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4 Boric and the Centre-Left

From Vilification to a Tactical Alliance

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Introduction

Since starting out as a student leader and until he became president, Gabriel Boric's political discourse constantly attacked Concertación governments and centre-left parties. Indeed, during the so-called 30 year period, social democracy was systematically defamed by a young radical left that berated its conciliatory nature and its tacit support for the neoliberal economic model.

Behind this ongoing harassment of the centre-left, the aim was to dispute the hegemony exercised since the end of the 1980s at the heart of so-called Chilean progressive forces. The moderate Chilean socialist sector was undoubtedly a key and decisive player in the creation of a broad-based, successful opposition to the military regime. Following democratic restoration in 1990, the social democrats (made up of the Socialist party, the Party for Democracy, and the Radical party) cemented a productive alliance with the Christian Democratic party. They also played a key role in formulating successful public policies and in constructing a productive 'politics of agreements' with the right-wing opposition.

This scenario radically changed after the secondary student protests in 2006 and particularly after widespread university student demonstrations from 2011 onwards. From that moment, social democrat hegemony was seriously challenged by a new generation of radicalised youngsters with a completely new discourse. Claiming that their main aim was to end neoliberalism in Chile, this new radical left did not hesitate to lash out against Concertación forces and their leaders.

This chapter explores the tense and difficult relationship between the radical young left and the centre-left from 2011 onwards. It will try and identify a series of factors to facilitate understanding of both the confrontations and rapprochements between these sectors of the Chilean left over the last few years.

The first section examines how an important part of the moderate left was seduced by the radicalised student movement. What is striking about this is that the increasing pull within Chilean social democracy created by the

student movement occurred despite the relentless attacks on the moderate left by radicalised youth.

The second section focuses on the sudden reproachment between Gabriel Boric and centre-left forces during the 2021 presidential elections. It is worth remembering that, during the first round of the highly contended presidential elections in November 2021, Gabriel Boric defended a noticeably radical discourse, in line with his government programme, which promised profound changes in Chilean society. However, during the brief second-round election campaign in December 2021, Boric suddenly became much more moderate, aiming to gain the support of the centre and centre-left. After Boric's triumph, the centre-left was even invited to form part of his government. As a result, the social democrats began to regain some of their old political momentum, to the extent that several members were appointed to ministries and to important leadership positions in public office.

In the third section, the rising influence and importance of the centre-left in the Constitutional Convention is analysed. Social democracy made its mark on this body through the so-called socialist bench. On several occasions, this 'socialist bench' made obvious attempts to lower the extremist tone of the proposals defended by radical left convention members.

The fourth section takes a look at the emergence of new centre-left initiatives in the country, emerging from moderate sectors of society that felt unrepresented by the existing social democratic parties. As the constitutional process advanced, these social democratic voices expressed their discontent with the partisan and radical nature of the draft constitution being written, with movements like 'Amarillos por Chile', 'Una que nos Una', 'Proyecto Chile' and 'Centroizquierda por el Rechazo' being formed. These initiatives successfully managed to mobilise sectors of the centre and centre-left population to vote against the draft constitution.

After the overwhelming rejection of the draft constitution in the September 4th plebiscite in 2022, the final section analyses the unusual empowerment of the centre-left within Boric's government. Undoubtedly, incorporating the centre-left into Boric's government has had a series of advantages for the new president. However, the presence of members of the social democratic sector in the government has also been a source of ongoing tension and disagreements between the centre-left and the radical left, who have found it difficult to get along in the ruling coalition.

The centre-left *vis-à-vis* the student rebellion

One of the biggest enigmas of Concertación governments is the fact that, while unquestionably successful, they have never managed to obtain resolute support from the political forces underpinning them. As a result, student movements' unending criticism of Concertación governments took place in a political setting that was practically defenceless. After an onslaught of youngsters against the moderate left, few party-line voices resolutely came to

the defence of the government coalition. Moreover, not only did the centre-left opt to not deal with criticism from the student movement head-on, but many of its members also actually voiced their own criticism too (Mansuy, 2023). Therefore, from 2011 onwards, more and more social democrats began to clearly sympathise with and support the position of some sectors of the young radical left. As a result, an ever-broader sector of the traditional moderate left became more and more radical. This led to them denying both their own recent past and practically all the economic and social achievements of the Concertación's 20 years in power (Colodro, 2019).

This is a clear reflection of the obvious split between the so-called self-complacent and self-flagellant sectors that, over the course of the years, occurred within the Concertación. The first represented the most moderate and liberal wing of the Christian Democrats and part of the centre-left. This sector did not hide their complacency about maintaining the neo-liberal model inherited from the dictatorship. However, increasing discontent was also brewing in the centre-left, with the perception that this was simply a continuation of the previous regime. Above all, many members were visibly uncomfortable with the 'politics of agreements' between the Concertación and its right-wing opposition (Silva, 2011). In addition, they criticised the absence of more ground-breaking policies faced with the military regime's political, economic and institutional legacy (Brunner and Moulian, 2002).

During the Nueva Mayoría government (2014–2018), the former Concertación's left unsuccessfully tried to draw closer to the student movement's young leaders (Hidalgo, 2018). In fact, during Bachelet's second government, it took on a large number of the demands made by student leaders regarding education. In fact, during this government, leaders of the student movement such as Gabriel Boric, Giorgio Jackson, Camila Vallejo and Karol Cariola won parliamentary seats originally intended for candidates of the Nueva Mayoría, to which they did not belong. None of these generous gestures of reconciliation, however, led the young radical left to change the tone of their ongoing criticism of the former Concertación's left-wing forces. Quite to the contrary, after becoming MPs, what came to be known as the 'student bench' made use of their position to continue openly expressing their ongoing dissatisfaction with the Nueva Mayoría government, led by Michelle Bachelet (Correa Sutil, 2018).

Therefore, it is difficult to explain the attraction the centre-left held for radical left student groups that saw social democracy as one of Chile's greatest evils. This strange phenomenon could lead to it being concluded, erroneously, that this is a flagrant case of political masochism, in which unending attacks cause an inexplicable kind of pleasure and satisfaction amongst their victims. However, a closer analysis allows us to identify a series of factors that possibly contributed to the growing mimicry with the radical left that, at least until the plebiscite of 4 September 2022, occurred in an important part of the Chilean centre-left.

