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A Fourth Critical Juncture? Chilean Politics after Military Rule

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The Chilean party system has been a legacy of three fundamental social and political watersheds in the 19th and 20th centuries. At each watershed, *two-sided* cleavages generated a *tripartite* configuration of parties. Thus, two poles emerged representing antagonistic positions with respect to a fundamental axis of cleavage, and a politically significant center occupied the space between them. In a comparative Latin American framework, this political configuration is distinctive, resembling more closely patterns in some Western European party systems.

Working in the tradition of Lipset and Rokkan, and Collier and Collier,¹ I argued in my book *Rethinking the Center* that these three watersheds were driven by generative cleavages that yielded critical junctures, shaping and reshaping the national party system and creating institutional patterns that endured for long periods of time.²

This essay extends my earlier analysis by asking whether—in the wake of authoritarian rule and neoliberal transformation in the 1970s and 1980s under Pinochet—Chile has now experienced a fourth critical juncture. To provide a baseline for analyzing this new episode, I present a brief overview of criteria for identifying critical junctures, along with a synoptic summary of the three prior episodes.

In the present framework, a critical juncture is said to occur if it leaves a distinctive legacy. It is interpreted as a *critical* juncture not just because of the scope of conflict involved—for example class or religious conflict—but because it generates an enduring legacy. According to standard criteria, in observing a critical juncture we expect to see a fundamental, new conflict and line of cleavage, followed by change in the key issues around which parties cluster and over which they fight. The party system shifts on its axis, and this new line of cleavage cuts across the electorate. Change also occurs in the identity of parties, the party attachments of voters, and the attitudes and predispositions of party identifiers. Given the distinctive trajectory of the center in Chile, one must likewise ask: what happens to the center? How is it reproduced or transformed? Given that each of these three prior cleavages in a sense bifurcated the political system, how did a stable center party emerge each time?

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¹ Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Collier and Collier 1991.

² Scully 1992.

Overall, we rely on these criteria and questions to judge whether the presumed critical juncture indeed generated a distinctive legacy that structured party alliances in Chile for years to come. And to reiterate, affirmation of this legacy provides the basis for concluding that the juncture is indeed critical.

Three Critical Junctures in Chile

Against this standard for evaluating a critical juncture, we delineate three such episodes.

First, in the mid-19th century, the clerical-anticlerical cleavage produced a political “space” between the contending parties at opposing ends of the spectrum, the anti-clerical Radicals versus the Conservatives. The dispute between these two contending factions centered around a profound divide between those who sought to elevate the role of the Republican state in providing critically important services such as health, education, and birth registries, versus those who wished to retain these functions in the hands of the Catholic Church. By avoiding identifying themselves with either side of the dispute, the Liberal Party established itself as a non-ideological, pragmatic center that came to serve as a coalitional fulcrum, periodically occupying the presidency. The result was a well-institutionalized party system that persisted for more than five decades.

Second, in the initial decades of the 20th century a new, defining axis of political opposition emerged. We observed the emergence of an organized working class and the corresponding rise of worker-owner conflict in the modern sector—i.e., in urban areas and modernized export enclaves, above all, mining. In this context, two major new parties appeared on the left, Socialist and Communist. The Radical Party, like the pragmatic and non-ideological Liberals before them, established itself as the mediating center party, playing the role of broker between the right and the left and periodically holding the presidency. This pattern persisted for roughly four decades.

Third, in the mid-20th century another dimension of class conflict emerged, between an organized peasantry and the elite of the traditional rural sector. This conflict generated a blood feud between the forces of the traditionalist conservative Catholic right and a newly energized progressive Catholic, but equally anti-communist and anti-socialist, center-left. A different kind of center party then inserted itself into the middle-position of the political spectrum, i.e., the Christian Democrats (PDC). In contrast to the previous center parties, PDC was a non-pragmatic *positional* center as it related to the central axis of class conflict in the urban and rural sectors. It was in important respects an ideological party, opposed to the traditional Conservative right, and opposed to the statist left, drawing inspiration from the wider tradition of Catholic social thought that comprised the wellspring of Christian Democratic parties in many countries.

