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Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia: Coalición política, partidos y sistema electoral en Chile, 1987-2010

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Summary

The Chilean transition to democracy in the late 20th century is considered one of the most successful to have ever taken place in the world. During this process the obstacles set in place by the military government and the dangers of radicalization on the part of the opposition were adroitly overcome. The plebiscite of 1988 and its result, which was unfavourable to the dictatorship, permitted to bring the political impasse to an end by means of a political-institutional solution. Chile has also managed to avoid the instability that generally accompanies transition processes and to guarantee the full functioning of the democratic order through a policy of agreements between the government and the opposition.

After the restoration of democracy in 1990, Chile has gradually attained the status of intermediate country by means of persistent and orderly economic growth and increasing social well-being. The Concertación, the centre-left government coalition that was in power between 1990-2010, is considered as the most successful political formula that Chile has come up with during its lifespan as a republic.

However, the victory in 2010 of Sebastián Piñera, the presidential candidate of the right wing, generated a process of self-criticism in some sectors of the old Concertación, in an attempt to explain the factors that brought their long period in power to an end. In no time, this spawned in a sector of the Concertación elite and of the Left in general a series of reproaches concerning the democratic deficit presumably generated by the “democratic liberalism”, which was installed in the country in 1990. This has been compounded by a growing malaise about the legacy of the Concertación years within the social movements, which has driven some political leaders to pronounce the Concertación as a thing of the past and argue that it has come to the end of its historical cycle.

Regardless of these critical voices and their correlation with some actual facts, it is possible to assert that the eruption of new actors into the political scene and their grievance agenda, and/or the low citizen adherence to the any of the parties of the political spectrum do not fully corroborate the idea of the end of a cycle. There is no doubt that there have been important changes that have had an impact on the political arena. However in my opinion, these changes are rather the result of the growing benefits that the democratic consolidation itself has brought along. This consolidation

has made the consumer-subject become a citizen that demands a series of changes in the socioeconomic and political model of the country.

This work develops the thesis that the formation and evolution of the Concertación since the mid-1980s has been of crucial importance for the spread and consolidation of the democratic process and for the development of the country or, in other words, for the change from an authoritarian to a democratically elected government, followed by a democratic and institutionally consolidated government. To do so, drawing from a vast corpus of studies in the Chilean political evolution in recent decades, it offers a conceptualization and characterization of the emergence of a coalitional paradigm that has facilitated democratic governance and the national development.

The objective of this thesis has been to study the Concertación as an effective politico-historical coalition, from the perspectives of the theory of coalitions and compared politics. To do so, I have looked into its longevity (which has been the result of continued success at the polls) and the effective and efficient development of public policies designed and applied by the Executive. Thus, I zoom in on a series of factors, including the recent political history, the factors conditioning the transition and the endurance capability of this coalition to remain in power for a long period of time.

My hypothesis is that the Concertación is an effective (successful) coalition because of its longevity (legitimacy) in power and the positive results obtained. It is a coalition that has shown its capacity for learning expressed in its adaptation and/or renewal (virtuous decisions). This has been prompted by the political demands of the moment, yet the Concertación has not lost its anchorage in long-standing values and procedures. To boot, there have been all the constraints that the “*veto players*” and the institutional pillars inherited from the military government imposed on the transition. This dependent variable conditioned by the two expressions of “path dependence” (“critical juncture” and “reactive sequence”), are correlated to six independent variables (incentives), which explain and condition it by interacting in the political evolution (combination). These variables are the following: Political Coalition, Party-Political System, Electoral System, Type of Political Regime, Normative and Media Concentration.

In Chapter 1, I deal with the theoretical discussion of the six independent variables. I place a special emphasis on the theory of *path dependence* and its relation with the dependent variable, all of this in terms of the political process within which this alliance is inserted and the transition (“process tracing” method). This chapter shows that

unlike during any other conflictive period, the political learning carried out by several political parties in terms of revaluing democracy and the need to formulate projects favouring the majority facilitated the formation and consolidation of this coalition, which was crucial for the installation of democracy. Such learning took place within the framework of the early inauguration of the political party system and the experience of political alliances, and cut across classes and ideologies after the 1973 coup. Ultimately, all this led to the constitution of a moderate multi-party system during the transition period. It was confirmed that what is relevant to attain governance is not the number of parties but the relative degree of “ideological distance” existing between them.