Firstly, the weight of the past must be considered. The majority of the centre-left political groups that took part in the Concertación governments had also been undeniably radical during the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Socialist party, MAPU and Izquierda Cristiana, all of whom had openly supported the revolutionary ideas that were in fashion at the time. There is also the fact that, years ago in their youth, many of the Concertación's leaders had also been student leaders. Like the 2011 student leaders, they had taken to the streets during the Frei and Allende governments to demand a radical transformation of Chilean society. However, after the military coup, these sectors of the Chilean left gradually moved away from radicalism, distancing themselves from the use of political violence and valuing the democratic system and its institutions (Walker, 1988). However, the abrupt explosion of student demonstrations during Bachelet's first government caused many of them to remember their own radical past, reviving feelings of nostalgia and sympathy for the radical youngsters.

Secondly, Chilean youngsters began to show more interest in politics after many years of becoming alarmingly depoliticised. It must be remembered that, in the 1990s, the expression 'no estoy ni ahí' ('I couldn't care less') was used constantly by young people to show their visible indifference and lethargy towards anything political. In those years, Chilean youngsters prioritised individuality and satisfying their own material needs. Some refer to these young people as 'Generation Zero', highlighting their lack of interest in politics and their apathy (Baño and Faletto, 1992). As a result, after the secondary school student demonstrations in 2006, many left-wing parents could not hide their pride and relief. Their children were finally starting to show signs of a certain level of political maturity and social conscience, beyond merely being interested in satisfying their most immediate personal interests.

Thirdly, from 2010 onwards, the vital exhaustion of the generation that grew up in the 1960s, involved in an ongoing state of mobilisation for more than four decades, can be seen. After the turbulent years of the Frei Montalva government, the progressive youngsters of the 1960s wasted all their energy on the failed Unidad Popular experience. After the military coup, this same generation experienced the onslaught of repression and the hardship of exile. They fought, on and off, against the military regime for more than 17 years. With the return to democracy in 1990, this same generation was completely absorbed by Concertación governments for two decades. After the death of Pinochet in 2006, however, any incentive to keep on fighting to protect democracy from an eventual military ambush suddenly disappeared. Democracy at that time was seen as consolidated and the country had good economic and social indicators, which meant that this generation gave up and an already ageing and tired generation relaxed their state of high alert (Silva, 2022).

During Piñera's second government, the Chilean left as a whole became so radical that the traditional ideological barriers that had separated the traditional moderate left from the extreme left until then were almost completely broken down. This was reflected dramatically in the social uprising of

October 2019. On that occasion, almost none of the social democrat leaders publicly object to the wave of vandalism and violence this involved, such as the destruction of underground stations, the burning of churches, the looting of supermarkets and shops and the calls to put an end to Piñera's legally constituted government. As a result, centre-left MPs and leaders effectively ended up justifying and legitimising the use of violence to achieve political aims (Muñoz Riveros, 2020).

Boric and his reproachment with the centre-left

The social uprising in October 2019 created a climate of structural crisis within the Chilean political and institutional system. As the events of October 18th (18-O) unfurled, there was an actual attempt at insurrection by the radical left. This sector wanted to make the political and institutional crisis affecting the country worse and cause the fall of Sebastián Piñera's government. The most radical left-wing sectors insisted on using violence on the streets, inciting a violent and ongoing confrontation with security forces, destroying transportation systems and looting local shops (Peña and Silva, 2022). In this scenario of profound social unrest, the more moderate political sectors turned to a political and institutional way out of the crisis through frenzied negotiations in the Parliament. This resulted in the signing of the Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution on 25 November 2019. Social democrat and right-wing MPs were the main parties involved in this agreement.

Despite strongly opposing the Concertación and Nueva Mayoría governments, Boric was able to keep certain channels of communication open with representatives of the more moderate left. As a result, during his time as an MP, he did not completely disregard what was defended by the Concertación's left-wing legislators. On several occasions, he even surprisingly distanced himself from his own political sector. The clearest and most decisive example of Boric's 'relative autonomy' was his unexpected and daring participation in November 2019's previously mentioned agreement. Boris gave his personal support to the agreement, since his own party, Convergencia Social, was not willing to sign the document.

In this agreement, the leaders of the different political parties agreed to embark on a constitutional process as an institutional way out of the crisis caused by the 18-O uprising. Among the radical left, only the president of Revolución Democrática, Catalina Pérez, and the president of Partido Comunes, Javiera Toro, decided to sign the document. On the other hand, the Partido Comunista and other radical left-wing sectors refused to sign the agreement, instead criticising it harshly. Boric's support for the agreement was strongly criticised by his own colleagues in the Frente Amplio and the radical left in general, who saw his support for this document as an act of betrayal. However, Boric's decision to support the November agreement also visibly improved his public image among broad sectors of the population. This gesture was seen by many as a sign of political maturity and republican sense,

which undoubtedly helped pave the way for his subsequent candidacy for the presidency of the Nation.

As a presidential candidate for *Convergencia Social*, Boric was up against Daniel Jadue, the Communist party candidate. The latter appeared in all the polls as the great favourite to triumph in the primaries of the electoral pact *Apruebo Dignidad*. During a televised debate on 12 July 2021, Jadue took advantage of the opportunity to criticise Boric openly for having signed the agreement. After the October uprising, Jadue and the Communist party were against any kind of political agreement that would lead to demobilising the people protesting against Piñera's government. During this debate, Boric not only defended his decision to sign the agreement but also criticised the authoritarian and anti-democratic practices of several left-wing governments in Latin America. Given his criticism of Bolivarian regimes, Boric once again was severely harassed on social media by the more radical sectors, distancing himself from the Communist party, which had always expressed its resolute support for the governments of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. This is how Boric tried to gain the support of the independent voters also taking part in the primaries. Indeed, both signing the November agreement and obviously distancing himself from several radical Latin American regimes, paid Boric significant dividends in his battle to win the presidency. In the primaries on 28 July 2021, he won an overwhelming victory over the Communist party candidate, obtaining 60.4 per cent of the votes.