Whereas for the first two critical junctures the duration of the legacy is well established, for this third critical juncture its duration remains an open question. How long did this third constellation of parties persist? That question can only be answered by examining the hypothesized fourth critical juncture.

ture that occurred under Pinochet. Did the Pinochet dictatorship, in fact, leave a distinctive party legacy, one defined by a democracy versus authoritarianism cleavage? (1) If the answer is yes, then the legacy of the third critical juncture lasted less than two decades, until the coup in 1973. (2) If the answer is no, then the party legacy of the third critical juncture still persists today, having thereby lasted six decades, but interrupted for sixteen and a half years by the political hiatus created by the dictatorship. According to the interpretation advanced in this essay—that the underlying structure of the party system was not changed by the Pinochet period—then it would be argued that the legacy of this third critical juncture has indeed persisted for six decades.

A Fourth Critical Juncture?

The Pinochet coup of 1973 set in motion dramatic change in Chile that represented a great victory for the political right and a massive defeat for the left. Pinochet launched highly repressive authoritarian rule, accompanied by a suppression of the preexisting party system and an assault on the political organizations of the working class and the left—in both the urban and rural sectors. This period likewise saw a fundamental transformation of the Chilean political economy: wide-ranging neoliberal reform, partial dismantling of the state-centric model of development, and internationalization of the economy. In terms of the magnitude of sectoral and class conflict, as well as the scope of policy innovation, this new episode is certainly equivalent to the second and third critical junctures discussed above.

The question to be considered here: was this a critical juncture in the sense that it fundamentally restructured the Chilean party system? Alternatively, were the effects less profound and less permanent—such that the critical juncture framework does not fit here?

Writing two-and-a-half decades ago, from the perspective of the early 1990s, I expressed skepticism that the Pinochet episode, despite his efforts, represented a new critical juncture. In my concluding chapter in *Rethinking the Center*, I argued that “for a critical juncture to occur, the changes experienced by the party system during a specified period of time must be lasting, that is, they must endure well beyond the period of transformation....As a result, any conclusions...must necessarily remain tentative.”³ Within that framework of caution, I suggested that despite the “significant change as a consequence of the experience of authoritarianism, it is unlikely that a new generative cleavage has reorganized the basic contours of the political landscape.”⁴

Today, 25 years later, it is productive to revisit this question of a fourth critical juncture. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now examine the *political* legacy of the Pinochet years as it has played out since 1990, during the more than two-and-a-half decades of competitive democratic politics. This assessment must be carried out with care, because persuasive arguments have been made both for and against the claim that a

major discontinuity in the party system has occurred.⁵ Further, as will become clear, the analysis is made more complex by substantial changes that have occurred within this 25-year period.

Arguments for Discontinuity

Several analysts have argued that major changes within the party system took root in Chilean politics as a result of the Pinochet interlude. These scholars suggest that the Pinochet period generated a distinctive legacy in the form of a new party system, and correspondingly that it was indeed a critical juncture.

The new party system has two key features. First, the prior tripartite division of left, center, and right has been transformed into two contending blocs, the Alliance on the right and the Concertación on the left, and it appears that a center is no longer a basic force in Chilean politics. Second, these scholars argue that a fundamental shift in political cleavages has also occurred. The base line for this shift was earlier patterns of religious and class cleavages—including a profound left-right division on issues of political economy and public policy. By contrast, they argue that the post-dictatorship period saw a shift to an “authoritarian versus democratic cleavage.”⁶

These two dimensions of change are clearly evident in the national plebiscite of 1988, which was the founding election for the new democratic regime. A *yes* vote mandated that Pinochet remain in power for an additional eight-year term, whereas a *no* mandated that he step down the following year. The vote for *no* became a rallying cry for the opposition, which dramatically won the plebiscite: 56% no and 44% yes.

