How could a woman with Bachelet's characteristics succeed under such apparent negative conditions? And more importantly, what lessons could be learned from this case for the challenges facing women seeking executive power?

In this essay, I will argue that the major hurdle confronting Bachelet lay at the nomination stage, rather than at the election itself. Three factors explain her nomination and subsequent victory: 1) disruptions of the political scene that impacted the governing coalition, in particular, opening a window of opportunity for nontraditional political elites such as women; 2) the slow but persistent pressure for gender equity in politics that had allowed women to occupy key and highly visible political positions at the executive branch; and 3) gender-based voting that impacted both public opinion surveys and election results in which women supported and voted for female candidates.

### **“A Window of Opportunity”: Internal Turmoil within the Concertacion and the Need for Elite Renovation**

The triumph of Bachelet in the 2005–6 presidential election was the fourth consecutive victory for the governing center-left coalition. This coalition has been the most successful political configuration in the country's history, winning every single electoral contest since the 1988 plebiscite that marked the end of the Pinochet regime. The Concertacion won four presidential elections, five congressional elections, and four municipal elections between 1988 and 2006.<sup>4</sup> This meant that in 2005, whoever was able to secure the internal nomination as the coalition's presidential candidate had a very strong chance of becoming Chile's next president.

The tightest victory for the coalition occurred during the previous presidential election in 1999, when Ricardo Lagos became the first socialist to win the presidency after Salvador Allende's violent ouster in 1973. He began his term with only a slight lead over his right-wing opponent (51.3% versus 48.6%, respectively). By the end of his term in

PPD (Party for Democracy), PRSD (Radical Social Democratic Party), and the DC (Christian Democratic Party). The first three can be broadly classified as left wing. The PS and PPD are the most significant progressive parties, while the PRSD is a very small organization that serves as a go-between party with the centrist Christian Democratic Party within the coalition.

4. For final results, see Chilean Electoral Service, <http://www.servel.cl> (5 July 2008).

2005, 60% of Chileans approved of his performance as president.<sup>5</sup> Economic stability, decreasing levels of poverty, improved income, stable political conditions, and considerable investment in infrastructure and political reforms had diminished the most authoritarian aspects of the Constitution inherited from the Pinochet regime. Not surprisingly, when electoral campaigning began in 2005, the incumbent coalition enjoyed high popular support and stable economic conditions.

In addition to the Lagos heritage, the Concertacion had another political advantage that helped secure its winning record. This was the inability of the right-wing opposition to come together behind a common project and strip itself of its ties to the dictatorial past. If internal conflicts were present among the ruling elites, they were rampant within the right-wing opposition, so much so that it was unable to unify behind a single candidate, opting instead to face the 2005 elections with two candidates: Joaquin Lavín, representing the UDI (Independent Democratic Union), and Sebastian Piñera of *Renovacion Nacional* (a more moderate rightist party). The opposition was also hampered by its links to the military regime, which blocked the translation of public discontent with governing elites into political support. This resulted in an electoral ceiling that has proven impossible to surpass until today.

Thus, most analysts became confident of another Concertacion victory as Bachelet improved her standing in public opinion polls. Between December 2001 and December 2004, the percentage of people who said that they would like her to be the next president went up steadily from 0% to 35% (Segovia 2005).

The possibility of an electoral victory, however, aggravated the problem of selecting a presidential candidate within the Concertacion. As a coalition of four parties with no legal rules to help address the thorny question of the presidential nomination, the Concertacion had experimented with different options since its emergence. In 1988, elite negotiations produced a rather consensual result that culminated in the nomination of Patricio Aylwin, a Christian Democrat who was perceived to be moderate enough to appease all sectors of society after the long period of military rule. In 1993, the Concertacion organized a closed primary in which only formal party militants could choose between the Socialist candidate Ricardo Lagos and the Christian Democrat Eduardo

5. Survey data collected every trimester by the Centro de Estudios Públicos is available at <http://www.cepchile.cl> (5 July 2008).