During the first round of the presidential elections on 21 November 2021, Boric only received support from 25.8 per cent of the electorate and was beaten by hard-right candidate, Antonio Kast, with 27.9 per cent of the votes. During his campaign, Boric defended the refoundational agenda of the *Apruebo Dignidad* coalition with conviction. Although Boric managed to pass to the second round, nothing assured that in the ballotage he would be victorious against Kast. During the first round, both the traditional right-wing candidate, Sebastián Sichel, and the right-wing populist candidate, Franco Parisi, ended up drawing, with each getting 12.8 per cent of the votes. As a result, everything seemed to point towards most of this 25.6 per cent backing Kast in the second round.

Given the uncertain electoral scenario, Boric launched himself into winning over the centre-left and centre. He was forced to adjust his political discourse, adopting positions traditionally defended by the centre-left. On the eve of the second-round election, Boric underlined the importance of implementing change gradually and maintaining political governability and economic stability. His forced reconciliation with the centre-left and centre forces was also due to the need to gain the support of the former *Concertación's* left and of a sector of the Christian Democrats in Parliament in order to try and counteract the right's power. During the presidential election's first round, parliamentary elections had also been held. All the seats in the Parliament were up for grabs (155), as well as 27 of the 50 seats in the Senate. The right

did well in these elections, which would make it more difficult to implement Apruebo Dignidad's government programme if Boric won the elections.

Undoubtedly, Boric's tactical U-turn during the second round was really quite bold. By moderating his message, he risked losing the support of the more radical sectors of the Apruebo Dignidad coalition that, to a certain extent, felt they were being betrayed. For example, the candidate who lost the Apruebo Dignidad primaries, Daniel Jadue, warned Boric that, should he win, the Communist party would not allow his government not to fully implement the agenda agreed upon by the Apruebo Dignidad coalition. At the end of the day, however, the left-wing sectors' wider aim of preventing an Antonio Kast victory took precedence.

During the short second-round campaign, several centre-left figures who had held important positions in the former Concertación governments openly supported Boric's candidature, including Carolina Tohá from the Party for Democracy. In the past, Tohá had been a member of the government cabinets of Eduardo Frei, Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet and Mayor of the Municipality of Santiago. During the second round, Tohá made several television appearances and did several print interviews to reach out to centre-left and centre voters, encouraging them to vote for Boric. Even more important was the support Boric received from none less than former President Michelle Bachelet. She travelled from Geneva to Chile especially to publicly express her support for Boric's candidature. Not only did she meet the presidential candidate but she also appeared in a television spot calling on people to vote for Boric.

Between the first and second rounds, Boric went from having an initial 25.8 per cent of the vote to a formidable 55.8 per cent; the highest percentage obtained by a presidential candidate since the return to democracy in 1990. The new voters Boric attracted in the second round came mainly from the centre-left or were independents who preferred political moderation. That is why many of these voters could not specifically be said to favour Boric but were rather more anti-Kast. Among them were also voters who feared that an eventual Kast triumph would cause more rioting from the radical left, this time to a much greater extent than that of October 2019.

After Boric's triumph in the second round, social democracy once again started to play a role in national politics, after it had almost completely disappeared at the end of the Nueva Mayoría government and during Sebastián Piñera's second administration (Brunner, 2021). Boric appointed six experienced figures from the former Concertación to his first cabinet. Economist Carlos Montes from the Socialist party, and former president of Parliament, was named Minister of Housing. Socialist MP Maya Fernández, granddaughter of Salvador Allende, was named Minister of Defence. Jeanette Vega, from the Party for Democracy and Deputy Secretary of Health during Michelle Bachelet's first government, was named Minister of Social Development. Esteban Valenzuela, one of the Party for Democracy's founders, was named Minister of Agriculture. Marcela Hernando from the Radical party,

former MP and Mayor of Antofagasta, was named Minister of Mining. No less important was appointment of Manuel Monsalve, a member of the Socialist party, as Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, in charge of trying to improve security in the country.

The most significant appointment was that of Mario Marcel as Finance Minister. Marcel, a close ally of the Socialist party, had been one of the main figures managing the economy and finances during the Concertación era and was a prestigious economist with a successful career behind him. Marcel, with a clear technocratic profile, was in charge of the Budget Office during Ricardo Lagos' government and was president of the Central Bank when he was named Finance Minister. Through his appointment, Boric wanted to give clear signs of economic and financial moderation, since his electoral victory had created significant levels of concern and uncertainty in the markets. In this way, the announcement about who would be the new Minister of Finance was awaited with great expectation by the main national and international economic actors. Indeed, after Mario Marcel's appointment, the Santiago Stock Exchange and financial experts in general reacted with visible relief and optimism.

The integration of centre-left figures into Boric's government obeyed a series of factors. To start with, Boric needed to repay the electoral support he had received from the social democrats during the election, which had been decisive in ensuring his victory against Kast. On the other hand, Boric was aware that there were few individuals with sufficient experience in running state bodies within his own political sphere. However, the social democratic parties (the Socialist party, the Party for Democracy, and the Radical party) had a broad and seasoned cast of candidates who, during 20 years of Concertación governments, had carried out different public functions. Many of them had held ministerial positions, had experience in Parliament and had headed up different public institutions.

Boric's decision to incorporate centre-left figures in his government was possibly also motivated by the desire to reduce the weighting and influence of the Communist party within the government coalition and therefore to moderate the course his government was taking. Since the start of the political-electoral alliance between the young people in the radical left and the Communist party, the latter had often imposed their views and demands on the rest of the conglomerate, given its hundred-year existence, renowned internal cohesion and the iron will among its ranks. Therefore, it was not difficult for them to exercise their influence among so many recently created parties and movements, mainly made up of young people with little life experience and who were not used to working together in a coalition. By incorporating the centre-left, the axis shifted towards the centre, immediately decreasing the relative weight of the Communist party in the government. This is why it was not unexpected that the Communist party publicly manifested their annoyance after the Socialist party, and the Party for Democracy joined the government.