Obviously, the plebiscite was a one-time event, rather than an ongoing electoral cycle. Yet at the very beginning of the democratic period it was a key step in structuring political conflict. First of all, parties that had previously aligned themselves along a *left versus right* political economy spectrum now regrouped around the choice presented by the plebiscite: *Pinochet versus anti-Pinochet*. Second, given the binary, *yes-no* structure of the plebiscite, it provided no opportunity for a centrist alternative. This was the first of many steps through which the Christian Democrats were drawn into an alliance with the parties of the secular left.

The salience of this democratic-authoritarian cleavage was dramatically reflected in a 1995 *Latinobarometro* survey, which revealed a striking divergence across the political spectrum. Voters who identified with center and left parties strongly preferred democracy: 75% for both the PDC and the Party for Democracy (PPD). By contrast, relatively few voters who identified with right-wing parties preferred democracy: only 17% for supporters of the Union of Independent Democrats (UDI), and 36% for backers of National Renewal (RN).⁷ This is a stun-

⁵ The debate over this argument is complex and ongoing. For some of the key contributions to this debate, see the references in Valenzuela, Somma, and Scully forthcoming.

⁶ Tironi and Agüero 1999; Torcal and Mainwaring 2003.

⁷ Torcal and Mainwaring 2003, 76.

³ Scully 1992, 191.

⁴ Scully 1992, 191.

ning contrast.⁸

Along with this dramatic contrast among party identifiers, the Chilean right has undergone a fundamental transformation. In the 1969 election for the lower chamber (the last election before Allende's electoral victory), the right won 20% of the electorate; after the plebiscite of 1988, the right doubled its vote share to over 40%. Its parties are new—in particular UDI—having been created by allies of the Pinochet government with the goal of preserving its legacy.⁹ UDI developed new linkages to a variety of different constituencies. While it initially had strong ties to elites and business leaders, it began to seek broader support from the popular sectors through clientelism.¹⁰

Coalitional relationships on the center-left have also been transformed.¹¹ The campaign for the 1988 plebiscite yielded a marked reduction in the historical enmity between the Christian Democrats, on the one hand, and the Communists and Socialists, on the other. The left parties, which had formerly considered the Christian Democrats to be class enemies, took a more moderate stance in order to peel away popular support from the military regime. In particular, the Socialist party shifted its political discourse from class appeals to appeals based on democracy.¹² During the 1988 plebiscite, there was a change in political tone and a tendency towards moderation, which has remained an ongoing feature of Chilean politics.¹³ This moderation stands in stark contrast to the more ideological and polarizing appeals made by the left prior to 1973. The result was an entente between the Christian Democrats and parties of the left that crystallized as a center-left coalition, the Concertación. This coalition is unprecedented, and represents an alliance that only the traumatic experience of the Pinochet regime could have forged.¹⁴

The Christian Democrats' alliance with the left, which has dominated Chilean politics since the democratic transition, had important implications for the normative positions adopted by this party. The very nature of this alliance between the more religiously oriented Christian Democrats and the secular left has meant that religious perspectives on issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion have been somewhat muted. This

⁸ The wording of the questions posed by the 1995 survey may lead to problems with the interpretation of these data, but the findings, even if exaggerated, certainly point to a wide breach between the two positions. For my view on the salience of the democratic-authoritarian cleavage, see Valenzuela, Scully, and Somma 2007.

⁹ Loxton 2016, 6-7.

¹⁰ Luna 2010, 343-353.

¹¹ It should be noted that other factors unrelated to the critical juncture also played a role in the transformation of the left. The collapse of the Soviet Union of course had a dramatic effect on Communist parties throughout the world, and was very significant for the Chilean left. Another factor was indirectly related to the Pinochet experience. Many of Chile's political leaders lived in exile in Northern Europe, contributing to an increased commitment to the democratic component of democratic socialism. See Lagos 2013, 390; Ortega Frei 1992; and Walker 1990.

¹² Torcal and Mainwaring 2003, 81-82.

