

## **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN CHILE'S 2013 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Ever since Chile's return to democracy, at the beginning of the 1990's, electoral participation in the country has been on a steady decline. This phenomenon is consistent with that of many countries in the world, especially in democracies that have allowed voluntary voting. Because of this, it is not clear that this disaffection for politics is a problem in and of itself, even if many analysts contend that it may be (Chuaqui, 2005; Contreras et al., 2013) when considered alongside other behaviors characteristic of Chilean idiosyncrasy.

In regards to gender composition and political participation, in Chile more than half of the population is made up of women. However, they only occupy 12.7% of popular representation seats. On the other hand, even if Chilean congresswomen make up only 13% of the upper house and 14.5% of the lower house, compared to a Latin American average that surpasses 20%, both candidates who made it to the second round in the last presidential election, in accordance to the current political Constitution, were women, and subsequently, the first seat in Chile is once again occupied by a woman.

This paper tackles the problem of the general population's diminishing participation in parliamentary and presidential elections - only 46.5% of the electorate voted in the last election, this being the lowest recorded participation rate despite recent modifications to electoral legislation which sought to raise it. It also attempts to explore the reasons that might explain the apparently contradictory phenomenon that, considering such a low representation of women in political power in Chile, it was two women who disputed the presidency of the Republic in the last elections held in November and December 2013. Finally, it also speculates about a correlation between the low participation of citizenry at the polls and the triumph of women in spite of the scarce representation of Chilean women in seats of power.

*Keywords:* Chile, women, politics, abstention

### **INTRODUCTION**

To understand the steady decline in electoral participation, it is necessary to recall some historical facts. The first of them being that even if once a republic characterized by a high voter participation, which was seen by public opinion as a sign of civic maturity, this electoral tradition was interrupted in the recent past by the military coup of 1973. The coup saw the Armed Forces intervene in the democratic power structure during the fourth of socialist President Salvador Allende's (elected by a little over a third of the popular vote in the 1970) six years in office. During his term, the country quickly arrived at a political polarization between the governing coalition,

known as Unidad Popular (People's Unity), that propitiated a government model very similar to that of Cuba, with the nationalization of education and the country's natural resources and a statist stance on ruling, and the right wing, which had lost the presidential election by a narrow margin and had united with the center political forces represented primarily by the Democracia Cristiana (Christian Democracy) party. This ideological estrangement, with the presence of extremist forces on both sides, one of them promoting a socialist revolution that justified violence and the other calling for military forces to take control of the government, polarized the country. As a result of this crisis, on September 11, 1973, the Armed Forces staged a coup which led to military governance, under the rule of General Augusto Pinochet, for a period of 17 years. On October 5, 1988, following the approval in 1980 of a new Constitution, a referendum was held which was won by the "No" option, meaning the rejection of continued rule by General Pinochet and the installment of a system of democratic elections to elect a President and a new Parliament.

This is how in March of 1990, after 17 years, a democratically elected President took office, backed by a political coalition known as *Concertación*, that included the center and center-left forces, excluding the Communist party. The other great coalition was constituted by an alliance of the two main Chilean right-wing parties that had been created upon the return of democracy. The *Union Demócrata Independiente* (UDI, Independent Democratic Union) and *Renovación Nacional* (National Renovation). This in accordance to the bipartisan system instituted by the 1980 Constitution that attempted, in a model similar to that of the United States, to achieve a system with two large coalitions by making it necessary for smaller parties to ally and concert in order to attain governance. Since then, the presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections have seen a continued decrease in voter participation. It is worth mentioning that the electoral laws in effect at the time established voluntary voter registration for people over 18 years of age, but, once registered, participation in the election became mandatory.

As a result of the growing congressional concern over the decreasing number of voters, as well as with public polls showing a growing disaffection towards political activity, an amendment to the electoral law was passed, which consisted in switching from voluntary to automatic registration, and from mandatory to voluntary voting. With this, it was hoped that the electoral roll would increase, especially considering that the voting population had seen a shift toward an older demographic, as young Chileans were not turning out en masse to the polls. This new law was published by the *Diario Oficial* (Chile's public journal) on January 31 2012.