The centre-left during the constitutional process

The signing of the Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution on 15 November 2019 briefly assuaged the profound political unrest that had been unleashed after the 18-O uprising. For many Chileans at the time, drawing up a new constitution appeared a reasonable way out of the grave political-institutional crisis that was occurring in the country. During the Entry Plebiscite of 25 October 2020, the option to initiate a constituent process received 78 per cent of citizen support. This result sparked optimism that drawing up a new Constitution was actually going to be possible, bringing the never-ending conflict surrounding the 1980 Constitution to an end. However, the radical left conveniently interpreted this overwhelming support for drafting a new constitution as a mandate to write a completely new one reflecting the spirit of the October 2019 rebellion.

During the negotiations that led to the November 25 agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution, the right managed to impose its demand that the proposed new constitution had to be approved by two-thirds of the 155 constituents. The right-wing forces started from the base that they would manage to elect more than a third of the members of the convention. This would ensure a relatively comfortable negotiating position within that body to avoid the adoption of a too radical constitutional text.

On 15 and 16 May 2021, citizens voted on the members of the Constitutional Convention. Twenty-five members of the centre-left, represented by the *Lista del Apruebo*, were elected. This list included the Socialist party, the Party for Democracy, the Radical party, the Liberal party, *Ciudadanos* and the Progressive party. Within this group, 17 of those elected made up the *Colectivo Socialista* within the Constitutional Convention. The radical left forces, organised into *Apruebo Dignidad*, had 28 members elected. The biggest surprise of all, however, was among the so-called independent candidates, with 48 elected. Finally – and as had been previously agreed upon – 17 indigenous people were voted in. After the election of its members, it became immediately clear that almost all the independent and indigenous representatives had views similar to those of the radical left, therefore giving them a majority with enough leeway to completely throw out the old constitution and demand that the draft be drawn up from a clean slate. The right – through *Vamos por Chile* – had no chance of influencing anything drawn up by the Constitutional Convention, since it had only won 37 of the 155 seats available.

During the constitutional process, centre-left representatives were often ambiguous about radical sectors' new proposals. On several occasions, they got carried away by the overly revolutionary spirit of the Constitutional Convention and actually ended up supporting what were actually rather extreme suggestions. At other times, however, they distanced themselves from the radical left, voting against proposals that would obviously be rejected by broad sectors of the public. This centre-left tendency of increasingly

distancing itself from the radicals was accentuated during the last months of the constitutional process, when the draft started taking a definitive shape. Calls for moderation from the *Colectivo Socialista* became more and more frequent as opinion polls showed that the majority of the population was leaning towards rejecting the draft. As opposed to the more radical sectors of the Convention, who were counting on a draft that was as 'refoundational' as possible, members of the *Colectivo Socialista* were completely aware that presenting an extremely partisan text to the electorate would only end up in defeat in the exit plebiscite (Garín González, 2022).

Given that they decided not to support the different proposals presented by the extreme left, members of the *Colectivo Socialista* were often accused by more radical members of the Constitutional Convention of treason. This occurred, for example, on 18 March 2022, when the plenary session of the Constitutional Convention contested the first political system report, rejecting 93 of the 96 articles proposed by the Politics Commission. This proposal included a series of radical changes to how the Chilean political system would work, including eliminating the Senate and creating a Regional Chamber that would not have the power to go up against the Parliament. What was suggested, in practice, was a kind of single-chamber system. On this occasion, the Communist party accused the *Colectivo Socialista* of not honouring an alleged existing agreement to approve the proposal (Pauta, 18 March 2022). However, social democrats' criticism of eliminating the Senate was not only heard within the Constitutional Convention. In addition, in Parliament, several socialist MPs indicated they disagreed with plans to eliminate this important legislative body.

The same occurred on 2 April 2022, when the Environment Commission's report was rejected in the Constitutional Convention's plenary session. This report included a series of proposals, such as a national statute on water and mining. The quorum of two-thirds needed to approve it was not reached, with 98 members voting in favour, 46 against and 8 abstaining. The radical left sectors within the Constitutional Convention blamed the *Colectivo Socialista* for this defeat. During voting, socialist members were shouted at, insulted and branded 'traitors'. In addition, during a press conference, radical left-wing representatives read a list of the names of *Colectivo Socialista* members who had voted against the report or abstained, as a way of publicly shaming them.

The struggles and polarisation within the Constitutional Convention increased as voting on the articles to be included in the new constitution began. The uncompromising position the radical left adopted chipped away at the already dwindling prestige of this body and at citizen confidence in its work. The lack of seriousness and respect for formality shown by several more radical members also made more and more citizens start to seriously question this process and its final result. It could be said that wear and tear in the Constitutional Convention and the discrediting of its work began the very same day it was inaugurated on 4 July 2021. Representatives of the radical left interrupted the inauguration led by Carmen Gloria Valladares, secretary of

the Electoral Qualifying Tribunal (TRICEL), several times. In addition, radical left groups organised several demonstrations in the area surrounding the old Parliament building where the ceremony was being held, with people chanting all kinds of slogans and demanding the release of vandals detained during 18-O. Radical members of the Constitutional Convention also prevented Chile's national anthem being sung. All this was an indication of what was to come and of the radical left's important sectarianism and indisposition towards discussion of any kind.

The election of Elisa Loncón as the Constitutional Convention's first president did not help either, since it worked against creating a climate that favoured dialogue or a willingness to reach agreements so that a draft that represented the majority of political-ideological positions could be created. Instead of becoming a figure that bridged the gap between the different political views in the Constitutional Convention, Loncón opted to concentrate continuously and almost exclusively on her own Mapuche cause. As a result, she practically gave up on her role as mediator and guarantor of the constitutional process, which would have helped generate at least a minimum amount of confidence in which to negotiate and accommodate different views to come to an agreement on the draft constitution.

On Tuesday 21 December 2021, Boric, as president-elect, paid a visit to Loncón and the other leaders. He expressed his satisfaction with the constitutional process and his respect for this body's autonomy. However, he also made some declarations that could be interpreted as a warning to Loncón and the other leaders that they should not get carried away by the temptation to write a constitution based exclusively on their own political agendas.