Frei. The latter won with 62.9% of the votes. In 1999, a primary was again organized; it was an open contest where all citizens (except those registered in parties outside the coalition) could express their opinions: Lagos won this time with 71.3% of the vote.

By 2005, Christian Democrats were increasingly wary of participating in a primary to select the official presidential candidate. They looked at the results of public opinion polls with dismay, as none of their prospective candidates appeared better positioned than the Socialist candidate, but nonetheless agreed to go ahead with the nomination process. After the first debate between the two strongest candidates, Soledad Alvear and Michelle Bachelet, it was obvious that the differences between them were growing and that Bachelet, the left-wing candidate, was increasingly favored in opinion polls. Pressured by her own party, Alvear was forced to step down to avoid a defeat similar to that experienced in 1999. Alvear's departure left Bachelet as the sole official candidate.

Public opinion polls became the key defining factor in positioning strong candidates and in resolving internal coalition debates over the nomination. Thus, survey results, rather than elite negotiation or internal party mobilization, made it possible for Bachelet to be seen as a viable candidate. She did not owe her political success to party structure nor to the traditional political elites, but to a much more diffuse process that allowed her to be seen by average citizens as a reliable leader.

Notwithstanding public opinion poll outcomes and the problems the opposition faced in proposing a viable alternative, there was a growing feeling of exhaustion with the Concertación's 15 uninterrupted years of rule. The coalition appeared increasingly disconnected from the country's citizens. Internal rivalries among its members and the need to divide government posts among them had created the image of parties solely preoccupied with the trappings of power. With a clear technocratic and state-centered approach, the coalition's rule was considered by many to have left few spaces for citizens to participate in politics. The situation was aggravated by a series of corruption scandals involving members of the government, which increased the public's rejection of traditional *concertacionista* elites. In the meantime, the right-wing opposition was campaigning on an "antipolitical" discourse, which resonated with the electorate. Joaquín Lavín, defeated by Lagos in 1999, built his political identity and career around populist slogans that attempted to portray him as a political outsider, although he had long been active in the right-wing UDI, with close connections to the military regime. Paradoxically, despite Chile's economic and political stability

and the relative success of the Concertacion governments in reducing poverty and promoting social policies aimed at fostering social inclusion, the 2005 presidential competition was played out in an environment that was hostile toward the political elites who had promoted those policies. More than ever before, the presidential contest would be fought over symbolic and discursive projects, rather than on strictly socioeconomic programs.

It was this antiestablishment climate that provided a window of opportunity for a woman like Bachelet to be nominated as an official candidate of the ruling coalition and to win the election. As a female candidate with a long political trajectory, but distant from the small group of male politicians who had governed Chile until then, Bachelet was able to build her campaign on the idea of bringing new winds of change to the Concertacion's program. She presented herself as a candidate closer to the people, one who could connect and listen to citizens' demands in a way that had not been done before. In her campaign, she vowed to appoint "new faces" to her government team, in this way taking advantage of the overall political atmosphere. She convincingly claimed to be an "outsider" and an antiestablishment leader.<sup>6</sup> This coincided perfectly with traditional cultural constructions of gender in Chile, where differences between women and men are taken for granted. The qualities attributed to women include generosity, a commitment to service, an interest in the common good, little ambition for power or wealth, incorruptibility, and closeness to citizens' concerns. Thus, ironically, the most traditional constructions of gender in Chilean political culture (and not the most egalitarian or modernizing ones) helped to cement popular support for the Socialist candidate, who was seen to be incorruptible, interested more in the nation than in petty party concerns, and willing to promote a more horizontal way of doing politics.<sup>7</sup>

Bachelet was able to seize the opportunities left open by growing citizen discontent with traditional male political elites, but also due to the fact that party leaders had no grounds on which to oppose a candidate who was so well positioned in public opinion polls. Thus, she was able to harness

6. The day after her election, *La Nacion* (national newspaper linked to the Concertacion) included an article entitled "When Everyone Thought the Concertacion Dead, Bachelet Reinvented It" (January 16, 2006, <http://www.lanacion.cl>. [5 July 2008].)