### **ELECTORAL MODIFICATIONS**

However, the results were not as expected. The first elections to test this electoral modification were the municipal elections of 2012, in which the whole of the country had to elect mayors and city council members. It had the highest abstention rating in Chile's civic history, with little over 40% of the electorate turning out to vote. This did not improve much during the 2013 parliamentary and presidential elections. In the first round, a little over 48% of voters participated and in the second round participation was just above 42%, the lowest number in Chilean electoral history considering the number of registered voters (La abstención histórica..., 2013).

According to a survey conducted by the magazine *El Sábado* (Cabezas, Gaete, & Ruiz, 2013), in which a group of electoral experts were asked about possible reasons for such high

abstention, much of the population could be described by five non-voter stereotypes:

1. **The anti-systemic:** an ideologized voter who does not consider voting a real alternative. As described by one interviewee: “They are politically active youngsters, with an interest in public affairs but who are critical of the current system because they consider it unfair” (Cabezas, et al., 2013, pg. 17). This type of voter, according to another expert, feels that voting has no impact on his life. This vision is concordant with the UNDP report, which observes a dissonance between the Chileans' personal projects and the institutions of the state (González et al., 2012).
2. **The uninterested:** This voter-type “does not even ask themselves whether to vote or not.” It is something that is simply not a part of his life. He thinks, either way, his individual condition will not change. According to one expert, this is an individualist type which is not largely concerned with the problems of the community. They do not see the point of concerning themselves with something as arid and unproductive as politics. In the updated version of Chino Rios' “*no estoy ni ahí*” (Allusion to the former Tennis world champion Marcelo “Chino” Rios, who was characterized by this phrase to show his apathy.), this group is considered by the interviewed experts as socio-economically transversal but more abundant in the middle and lower classes, as education is a fundamental factor for political engagement. The better educated a person is, the more likely he is to vote. This is thus exemplified by one of the experts: “it is like when the movie theater is not showing anything that interests you, and that's what happens in countries with voluntary voting, except for phenomena like Obama that move the masses” (Cabezas, et al., 2013, p. 18)
3. **The obliged:** People who got registered in the 1988 referendum and who for 20 years participated in the elections, partly out of a sense of duty, partly because it was mandatory. When the law changes they do not vote any more. According to one of the experts, this part of the electorate did not have an ideological motivation, and was influenced mostly by advertising. These non-voters are mostly males between 40 and 60 years of age, coming from middle and lower social strata.
4. **The widower:** There were nine candidates in the last presidential election, an unprecedented happening in the history of Chile, representing the most diverse ideological tendencies and social groups. As none of the candidates obtained over 50% of the vote, a second round was staged between the two most popular candidates, both of them women. This group of non-voters, identified as widowers, is composed of those who became so attached to their first round candidate - or in some cases their primary election candidates - that they could not put their trust in any of the competing alternatives. This is usually the case with voters that felt a special reason to go and vote for a specific person, without whom, to them, the exercise lost its meaning.
5. **The disillusioned:** they might have believed in democracy but constant disillusionment taught them to mistrust its capacity to bring forth joy. In the lower classes it is usual to find this type of citizen, who mistrusts the politicians' intentions. “They all steal,” “They all lie,” “Nobody cares about us,” “We'll have to work tomorrow as always,” are some of the expressions that ratify this sentiment. The disillusioned have some commonalities with the uninterested, but

what sets him apart is his emotionality. Frustration is more connected with anger and that is why sometimes they annul their votes in order to manifest their rage against the system.

### **POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL UNREST**

The latter type reflects a rising mistrust in political institutions and a social unrest that is hard to explain, as it contrasts with the fact that on many dimensions, Chilean public institutions are positively evaluated in international comparisons. As a matter of fact, Chile's political stability and economic handling are generally appreciated throughout the world. The vision that the world at large has of Chile is usually better than what Chileans have of themselves and their institutions. And even if this could be explained as an idiosyncratic trait of Chileans, it is not less true that a permanent mistrust towards its institutions is a complexity for any country. A further facet of the complexity of citizen disaffection, expressed in electoral abstention and a low attachment to parties and coalitions, is its stark contrast with the healthy situation of many public institutions. According to the Res Publica Chile group,

We Chileans mistrust our fellow men and, especially in recent years, our public institutions, which confirms the low social valuation of communal systems. It is in the midst of this mistrust that public demonstrations emerge as an alternative, or even a replacement of traditional politics, as a tool to decide large-scale social issues. Today the number of the politically disenchanted appears to rise higher than those who want to become actively involved in the electoral process. (Contreras et al., 2013, p. 41)

This increase in the popularity of protests and demonstrations, led in its fervor to former student leaders running in the parliamentary election for seats in the house of deputies, which would seem to pose another paradox, as those who more actively rejected traditional politics now start joining its ranks.