¹³ Boas 2016, Chapter 2.

¹⁴ Munck and Bosworth 1998, 480-482.

has caused defections by some PDC supporters who have shifted their support to the right. From the standpoint of party loyalists it has resulted in a damaging "brand dilution."¹⁵ The resulting steady decline in PDC vote share in recent years represents a significant marker of party system discontinuity.

Binomial Electoral System

The binomial electoral law that went into effect in 1989 was a driving force in party system change. This system of proportional representation played a key role in eroding the political center, both by weakening the Christian Democrats and by creating a coalitional imperative in which the PDC was pushed to form an alliance with the left, rather than operating as an independent center. These consequences of the law were not accidental. Indeed, Pastor maintains that the binomial system reflects a deliberate effort on the part of the Pinochet government to reshape the party system.¹⁶

This unusual electoral system was carefully designed to achieve two key goals. The first was to strengthen the right within the national legislature, giving it the capacity to veto constitutional reforms that might have weakened the prerogatives of the Pinochet loyalists, as well as to block other policy initiatives advanced by the center-left. Given the results of the 1988 plebiscite, if the electoral system had instead used a simple plurality formula (with one representative per district), right-wing parties would have had a difficult time competing, since they could only mobilize about 40% of the electorate.¹⁷ By creating a system in which two seats were in play in each district, in order to win both seats, a party needed to double the percentage of the vote of the nearest competitor. This meant that a party needed only 33% of the vote to win one seat within a given district. These rules made it possible for the right to win roughly 50% of the legislative seats with only 40% of the vote.

The law's second goal was to offer strong incentives in favor of a bimodal system, in which the Christian Democrats had to ally with either the left or the right. By limiting candidate lists to only two per district, the binomial rules provided a powerful incentive to group party alliances into two large electoral coalitions. The resulting pattern of competition has led some observers to view Chilean politics through the lens of a contest between multi-party coalitions, rather than between the parties that formed them.

The actual consequences of this electoral system have been uneven. Critics argued that it was designed to increase the legislative representation of the right, yet this effect was small.¹⁸ The Concertación did not succumb to infighting among coalition partners. Rather it remained cohesive during elections in 1989 and 1993, winning majorities in the lower house while the right fell short of what it had expected. However, because the nine appointed Senators who were appointed for

¹⁵ Lupu 2016, Chapter 1.

¹⁶ Pastor 2004, 28.

¹⁷ Siavelis 1997, 657.

¹⁸ Polga-Hecimovich and Siavelis 2015; Valenzuela, Somma, and Scully forthcoming.

the 1990-1998 period were all sympathetic to the military regime, the right was able to block any reforms to the constitution that would have weakened their own position.¹⁹

The biggest electoral loser in the binomial system was the Christian Democrats. This system created coalitional dynamics that tended to over-represent small parties that received fewer votes, imposing a greater cost on the PDC in terms of lost representation and local party activation. Along with the “brand dilution” noted above, this feature of the electoral system contributed powerfully to the Christian Democrats’ slow attrition of its electoral support over the years.

Another major consequence of the binomial system was its contribution to a growing crisis of representation in Chile. Under this electoral law, the party system was in one sense stable, given the low volatility in the national vote share of the two contending party blocs. Yet parties also appeared to have low levels of legitimacy and rootedness in society, as well as weak grassroots organizations.²⁰ Electoral rules increasingly gave elites, not voters in party primaries, control over candidate selection. The creation of electoral lists involved pact-making, horse-trading, and backroom deals among party leaders. Electoral rules promoted conflicts within coalitional blocs, rather than between them.

This elitist character of Chilean democracy has led to widespread disaffection with the parties, and Luna reports a significant crisis of representation that is reflected in a number of surveys.²¹ These trends mark a significant departure from the past, when party politics was characterized by the intense engagement and identification from the grassroots.