7. In a survey conducted in April 2006, 88.5% of those asked believed that "women contributed a different perspective that was necessary in politics" (SERNAM 2006). There were no statistical significant differences between the responses of men and women.

popular support early in the campaign by capitalizing on her predecessors' achievements, but at the same time by offering something new: her female identity, a new way of doing politics, and a commitment to renewing governing elites. It was precisely this mixture of continuity and change that allowed the Concertación to secure its traditional base, while winning votes from others who had remained on the sidelines of the electoral process or supported the rightist opposition.

### **Pressure for Gender Equity and the Visibility of Executive Positions**

Pressure for gender equity in politics has been a central theme in Chile since the emergence of the contemporary women's movement in the late 1970s. From the beginning of the regime transition to democratization, women activists were lobbying for gender equilibrium in political representation, but were mostly unsuccessful in making significant gains. In 1990, by the time the first democratically elected president assumed office after a 17-year military interruption, women were occupying only 2.6% of the Senate seats and 5.8% of the lower chamber (Ríos Tobar and Villar 2006). Fifteen years later, at the time of the last presidential contest, the percentage of congresswomen had increased three times in the lower house (to 15%) and only twofold in the Senate (to 5.2%). According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's World Classification of Women in National Parliaments, Chile places seventy-seventh in terms of women's presence in the legislature, lagging behind the world and regional averages.<sup>8</sup> The slow progress is in part due to the absence of legislation to force political parties to nominate more women as electoral candidates. Thus, unlike many of its neighboring countries, Chile does not have an electoral quota law to promote an increase in the number of women in electoral positions.

The resistance to change came fundamentally from the more traditional parties of the right, who have had veto power over legislation due to the requirement for extremely high quorums embedded in the 1980 constitution. Official parties, for their part, have shown little interest in affirmative-action policies to increase women's representation, leaving activists with little support within the political system. In addition, the women's organizations have not been able to mobilize for change in this respect. As elsewhere in the region, the transition to democracy produced a dramatically new set of challenges for the women's

8. <http://www.ipu.org> (2 May 2008).

movement: For the first time in decades, it had to interact with the state, state actors, and professional politicians and negotiate a political role with respect to the parties that now dominated the public sphere. The movement that had emerged and mobilized around the struggle against military rule had difficulty in agreeing on a common agenda that would support an articulation beyond the multiple identities, organizational structures, and thematic objectives pursued by specific organizations (Ríos Tobar, Godoy, and Guerrero 2004).

The pressure to increase women's representation in electoral office was slow; however, activists did manage to impact certain parties, parts of the governing coalition, and cultural values. This allowed for a slow and steady increase in the appointment of women in the executive branch at all levels of government. In 1990, there was only one woman appointed to the cabinet, Soledad Alvear, a Christian Democrat lawyer married to the president of the Christian Democratic Party. She served as minister of the newly inaugurated National Women's Service. By 2000, when Ricardo Lagos became president, there were five women in his cabinet (Corporacion Humanas 2006). Among these five ministers, Alvear continued as minister of external affairs, while Bachelet began her career as minister of health. Two years later in a cabinet shuffle, she became the first woman in Latin America to serve as minister of defense.<sup>9</sup>

As the previous discussion shows, occupying ministerial positions has become an important stepping-stone for the advancement of both male and female political careers. Yet considering the greater difficulties encountered by women in competing for electoral office, executive offices have become central for increasing women's access to political power. This was the case for Alvear and Bachelet, who, throughout the Lagos presidency, began to appear better positioned in public opinion surveys than their male counterparts in the cabinet (Segovia 2005). As the trend continued, the two women became the only credible candidates for the presidential contestation within the Concertacion. Both would later leave the government to become candidates of their respective parties within the coalition: Bachelet of the three left-wing parties (Radicals, Socialists, and the Party for Democracy) and Alvear of

9. With the election of President Bachelet, the gap in women's presence in the legislative and executive branches has increased due to her active policy to promote gender parity in her government. While women continue to represent only 12.6% of all members of congress, they have represented between 40% and 50% of all ministers in the different cabinet teams appointed.



the Christian Democrats.<sup>10</sup> Their role as ministers played a central role in the ability of these women to climb the political ladder.