A further paradox lies in the fact that, despite being a country that achieved over the last 20 years a rate of growth never before seen in its history (Corbo, 2012), there are many aspects of the country in which there's a visible lag when compared to similar nations. One of them is that, while the presidential office will, in March, be once again held by a woman, there is an overall low participation-rate by women in positions of power when compared to other Latin American countries. To try and understand an apparently contradictory social and political phenomenon, it is again necessary to recall some historical context.

### **WOMEN IN CHILE**

In Chile, women represent over half the population. Strictly speaking, they make up 53% of the electorate. As we have said, however, only 12.7% of them occupy seats of popular representation and Chilean women became able to vote only a little over 60 years ago, on January 8, 1949. Under the presidency of Gabriel González Videla, women gained a voice and a “vote” in society... at least in theory, as seats of power remained in the hands of men, this being - to a lesser extent - a reality that is still current.

A mere 14 years ago, for the first time two women put their names on the presidential ballot:

Gladys Marin of the Communist party and Sara Larrain of the Ecologist party. It was 1999 and they were facing a highly polarized election between socialist Ricardo Lagos, the eventual winner, and Joaquin Lavín, of the UDI. Both women had a very poor electoral performance, Marin with a 3.91% and Larrain with a 0.44%.

Six years went by before Michelle Bachelet reattempted the feat and was elected as the first woman President in the history of Chile. Now it will again be she who will assume the seat on March 11 2014, having won on a second round of voting against Evelyn Matthei, who was the first woman nominated for the presidency by the right wing coalition *Alianza por Chile*.

An increasing presence of women in representative and politically influential seats, however, does not guarantee that gender barriers have diminished. On the contrary, experts in the field like the Chile21 foundation's executive director, María de los Angeles Fernández, warn us about how that growth generates a deceitful situation which winds up hiding gaps in equality. "These are women who go out of the norm. They're exceptional and it can even be a matter of concern that their visibility hides that this triumph only happens on the surface, because the precarious situation of women continues unchanged from the point of view of the data" (Faúndez, 2013, p. 5). And the data is eloquent: In Chile, the current situation of women in positions of power is as follows: at the executive level, 27.2% of the offices are held by women (Six out of 22 ministers. This figure corresponds to the administration of President Sebastián Piñera, whose term will expire in March 2014.). At the legislative level, a mere 13.9% of the seats are held by women (13% of the Senate, 14% of the House of Deputies, when the global average is 19.7% and the regional average is 22.6%) (Faúndez, 2013). At the local level, the number reaches 23%, distributed between 12.7% mayors and 24.9% city council members. At the judicial level, female judges represent 36.6%, and 18.2% of court districts are presided over by a woman. Only 2.7% of embassies are directed by women and just 5.1% of universities are led by a female rector, meaning three out of 59.

In the private sector the breach is even larger. Finance - Central Bank and Insurance Companies - retail, mining and wood pulp industries, are the areas where there are the fewest women in positions of power. And regarding salary, in Chile women earn on average 34.5% less than men: while employed women received an average compensation of \$300,026 CLP, men earn \$458,157CLP. This in spite of 38.8% of families being headed by a woman, as established by the CASEN poll (Survey of socio-economical characterization conducted by the Government of Chile), which also shows that in almost 60% of these homes, a woman is the only adult (Faúndez, 2013).

This view is shared by the current head of the SERNAM (National Women's Service), Loreto Seguel, who points out that "there are advances, a different Chile is starting to show, but the cultural changes cannot stop there" (Faúndez, 2013, p. 5), because Chile, despite these changes, continues to be a country with a labor system created for men and by men. This, however, is natural when it is considered that until a few years ago the percentages of insertion in the workforce were very low. The participation of women in the work market has forced an important quantitative development, but there is still a qualitative factor that is owed them: the rise of women to higher positions is difficult. At higher levels there is a very strong gender breach, an invisible barrier between women and decision-making positions. There is another factor that continues to play a part in all of this: machismo (García, 2013, para. 5). This is expressed in the way in Chile that most

of the domestic burden still falls on women, which greatly complicates the chances of working women with children to be able to deliver on both fronts. But besides chauvinism, there are other elements that left women outside of politics and decision making, focusing mainly on their families. In Chile, awareness has been raised on the need for public policy that is able to change this scenario and there have been important efforts, like extended postnatal leave, but the development of a policy of work conciliation at a country wide scale is still an urgent necessity.