Arguments for Continuity

Notwithstanding these changes, there is strong evidence of continuity, suggesting that the Pinochet period was not a critical juncture that transformed party politics. In fact, along with my co-authors, I argue that the party system has retained its predisposition to divide in a tripartite fashion among right, center, and left.²² The two earlier lines of fundamental cleavage, religion and class, continue to be the major forces shaping the structure of the party system. The two contending blocs are in fact coalitions of convenience, and the parties that constitute these blocs have—*notwithstanding the dynamics of coalitional-formation—by and large retained their distinctive identities.*

These continuities will certainly be reinforced by the elimination in 2015 of the binomial system. The law had long been opposed by the center and left. It was finally rescinded when fragmentation within the right enabled smaller parties to achieve the four-sevenths majority needed in both houses of congress.²³ The key vote to reach that majority in the Senate was provided by *Amplitud*, a breakaway party from RN.

The 2015 electoral law introduces an open list propor-

tional representation system using a d’Hondt formula. This was much like the law that had been in effect before 1973, except that voters are not able to cast a straight party list vote. All parties can present one more candidate than there are seats to be filled, and overall, the new law will encourage coalitional patterns more similar to those before the Pinochet period.

The new electoral law may also be expected to assist the centrist PDC in recovering the electoral losses it sustained in recent years. It will permit the party to present its own full slate of candidates in all lower house legislative districts where it has considerable electoral support. This will allow the PDC to reassert its identity, irrespective of the coalitions it enters with other parties, and to win back supporters who had defected to the right.

With these new rules, the continuities in party politics will likely become more evident. The party system has between six and eight main parties: two on the right, two on the left, and an evolving number of smaller formations. The party system’s ideological tendencies are related to the two historic axes of differentiation, religion and class, which remain guideposts for party identities. The left side of the spectrum continues to be framed by Socialist and Communist parties that draw their symbols and trace their ancestry back to the formative decades of the labor movement. A secular versus religious difference still emerges over value-laden issues such as marriage, abortion, and education policy. Finally, the old split between the social Christians and traditionalist Conservatives is still reflected in the differences between the more socially progressive Christian Democrats and the more socially conservative parties of the right, in particular UDI. This party system bears a strong resemblance to the party system in place before 1973.

In addition to the importance of electoral rules, a strong sense of party identification among voters—along with inter-generational continuity in party identities—are also important features of contemporary Chilean politics. It is a mistake to think that, in the past, Chilean voters identified more intensely with parties; indeed, within a complex multiparty system, Chilean voters have always had low levels of identification with specific parties.²⁴ These identities are defined by their sub-cultural sensibilities along the original axes of cleavage: religion and class. In a survey, socio-economic and religious factors strongly influenced voters’ attachments to parties, while attitudes toward regime type shifted decisively in favor of democracy for voters not only on the left, but also on right. In addition, on a spectrum of closeness to the Church and to the rich, voters were able to locate parties correctly. This suggests a deeply embedded social rootedness of parties that is often overlooked. The democratic-authoritarian cleavage has been subsumed by the prior set of cleavages, which continue to structure Chilean politics.

Finally, as of the second decade of the 21st century, the major legacies of authoritarian rule have largely been eroded. Moreover, institutional protections, such as the appointed Senators, were eliminated in 2005, and Pinochet, who was designated as Senator for life, stepped down in 2002. Even parties

¹⁹ Siavelis 1997, 657-658.

²⁰ Luna and Altman 2011, 3.

²¹ Luna 2016, 129-130.

²² Valenzuela, Somma, and Scully forthcoming.

²³ Campos 2009.

²⁴ Valenzuela, Somma, and Scully forthcoming.

of the right supported the elimination of protective institutions created by the outgoing military regime. Moreover, revelations of corruption during the Pinochet period further discredited the authoritarian regime, and various surveys have shown a broadly negative assessment of Pinochet himself. While the legacy of authoritarian rule cast a shadow over party politics during the 1990s, increasingly Chilean politics appears to follow more closely the older pattern of class-based and religious cleavages.