Bachelet became the Concertacion's candidate because of the impressive public support that she received. However, she would never have been able to garner that support had she not had a successful career as minister in the Lagos government. Her appointment as minister was due, in turn, to the persistent pressure by activists within and outside political parties and institutions and the growing legitimacy among Chilean citizens of gender equity in politics.

### Turning the Gender Gap Around – Women Supporting Women

The last factor that helped cement the way for the election of the first female president in Chile was the process of gender voting that has been developing in the country for the last decade. Slowly but steadily, Chilean women have turned the traditional gender voting behavior around. Whereas women tended to vote for conservative parties irrespective of gender, increasingly they are supporting female over male candidates if they are given a choice (Altman 2004; Segovia 2005).

Thus, as I have tried to argue in this essay, the Concertacion's 2005 victory was in many ways predictable. However, the magnitude of Bachelet's triumph in the second round surprised many observers. No candidate claimed 50% of the votes required for victory in December 2005, necessitating a second round of elections in January 2006.

In 1999, Lagos had defeated his right-wing competitor by a thin margin (2.7%) in the primaries, but in 2006, Bachelet's margin of victory was more than seven percentage points in the general election (53.4% to 46.5%). The difference between the two elections was due primarily to the support received by a segment of the electorate that had not traditionally voted for the Concertacion, namely, women, especially working-class and poor women. Given the numerical importance of women, their support was ultimately decisive. While Lagos received only 45.3% of the female vote, Bachelet obtained 53.5%. This difference is even more significant if we consider that more women than men voted in the election and that various studies demonstrate that women are less likely to destroy their

10. By December 2003, for example, 14% of those interviewed by Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP) and registered to vote declared that they would want M. Bachelet to be "the next president of Chile" (<http://www.cepchile.cl> [5 July 2007]). She was the first-ranked political leader in the Concertacion by far, followed by Alvear with 10% and the ex-presidents Lagos and Frei with 4% and 3%, respectively.

ballots or abstain from voting than are men. More than a hundred thousand female voters that had supported other candidates in the primaries supported Bachelet in the presidential runoffs.

Electoral results were consistent with public opinion surveys prior to the election that showed significant gender gaps in levels of support received by the candidates (Segovia 2005). Massive street marches followed Bachelet's triumph, with thousands of women wearing presidential banners, demonstrating that her candidacy and victory resonated strongly with their aspirations for equality.<sup>11</sup> For an important percentage of women, gender identification took priority over traditional ideological preferences: "*Vota mujer*" ("vote woman") took hold of the Chilean female imagination.

## Conclusion

As the president herself has often acknowledged, she became the first woman elected head of state in a country that seemed an unlikely case for achieving a milestone for women's political empowerment. Her election was the product of at least three central factors: the long tradition of the struggle for gender equity that pushed for women's inclusion in political positions, including that of the executive branch; the support of women voters; and the skilled use of a small window of opportunity within the traditional elite structure that opened briefly in an otherwise closed and stable political system.

The story does not end there, however. The tale would not be complete without acknowledging the importance of Bachelet's own political wit, personal merit, and leadership capacity to seize the opportunities that came her way throughout her career. The president showed that she was capable of going against the current and inserting herself at the heart of party power; she appealed to citizen discontent with Chile's governing elites by simultaneously presenting herself as a continuation of their success and proposing to dislodge them from the center of power. For the first time in the country's political history, a woman turned an electoral campaign into a debate about gender and the role of women in society, winning the female vote in the process.

Some of the factors that contributed to Bachelet's election as president of Chile will no doubt be relevant for understanding the growing success of

11. For photographs of the event, see the Chilean newspaper *La Nación* for January 15 and 16, 2006, <http://www.lanacion.cl> (5 July 2008).

women in reaching the highest positions of power throughout the world. Future research should concentrate on looking for common experiences that allowed these change to occur, as well as the necessary impacts that different paths to power will have on promoting further gender equity.

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