One of the basic problems of presidential regimes has to do with electoral rules and their effects. In the case of post-dictatorship Chile, this was determined by the existence of a binominal electoral system. The present work establishes that despite the enormous democratic deficits inherent to such system, during the transition the binominal system favoured the constitution of stable coalitions. Also, I found evidence to prove that presidential regimes do not necessarily lead to failure or have a shorter life than parliamentary regimes. This is explained by the process of promoting stable majorities (coalitions) and the increasing “checks and balances” imposed by the division and independence of the branches of Government. In addition to this, there is the growing autonomy of some public bodies and the imposition of an ideological centripetal force expressed in the policy of agreements. These factors account for setting up a “presidentialism of compromise” or neo-presidentialism”, the main axis of which was governability.

Finally, this chapter presents evidence showing the interrelation of traditional and new economic groups with right-wing parties and the mass media. All of them became a triad (*veto players*) that remodelled the democratic restoration and conditioned the transition and subsequent political process in ways that were not always positive. However, the actual existence of veto players was yet another factor that reinforced the cooperation of the forces of the Concertación and of the Left, and imposed a certain degree of prudence on the citizens so as not to thwart democratic progress.

In Chapter 2, I have analyzed the effects of the constitutional amendments in the 20th century and the changes that they brought about in the political regime, the political party system and society. From this perspective, the coup d'état of 1973 and the inauguration of the military regime represent a true historical breakdown.

In addition to putting an end to the historical liberal-conservative duopoly, the early emergence of the working class and the popular parties in Chile, brought out into the open the main cleavages that have accompanied the evolution of the political system, which become manifest in the conflicts between owners and workers, the oligarchy and the bourgeoisie, and Church and State. However, the new parties and the differences that they generated did not bring about a final and definite break away from the past, as there was no correlation of strength to impose a change in hegemony. Besides, there are always ways and means to establish a dialogue among traditional elites whose ideological differences are minor, as can clearly be observed between liberals and conservatives and, during the transition process, between the elites of the Concertación and those of the Right.

Since the Constitution of 1925 (the main regulatory framework of the 20th century) became effective, what has prevailed is a presidential regime that still persists, with some differences in shade and limitations. At the same time, what has prevailed in the country has been a trend to form alliances incorporating different political stances with a view to conquering power or opposing a globalizing ideology. This has generated a new style of engaging in politics, compromising and forming coalitions with a view to elections. This is what the Concertación did initially on the occasion of the 1988 plebiscite.

During the years in which a presidential and multi-party system operated in Chile, democracy made a remarkable progress (increased participation of women and the middle and working class). However, it also showed its limitations with its extreme ideologization and alignment during the Cold War. Between President Frei Montalva's *Revolución en Libertad* (1964) and President Allende's *Socialismo a la Chilena* (1970), an enormously polarized party system was installed in the country, with no intermediation by the centre. What we can observe is that the Christian Democracy shifted towards the Right, whereas the Radical Party moved closer to the Left. During the government of President Allende (1970-1973) this would lead to a lose-lose game between the Executive and the opposition "entrenched" in Parliament.

The final outcome of the process was the coup of 1973. The ensuing military regime installed in Chile set itself the aim of re-founding the country ("new professionalism") and thus, Chile was one of the few countries in which the authoritarian-neoliberal prescription was successfully applied) a fact which during the transition would end up by hindering the depth and speed of the democratic changes.

The neoliberal economic model imposed by the military regime became a strategy to construct the institutional framework and regulate social and political relations. An essential milestone in the weakening of the regime was the severe economic crisis of 1982. This crisis created a power vacuum within the regime and permitted the birth in 1983 of the Alianza Democrática, a comprehensive agreement among the forces of the opposition, which sought to generate the foundations for a peaceful transition to democracy. This alliance represents the historic cornerstone which would later originate the Concertación.