In synthesis: while female participation in power in Chile is below the regional average - only 13% on the upper house and 14% on the lower house, with a Latin American average over 20% - the first office of the country will be assumed by a woman, Michelle Bachelete, who ran against another woman, Evelyn Matthei. How can we understand this phenomenon?

For some analysts (Lupano Perugini & Castro Solano, 2011), this occurrence has to do with two issues, an emotional and a political one. Emotional from the social point of view, as Chileans tend to project in women a motherly figure, close to rejoicing and protection, which generates, one way or another, an affective bond between the citizenry and the candidate. A bond that is not generated by traditional politicians, the vast majority of whom have been men, who have throughout the years provoked an estrangement between the general population and political party's representatives. In effect, women seem nowadays to represent a view more in accordance with how citizens see politics, and female leadership seems better suited to their expectations:

Different studies have shown that women serving in political positions have a growing acceptance by voters (Carroll, 1985; Darcy, Welch, & Clark, 1987). Benze and Declerq (1985), synthesize the characteristics that voters usually prefer: strong but not aggressive women, who show a professional profile and who are not especially attractive physically." Uriarte and Ruiz (1999) maintain that female politicians are more open to dialogue, less authoritarian, and have a better capacity to integrate their subordinates. Benze and Declerq (1985) conducted an analysis of campaign spots and concluded that while most men emphasize their toughness, women usually accent their capacity for compassion.

In Argentina, D'Adamo, García Beaudoux, Ferrari, and Slavinsky (2008) conducted a study exploring the predominating perceptions in public opinion of female leadership, especially of women who run in political campaigns. Their results show that the majority of people consider that while there is no difference between the leading styles of men and women, the latter focus more on more difficult social issues and are criticized more due to the existing prejudice against them. Lastly, they consider some attributes that women can use to their advantage during campaigns: "showing intelligence and ability to negotiate, patience, firmness, determination and knowing how to exploit their feminine characteristics regarding their capacity for empathy and comprehension" (Lupano Perugini & Castro Solano, 2011, p. 142).

## CONCLUSIONS

This work analyzes citizen disaffection expressed in electoral abstention and the low identification of the population with political parties and coalitions in Chile. Chileans mistrust their neighbors and, increasingly in recent years, their public institutions, which confirms the low appreciation held for social systems. Along with this growing disaffection with the democratic

process, there is the paradoxical phenomenon that despite having achieved enormous economic growth in the last 20 years, there are aspects in which there are notable delays when compared to similar countries. One of them is the low participation of women in seats of power. It is a fact that women face more difficulties in their political careers, being conditioned by a familial and professional overload in a cultural scene “made for men and by men.” These issues notwithstanding, the President of Chile will once again be, starting in March, a woman.

This paradox can be interpreted from an emotional and a political perspective. Emotionally, Chileans project in women a motherly figure, which generates affective bonds between the citizenry and the candidate, something that does not happen with traditional politicians, most of them men, who throughout the years have provoked estrangement between the general population and political parties and representatives.

From a political point of view, women seem to represent nowadays a view that is more in line with the citizens’ political expectations. Different studies show that women occupying political posts have growing approval amongst the voters, and that the characteristics they tend to prefer are strength but not aggressiveness, having a professional career and not being too physically attractive. Female politicians are more open to dialogue, less authoritarian, and have more capacity to integrate their subordinates and usually accent their compassion. There would seem to be specific attributes that favor women when displayed in political campaigns: showing intelligence and negotiation skills, patience, firmness and knowing how to exploit their feminine characteristics regarding their capacity for empathy and comprehension. Despite a lack of research confirming these affirmations in the Chilean context, the descriptions made by different researchers seem to perfectly fit the candidates of the last election, in particular the elected president Michele Bachelet.

Finally, once the obstacles obstructing access to political power are overcome, the characteristics of women seem to respond better to the cultural stereotypes, and emotional and social needs, of the Chilean voter in the current political context, than those of men, giving the former a greater and richer connection to citizens.

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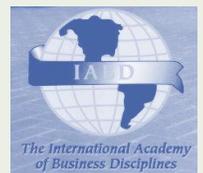
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