My hope is not for a partisan Constitutional Convention ... because that is not what is appropriate. This body goes beyond specific circumstances. We are available to help it function better, with unrestricted respect for all the views present here today, whether they are mine or not, because democracy is something constructed between us all. (...) I hope we are all willing to collaborate so that this process ends well.

(Diario Uchile, 21/12/22)

The erosion of the Constitutional Convention's public image and that of its members was also the result of widespread and ongoing media coverage of the constitutional process from beginning to end. All the convention's sessions were broadcast live on television and on the radio and were covered in the written press. During the constitutional process, the population witnessed innumerable events in which the frivolity of several of the Constitutional Convention's members was brought to light. None of this improved the public's opinion of the quality of the work they were carrying out.

One of the most notorious cases, which had an extremely negative effect on public opinion, was that of member Giovanna Grandón, also known as 'Aunt Pikachu'. During the protests that followed 18-O, Grandón had become

something of a celebrity by taking to the streets dressed as a Pokémon. The same can be said of member Cristóbal Andrade who, on repeated occasions, dressed up as a big blue dinosaur, leading the public to believe that many of its members were more interested in making name for themselves through outlandish actions than focusing on key constitutional issues.

Another bizarre case involves young convention member Nicolás Núñez, who once voted online while taking a shower at home. As a result, Núñez was harshly criticised by the public and in the media for his lack of respect for the formalities of the position he held. Even after this incident, Núñez once again angered public opinion by starting to play the guitar and sing like a pop star in the middle of one of the Constitutional Convention's sessions.

The case that ended up completely destroying the Constitutional Convention's credibility once and for all in the public eye was undoubtedly that of Rodrigo Rojas Vade. Rojas Vade appeared on the front line of several protests after 18-O looking extremely pale and ill and with catheters attached to his body. During the demonstrations, he wore a sign that said he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and was struggling to pay the medical bills he had run up in the private medical system. In the eyes of the radical electorate, Rojas Vade embodied the victims of neoliberalism in the country, which helped him be elected as a Constitutional Convention member. At the beginning of September 2021 though, the *La Tercera* newspaper revealed that Rojas Vade had lied about being ill, something he later admitted (Garín González, 2022). His standing as one of the most iconic figures of the October uprising spectacularly crumbled and, despite announcing he would resign, he only did so in March 2022.

The emergence of new centre-left political initiatives

After the return to democracy in 1990, the Chilean centre-left expressed itself exclusively through party structures. As a result, the Socialist party, the Party for Democracy and the Radical party have, for many years, been the only form of organisation they have known. This is in stark contrast to the organisational reality of the majority of the radical left, who have generally had a widespread and heterogeneous range of social movements to defend their identity-based agendas.

The radicalisation of the centre-left from Bachelet's second government onwards (2014–2018) and particularly after their incorporation into Boric's government in 2022 clearly left a vast sector of the population with moderate political positions politically orphaned. No party in the political spectrum defended their moderate centre-left position, as had been the case with the parties of democratic socialism during the first three governments of the Concertación. According to centre-left citizens, these parties had become too radicalised during Bachelet's second government and were now practically unrecognisable. The same thing happened to those with views more towards the centre, who in the past had voted for the Christian Democratic party. From

Bachelet's second government onwards, these parties' leadership became more and more aligned with the left-wing views that dominated in her government coalition. Several of its leaders, such as Carmen Frei, Francisco Huenchumilla and Yasna Provoste, began to adopt political views that in fact did not differ greatly from those defended by the radicalised centre-left.

This meant that a wave of dissidence emerged within the Christian Democracy, led by specific and renowned militants who publicly defended the achievements of the former Concertación governments and expressed their dissatisfaction with the political and economic performance of Bachelet's second administration. This resulted in an open letter being sent to the leaders of said party in January 2016, claiming that the Nueva Mayoría government represented a kind of 'progressivism without progress'. According to the document's signatories, the programme of Bachelet's second government was seriously damaging the economic, political and social foundations that had brought and guaranteed prosperity and stability during the Concertación years. This letter was signed by around 20 party members, including Mariana Aylwin, former Christian democratic MP and Minister of Education in Ricardo Lagos' government, and Eduardo Aninat, Finance Minister during Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle's government. This led to the subsequent creation of the 'Progressivism with Progress' movement, with figures from the political and intellectual world coming together to reject the radical turn that the Christian democracy leadership and the centre-left parties had taken.¹

From April 2022 onwards, the polls reflected an important increase in the number of people who were leaning towards rejecting the constitutional draft. These people were not happy with the lack of seriousness they perceived among several of the Constitutional Convention's members, nor with the radical nature of the constitutional draft that was being drawn up. There was also an increasing sense of discontent with Boric's government, which was criticised for a lack of solid policies to combat the country's high levels of crime, stimulate the economy and stop the widespread entry of illegal immigrants. Only two months after taking office as president, citizen support for Boric's government started to rapidly evaporate, with surveys showing that more than half the population disagreed with how he was governing. No government since the return to democracy in 1990 has lost support like this as rapidly as Boric's.

Despite the people's clear discontent with the proposed constitution and with Boric's government, from June 2022 onwards, the social democratic parties publicly showed their support for the new constitution. While the Socialist party expressed its support unconditionally, the Party for Democracy defended the ambiguous formula of 'approving it in order to improve', revealing that, although they were not completely satisfied with the new draft, they did think that much-needed improvements of the text could be carried out once the new constitution had been approved.

The Christian Democratic party also decided to approve the new constitution. At the same time though, the leaders of this party started intimidating

members who said they were thinking of voting against it by threatening to remove them from the party. This intolerance towards dissident groups led to certain well-known party figures publicly distancing themselves from the official views defended by the Christian Democracy, for example Ximena Rincón and Matías Walker, who ended up leading the sector that rejected the new draft. They were joined by former President Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, who on 8 July 2022 publicly declared that he would vote against the new constitution. He indicated that “I have insurmountable doubts about several aspects of this draft, which I consider jeopardise the peace, development and prosperity of our country” (*El Mercurio*, 9/7/22).