By the late 1980s, Chile faced a critical situation characterized by the erosion of support and loss of legitimacy of the regime, which took place against a precarious socio-economic backdrop. In turn, the opposition parties had managed to re-articulate and adopt a more united and pragmatic stance about how to put an end to the military dictatorship. Thus, the idea and principle that democracy is “the only game in town” became more firmly established.

Chapter 3 explores the political learning and key decisions adopted by the opposition parties in the ideological, coalitional and political spheres.

In the face of the regime’s intransigence about opening up spaces, Chile might have resorted to a violent solution of the civil war type (as happened in Central America). However, the Chilean opposition quite rightly understood that as long as there was cohesion in the armed forces and no overwhelming social pressure, there would be no change in regime. All this reinforced the Concertación’s decision to adjust itself to the formats and time horizons considered in Pinochet’s Constitution of 1980, despite rejecting its contents.

The opposition leaders learned to value democracy and developed an awareness of its frailty. This led the political elites to privilege dialogue over conflict in their negotiations with the military regime, and the public, to tone down and/or put off their most pressing demands after the plebiscite. This eased the pressure in that period of great politico-institutional fragility, which disappeared with the onset of the process of democratic consolidation. This successful learning by the Center and Left parties resulted in a more realistic and pragmatic anchoring of their ideology and their political platform. This facilitated the operationalization of the policy of consensus among the members of the opposition and the consolidation of a limited multi-party approach during the period of transition.

The transition to democracy in Chile is inserted within a very complex political context in which there are powerful “*veto players*” (right-wing parties, powerful entrepreneurs and the armed forces) and an intricate institutional fabric imposed by the legal framework inherited from the dictatorship. This made the democratic forces adopt a pragmatic attitude vis-à-vis the possibilities and impossibilities of the moment. This pragmatism contributed to the generation of a remarkable capability to develop bold and novel decision-taking mechanisms that made it possible to sort out successfully such complex situations as human rights violations.

Another factor that contributed to the continuity of the coalitions was the binominal electoral system that obliges the parties to join forces and support one single candidate in order to be competitive. This also encouraged the presentation of joint lists of candidates for the parliamentary and municipal elections, with a view to optimizing results at the polls. Chile was favoured by the fact that the binominal system implemented was *sui generis*: no majority vote, no proportional vote, and a tendency to the over-representation of the second political force to the detriment of the first and other forces. This was combined with a new predisposition to build majority coalitions, which was one of the differences observed when this system was compared to the traditional Chilean party system.

The choice of a Concertación candidate to the Presidency of the Republic and the overall negotiation of power among its member parties was no minor process in the consolidation (and continuity) of this coalition itself. This study identifies its three basic, novel and long-term characteristics. In the first place, it established a process of legitimation and democratic progression (increasingly open primaries) for the generation of presidential candidacies. This process gained such legitimacy that at present, it has been the object of legislation, and although primary elections are voluntary, fewer and fewer political actors can escape taking part in them. In the second place, the process managed to strike a balance of power in the Cabinet appointments of members of the lay parties of the Concertación and of the parties with a religious orientation, thus sharing the rewards inherent to the coalitional game. The balance of power principle has remained unchanged for the parliamentary and municipal elections, albeit under a more complex equation that includes the concepts of strength and compensation. In other words, gratification of the majority without the minority losing its perks, which results in a balance between these two worlds. In the third and last place, the process inhibits the differences in ideology and values through the joint design of a government program,

which also works as a roadmap and prevents the outbreak of an open confrontation between a security-oriented policy and an efficiency-oriented policy. Although the Concertación Presidents never fully executed their programs because of either the absence of a binding commitment or the need for compromise implied in ruling a country, they were always their Lodestar and “moral reminder”.

This selection-negotiation-programming process permitted a fairer share of the costs and benefits of governing. It also reduced the incentives to walk away and prevented the splinter-group effect and/or the loss of leadership in the negotiations of the coalition.