Assessment

Assessing whether post-Pinochet politics is fundamentally different, and hence whether a fourth critical juncture has occurred, requires a nuanced interpretation of ongoing change. The bimodal distribution of the electorate at the national level, generated in large part by the binomial formula, has certainly been an important feature of party competition. The crisis of representation noted by various scholars is also significant, and these along with other features can be interpreted as marking a discontinuity with the past.

Nonetheless, I argue that these shifts do not suggest a fundamental change in the underlying constellation of parties. Rather, the essential morphology of parties continues to reflect the long-standing divisions in Chilean society along religious and class lines. These divisions were created, and recreated, by the three critical junctures of the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The remarkable persistence of parties that were founded long before 1973 suggests that the criteria for identifying a new critical juncture have not been met. I am convinced that as we achieve even greater historical distance, the continuities will become even more clear.

To conclude this discussion, some further observations should be made about the importance of historical distance in evaluating critical junctures and their legacies. These observations are relevant as a general comment on the study of critical junctures, thereby making a connection with other essays in this symposium. They also contribute to interpreting the Chilean case by placing it in comparative perspective.

In evaluating the importance of historical distance, one might posit both a *reactive sequence* criterion and a *regime persistence* criterion. Regarding the first, Boas' discussion of Roberts in this symposium considers the challenge of analyzing cases where the legacy of a critical juncture is formed through a sequence of reactions and counter-reactions²⁵—sometimes consisting of a three-step “reactive sequence.”²⁶ For example, a critical juncture involving (1) a major opening to the left, might be followed by (2) a strong conservative reaction, which may in turn be followed by (3) a new shift in a more progressive direction. Alternatively, a critical juncture involving (1) a major move to the right, might be followed by (2) a “left turn” in politics, which is subsequently followed by (3) a shift back in a more conservative direction. As Boas emphasizes, major analytic mistakes may arise if the heritage of a critical juncture is evaluated before the final step has occurred.

Hence, the reactive sequence criterion can be decisive in pointing to the need for historical distance.

By contrast, for Chile the alternative criterion of *regime persistence* is decisive in underscoring the need for historical perspective.²⁷ Hunter has pointed out, drawing on the “modes of transition” literature, that Chile stands at the extreme end of a spectrum: a high degree of military control of the democratic transition, and also the persistence of military power well after the transition had taken place. This regime persistence contrasts sharply, for example, from the dramatic collapse of military authority with the democratic transition in Argentina in 1983.²⁸

Applying this regime persistence criterion to Chile places in a wider perspective key features of the authoritarian experience that were sustained far into the post-Pinochet period. The constitutional protection of military prerogatives lasted into the new millennium, until 2005. The democratic-authoritarian cleavage, which was in part a reaction to the very intensity of Pinochet's authoritarianism, was a key feature of politics for many years, though it is now eroding. The binomial electoral law carefully crafted by Pinochet's advisers was only abolished in 2015.

Based on this regime persistence criterion, two distinctive challenges emerge in analyzing Chile: the imperative of adopting a long time horizon and the problem of false positives. Thus, it can readily be argued that key observations needed in evaluating the legacy of the hypothesized critical juncture can only be made in the years after 2015—following a full 25 years of competitive democratic politics. Researchers must be patient in waiting for the evidence to come in. Further, for scholars seeking to demonstrate that Chilean politics and the party system have indeed changed, this delay in the emergence of crucial evidence substantially increases the risk of a *false positive*. There is a danger of incorrectly confirming the hypothesis of change, simply because the relevant evidence for continuity is not yet available.

In this framework, this essay has cautiously argued for the hypothesis of continuity, recognizing that in the coming years, further evidence is likely to emerge that even more strongly undermines the argument that fundamental change has occurred.

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²⁵ Boas 2017; Roberts 2014.

²⁶ Mahoney 2000, 509.

²⁷ The reactive sequence criterion is also relevant to Chile, but is less crucial for the issues addressed in this essay.

²⁸ Hunter 1997, 454-455.

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