A few days before, on 5 July 2022, former President Ricardo Lagos also made a public declaration about the new draft constitution. Although he did not indicate how he was going to vote, he made it clear that, in his opinion, both the 1980 Constitution and the new constitutional draft were far from representing the majority of the people. “Chile deserves a constitution that leads to consensus and, since neither of the two texts can do this, the political challenge is to continue the debate on the constitution until one is reached that represents the majority of Chileans” (*La Tercera*, 5/7/22). This declaration was interpreted by some as tacit support for voting against the new draft. Others saw his words as simply a show of concern about what would happen after the plebiscite on 4 September 2022 if neither of the two alternatives won by a wide margin.

Within the social democratic parties, there were also dissidents who demanded greater tolerance of the different political views within these groups, such as Felipe Harboe, former Party for Democracy senator and former Deputy Minister of Home Affairs in Michelle Bachelet’s first government. He resigned from his position in the Senate to become a member of the Constitutional Convention, in which he expressed moderate views and criticised the Jacobean fervour that so characterised the radical left. In November 2021, with around 40 other members, Harboe announced his resignation from the Party for Democracy and the creation of ‘Orienta Chile’. With its social democratic and liberal hallmarks, this group attracted several figures from social democratic parties, such as former Energy Deputy Minister, Jimena Jara; former Deputy Minister for Crime Prevention, Antonio Frey and former members of the Socialist party, the Christian Democratic party and the Radical party (*El Mostrador*, 6/11/21).

At the same time as the wave of resignations of well-known members who rejected the new draft constitution from the Christian Democracy and social democratic parties, there was also a series of citizen initiatives in favour of rejecting the draft that had an important impact on public opinion. One of these was the ‘Una que nos Una’ campaign, with centre-left sectors using social media and the media to express their support of a new constitution, but not the version suggested by the Constitutional Convention which, in their opinion, would only serve to divide Chileans. Among its main figures was actress Javiera Parada, who for many years had been a member of *Revolución*

Democrática, a party that later became one of the mainstays of Boric's government. Daughter of a well-known Communist who was murdered by the military regime, Javiera Parada, was, for many Chileans, an icon and an example of an unrelenting left-wing fighter. Her active role in this campaign had an important impact on public opinion, since she demonstrated that not only right-wing sectors but also people from the left and centre-left were against accepting the draft constitution.

The citizen initiative that had the greatest impact in the media and on politics during the last phase of the constitutional process – and that turned out to be decisive to the draft constitution's rejection – was undoubtedly 'Amarillos por Chile'. This movement is led by Cristián Warnken, a well-known and respected intellectual, who has been making different television programmes about art and culture in general for decades. Warnken represented a moderate republican left that had never been embarrassed about the Concertación governments' achievements and that always refused to accept the apocalyptic version of 'the 30 years'. In addition, from the very beginning, they rejected the radical left's use of violence and criticised their lack of willingness to talk and negotiate with anyone who thought differently. Warnken adopted the term 'yellow', used by the radical left to insult the moderate left that preferred a path of gradual change. It all started with a column Warnken wrote called 'A Letter to My Children', which appeared in the *El Mercurio* newspaper on 27 November 2021. In it, he explained to his children what being yellow meant, with this letter basically becoming the founding text for this movement. The column quickly went viral, gaining an important wave of support from different celebrities in Chile. This led to the launch of the 'Amarillos por Chile' manifesto in February 2022, signed by more than 70 important figures from the world of academia, politics and the arts, including former Ministers of State, former rectors of universities and several national science award winners (*Pauta*, 17/2/22). For the first time since the return to democracy in 1990, an important part of the moderate Chilean left managed to create a powerful channel through which to express themselves that did not depend on party structures (Del Canto, 2022). This felt like an act of liberation, since the leaders of the Socialist party, the Party for Democracy and the Radical party had completely aligned themselves with Boric's government. In addition, Amarillos por Chile turned rejection of the constitutional draft into a transversal option for Chilean society and not just something defended exclusively by the right (Guzmán, 2022).

On 30 July 2022, a group of citizen movements, including Amarillos por Chile, Una que nos Una, Ni esta ni la Anterior, Rechazo por una Mejor and Movimiento Proyecta, together with a large group of leaders from society and independent figures, launched a platform called 'Centroizquierda por el Rechazo'. This was an important milestone for the growing organisation of different centre-left forces that leaned towards rejecting the draft constitution. It was also the first large-scale citizen initiative that explicitly used the centre-left label in the name of its movement as a way of defending this political train

of thought. On this occasion, Warnken indicated that “today we defend our right to reject it, from a centre-left perspective, and to write a new and better constitution for Chile”. For her part, Christian Democratic Senator Ximena Rincón indicated that

those of us who are here love our country. From the centre-left, we have moved forward and built a better country together. And that is why we want a constitution that represents all of us and that we all fit into. We’re never going to give up on that challenge. And that is why we reject the draft.

(La Tercera, 30/6/22)

The centre-left following the 4-S political earthquake

As the plebiscite on 4 September 2022 (4-S) approached, Boric’s government started to accept the idea that the draft constitution might end up being rejected by the electorate. However, Boric did not heed advice to withdraw his support for the draft so that, if it was rejected, he could take on a leadership role in the post-plebiscite scenario. On the contrary, in the final weeks before 4-S, Boric and his team of ministers actively travelled through the country, campaigning in favour of the draft constitution. He and his ministers handed out and autographed copies of the draft constitution and highlighted the supposed benefits of the Constitutional Convention’s draft. They also took advantage of the opportunity to warn against the uncertain and bleak scenario that the country would face if it was rejected. The week before the plebiscite, surveys indicated that the gap between approval and rejection had lessened, giving officials hope that it was still possible the draft would be approved. Only a few days before 4-S, the majority of analysts agreed that either of the two options could win and that voting would be very close.