The process for the selection of candidates was increasingly democratic and progressive in essence, as can be observed when we look at the presidential candidates and their programs. This goes to prove the dynamism and capability of the Concertación to stay in tune with the cultural changes and the democratic development undergone in the country. The clearest example of this was the promotion of Michelle Bachelet’s candidacy as the presidential bet of the Concertación.

Clearly the Concertación’s long administration of power and its relatively successful results were factors that encouraged its continuity. The first democratic government, led by Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994), made it its main task to restore the basic links of the Chilean society, which yearned for peace, stability and a political order respectful of the basic rights. It was the onset of a long transition with a burdensome legacy. The normal operation of the democratic institutional framework, combined with an important tax reform and a substantial progress in the clarification of the identities of the Disappeared-Detainees were key achievements of the Aylwin administration, which contributed to the healing of the nation.

The second Concertación administration headed by President Eduardo Frei Ruiz Tagle, followed the path of democratic consolidation and economic modernization launched by his predecessor. Chile was to attain in those years a high level of economic bonanza. The Frei Ruiz Tagle administration corresponds to a stage of great reforms in institutional management, education, justice and the consolidation of the process of opening Chile to the world. This successful period came to an abrupt end with the Asian crisis of 1998-1999, although the institutional normality continued to operate.

Chapter 4 explores the tensions produced in a series of cleavages (original, transitional, State-Church, accumulation and modernity-ecology-industry), as well as a new weakening of the parties of the centre. It is in this period that a change in the national political narrative combining equality and modernity first becomes manifest. As

a coalition, the Concertación has successfully sorted out these mutations in discourse, yet there are some difficulties derived from mortgages that would later come to light.

The international economic crisis was one of the limitations that President Lagos had to handle. He had the difficult task of undertaking an electoral campaign when the economy was at its lowest ebb and, into the bargain, he had to face the initial reluctance of the voters of the centre. His campaign slogan was a faithful reflection of the challenges to be met: “*Growth with equality*”. At any rate, President Lagos’s administration was one of the most valuable assets of the Chilean democracy and the Concertación. His administration proved that the Concertación was capable of giving the country governance in an adverse economic climate. Also, Lagos’s government managed to carry out a large part of the items on his electoral agenda. The final outcome was a country with a different political-strategic stature, yet the much yearned for equality was not attained.

This chapter also analyzes President Michelle Bachelet’s term of office and the paradigm transplacement towards a more horizontal and participatory model represented by the slogan “*Citizen government*”. Bachelet implemented a program to increase citizens’ rights and extend the social reforms. Among the latter were cradle-to-old-age social protection, a social security reform, the introduction of a medical care system that guarantees access to popular sectors, etc. An important feature was the close and effective leadership style developed by the President. At the end of her term of office, it is possible to observe a narrative anchor that appears as the dominant trend and to which the political actors must adapt their discourse and strategies.

This experience has consolidated in the country a progressive culture that seeks equality and increased harmony in development, ultimately leading to a “*society of guarantees*”, as former President Lagos called it. All this is backed up by several legal instruments, as required in such an institutionalized and extremely legalistic country as Chile.

These considerations have permitted me to reassert the hypothesis that the Concertación has been a successful coalition. It was capable of giving the country governance by means of virtuous decisions which, in turn, have allowed it to adapt to the changes without losing its democratic progression. The Concertación has also been proactive in the reduction or suppression of basic cleavages and of the threats that coalitions in multiparty systems are exposed to. It has promoted mechanisms to fortify adherence and membership of its supporters. It managed to steer a successful course in a

presidentialist system with a controversial electoral system (the binominal system) and have positive results in the pursuit and exercise of power (victory at the polls). As a program-generating coalition, together with citizen re-politization it also managed to introduce some issues in the strategic culture and anchor them in an inevitable way (single-way path). Clearly, the policies implemented and the returns involved, have favored the organization and mobilization of different sectors. This has resulted in the displacement of some actors and the appearance of new ones. Finally, it has been possible to keep up the cohesion of the coalition after its defeat at the presidential elections of 2010. The Concertación is now thinking about re-inventing itself via a project for a more sustainable and democratic development, including winning the presidential elections to make it materialize.