This is why the overwhelming rejection of the draft constitution in the plebiscite on September 4th (with 62 per cent rejecting it) sent heavy shockwaves through Boric’s government and immediately transformed the political scenario and environment in the country. For the first time since the uprising in October 2019, the voices of refoundational radicalism were completely silenced. They had no explanation for the crushing citizen rejection of the political-constitutional agenda defended by the radical left. What was most disappointing for the sectors that supported the new constitution was seeing that this had been rejected in each of the country’s 16 regions and in 338 of Chile’s 346 municipalities. What also made things complicated for officials was that it was rejected in 13 out of the 14 prisons and also in the country’s poorest municipalities and with the largest indigenous population.

The very night the results were released, President Boric addressed the country, confirming that the new constitution had been rejected. At the same time, he announced a cabinet reshuffle, which took place two days later. This reshuffle visibly increased the presence of social democrats in the government.

First to be replaced was Izkia Siches, Minister of Home Affairs, who had made a series of blunders since being appointed. Siches had been Boric's right-hand woman during the presidential campaign and, until she was replaced, had been one of his closest collaborators. She was replaced by Carolina Tohá, a founding member of the Party for Democracy with a long political career behind her. The position of Secretary General of the Presidency, in charge of liaising with Parliament, was given to Ana Lya Uriarte, a member of the Socialist party and a close confidante of former President Bachelet. Uriarte had held the position of President of the Executive Council of the National Commission for the Environment during Michelle Bachelet's first government and was Chief of Staff during her second administration. Uriarte replaced Giorgio Jackson, one of Boric's closest collaborators, whose performance as a minister had been highly criticised by many political sectors, including social democratic MPs.

The cabinet reshuffle immediately improved the government's relationship with Parliament and with right-wing opposition leaders. Ministers Tohá and Uriarte used their political skills to start cleaning up the security agenda and moving forward with the constitutional discussion, respectively. It speaks volumes that in surveys, centre-left ministers are by far those best evaluated by the public.

In the months following the defeat on September 4th, Boric continued to give signs of adopting a more moderate position, which made his relationship with the 'October' wing of his government coalition tenuous. This became obvious during the unveiling of the statue honouring President Patricio Aylwin on 30 November 2022 outside the La Moneda palace. Aylwin, the first Concertación president, represented everything the radical left had detested about the Concertación era, namely their political moderation, the neoliberal economic model and the attempt to reconcile Chileans 'as far as possible'. However, during the unveiling of the statue, Boric paid an unusual tribute to the figure and legacy of former president, Aylwin, saying that "it's difficult for me to stand here, looking at the statue of Don Patricio and think of the tremendous challenge before me to match his sobriety and republican dignity from which I try to learn every day" (*Diario Uchile*, 30/11/22). Although the majority of politicians applauded Boric's gesture, the Communist party and sectors of the radical left did not only play down this tribute but also harshly criticised the president for blatantly recognising the Concertación's legacy.

The undeniable increase in centre-left presence within the government after 4-S has caused increasing frustration at the heart of the Communist party and the radical left. After realising they had lost influence, this sector has increased their pressure on Boric so he would bow to the demands of the 'October' left. Although on certain occasions this pressure has achieved its aim, the political cost has been paid exclusively by the president, as in the case of those arrested during the October 2019 uprising and subsequently charged and imprisoned. Since he became president, the radical left has persistently demanded the release of these 'political prisoners'. On 20 December

2022, Boric suddenly issued a presidential pardon for 13 of these prisoners. This controversial decision immediately unleashed a strong wave of criticism towards the president and his government, not only from the right but also from important figures within the Christian Democracy and the centre-left. The president decided to issue the pardon at the exact moment that Minister Tohá was about to reach an agreement with the majority of the country's political forces to create a public security strategy. When the presidential pardon became known, right-wing parties' representatives immediately withdrew from the negotiation table for an indefinite period of time. The pardon issued by Boric was also criticised by the public and was reflected in a sudden decrease in the president's popularity. In an attempt to halt the growing political crisis created by the pardon, Boric decided to replace the Minister of Justice, Marcela Ríos, and his Chief of Staff, Matías Meza-Lopehandía, implicitly holding them responsible for the debacle.

After the overwhelming defeat on 4-S, the different centre-left initiatives that had opposed the draft constitution emerged stronger than ever. The day after the plebiscite, the leaders of these groups met with the press and publicly confirmed their commitment to doing everything possible to facilitate the writing of a new constitution that would win the support of the majority (*El Mostrador*, 5/9/22). The crushing rejection of the draft constitution revealed that a large part of the population had no clear political leanings and that, although they rejected radical views, they were in favour of gradual changes in the country. This speeded up the decision of several of these centre-left initiatives to try and formally set themselves up as political parties. This meant that the centre and centre-left electorate could finally find a political home, after having been almost completely alienated from the Christian Democracy and traditional social democratic parties due to these groups' radicalisation over the last decade. Even more important was the opportunity to give a broad group of citizens an important level of political representation in the Parliament. This would make it easier to increase the influence 'of moderate Chile' when it came to making important decisions over the next few years.

The first to take this step was the 'Amarillos por Chile' group, led by Cristián Warnken. Accompanied by other centre-left figures, Warnken formally registered this movement as a political party in the Electoral Service on 21 October 2022. A week later, senators Ximena Rincón and Matías Walker resigned from the Christian Democratic party, prior to announcing on 2 November 2022 the creation of a new political party, *Demócratas*, bringing together different figures formerly of the Christian Democracy and the social democratic parties. It is impossible to predict the impact that these new centre-left parties will have on national politics in coming years, if they do eventually manage to establish themselves as such. What is a fact is that they have managed to put an end to the monopoly that the Socialist Party, the Party for Democracy and the Christian Democratic party had long exercised in the sectors of moderate progressivism.

Conclusion

Since the return to democracy in 1990, the Chilean centre-left has moved from successful participation in Concertación governments to a state of progressive decline and political irrelevance over the last decade. Despite the gains achieved during the Concertación years, social democracy never managed to identify fully with the accelerated modernisation process the country underwent in that period. During Bachelet's first government, the self-flagellating wing of the coalition began to acquire more and more political relevance as pressure from the student movement to adopt profound changes in society increased on the streets. It was only after the triumph of Sebastián Piñera that the social democratic parties abandoned their views once and for all and ended up completely imitating the radical left that had emerged after the student protests. During the Nueva Mayoría government, the Socialist party and the Party for Democracy started openly supporting a refoundational agenda that aimed to put an end to the 1980 Constitution and dismantle neoliberalism in the country. This attempt was unsuccessful, something reflected when the right triumphed in making Sebastián Piñera president for the second time.

All of a sudden, the October 2019 uprising placed extreme left-wing groups in the political spotlight. At that critical historical moment, the leaders of democratic socialism refrained from resolutely defending the institutions of the state and the established democratic order. In the 2021 presidential elections, social democratic parties were incapable of putting forward a political alternative that was substantially different to that presented by the Frente Amplio and the Communist party. This revealed the strong ideological convergence of the radical left, led by Boric and the former moderate left and why it is not strange that many members of the Socialist party and the Party for Democracy were attracted to the radical left's refoundational message and supported Boric unconditionally during the second round. For this same reason, it is also not strange that social democratic parties have so enthusiastically and unreservedly accepted Boric's invitation to form part of his government.

When Boric and his government came to power, everything seemed to indicate that Chilean social democracy had been buried forever. Boric was elected president by the highest number of votes since the return to democracy in 1990. In addition, the Constitutional Convention was, at that time, enjoying high levels of citizen support and it was predicted that the future draft constitution would be approved by the majority of the population.

Looking back at the process, I think that the refoundational excesses of the Constitutional Convention made the rebirth of the moderate left in Chile possible. As the constitutional process moved forward, citizen discontent with most of the content incorporated into the new constitution increased. In addition, the new, intolerant attitude of the majority of the members of the radical left in the Constitutional Convention meant they lost the support of an

important part of the population. This ended up eroding citizen confidence in the constitutional process and, in a climate of increasing political polarisation, the message divulged by initiatives such as 'Amarillos por Chile' and 'Centroizquierda por el Rechazo' in favour of dialogue, moderation, tolerance and national unity began to make more and more sense to many.

The other factor that allowed for the resurrection of social democracy with a Concertación hallmark was the disappointing performance of Boric's government during its first year, showing that age and experience are important for roles in government. The generational change in the country has been accompanied by numerous errors, blunders, sloppiness and all kinds of inconsistencies on the part of the new authorities. In addition, there has been a noticeable drought of public policies during Boric's government. The lack of actual solutions to problems as urgent as restarting the economy, controlling crime, the security problem in the south, illegal immigration, pensions and the education crisis had disappointed many of those who voted for Boric and who initially believed that his administration would offer real solutions. That is why one of the most-repeated phrases during the first nine months of Boric's term has been the Chilean expression 'It's different with a guitar in hand'. In other words, as the opposition, it was very easy for the radical left to constantly challenge what governments during 'the 30 years' did, but it is altogether different now they are in government and have to demonstrate that they can actually govern. What is clear is that both Boric and his closest advisors have not yet managed to relinquish their recent past as inflexible and rebellious activists to fully assume responsibility for their mistakes and try to fix them.

After the shockwaves of 4-S, many Chileans have rethought the country's evolution since 18-O and the conclusion is unpromising. The idealised images and feelings of 18-O, of the referendum that was the starting point for the constitutional process and of Boric's triumph in the presidential elections quickly evaporated after the new constitution was rejected. At the same time, more and more people have started to re-evaluate the often attack '30 years', coming to the conclusion that Chile was much better off in those years than now, post-18-O. All of this has served to defend the Concertación governments and re-evaluate the path taken to reach agreements and begin dialogue at that time, something now defended by the new social democratic initiatives.

The tension between the radical left and the social democrats within the government itself has increased as Boric's original aides have seen themselves replaced by members of the Socialist party and the Party for Democracy, who have won key positions in the government. If Boric's government keeps prioritising a more and more moderate path, this could cause a rift with the more radical sectors, including the Communist party. This would be a price that it is unlikely Boric would be willing to pay, since they form part of his very own political DNA. This is why it is likely that, during the rest of his

mandate, Boric will continue to act in favour of political equilibrium, taking measures that alternate between satisfying each of the two coalitions that make up the government. Obviously, this constant zigzagging between moderate and radical sides also has its price, namely citizens' increasing rejection of Boric's indecision when forging a clear and consistent roadmap for the next few years.

What also remains to be seen is what political orientation social democracy will take after the appearance of new centre-left citizen initiatives. On one hand, the Socialist party and the Party for Democracy could adopt positions that are more and more moderate so as to challenge the Amarillos' and the Democrats' support from the important group of centre and centre-left voters. On the other hand, however, it is also likely that the traditional social democratic parties choose to coexist with the radical left within Boric's government, although adopting a more moderate position could eventually cause more tension with the radical wing. For this reason, social democrats within the Executive will perhaps decide not to exacerbate the ideological differences between both government coalitions any further. However, if citizen rejection of Boric's government continues in the next few years, it is possible that social democratic parties distance themselves from Boric's government, particularly if they feel that they are paying too high a price for being part of it. The elements of Boric's government most criticised by the population are often the result of radical left-wing views within the coalition, for example the lack of robust support for restarting the economy, the lack of a solid security policy and apathy towards increasing levels of immigration. There are more and more signs of discontent among official centre-left figures, for example after the highly criticised pardons of December 2022, when leaders of the Socialist party and the Party for Democracy publicly expressed their disapproval, causing serious political tension the result.

Finally, the majority of the predictions concerning the evolution of the Chilean economy over the next few years are quite negative. If the economic crisis keeps getting worse and political and social tension continues to increase, it is likely that Boric will eventually be unable to resist pressure from radical sectors and will adopt a more rupturist course. This will obviously make it difficult for social democrats to remain in the government coalition. However, the worsening of the economic situation could also trigger a more pragmatic strategy based on stimulating economic growth, investment and reducing unemployment. If this happens, Boric would paradoxically embark once again on the path followed by the centre-left during the Concertación era.

Note

1 See <https://progresismoconprogreso.cl/origen-pcp/>

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