

Bachelet's Triumph and the Political Advance of Women

Susan Franceschet

Although it can be interpreted cynically as fruit of the need for a coalition with fifteen years in power to indicate its disposition to change, Michelle Bachelet's triumph can also be seen as part of a cultural change in Chile: the victory of the socialist leader challenges stereotypes about women's place in politics but also implies persisting with the neoliberal economic strategy that discriminates against women in the labor market. A result of the paradoxes and tensions of Chilean modernization, the Bachelet government will be able to produce authentic transformations to the extent that the women's movement is activated and obliges her to advance with an agenda designed to reduce gender inequality.

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Enormous changes are underway in Latin America. Many of the region's largest countries are governed by left-of-centre political leaders, a trend that is predicted to continue in future presidential elections. The shift to the left has gained international attention, and is interpreted by some as Latin Americans' growing rejection of neoliberalism and the hegemony of the United States. A second notable trend is gaining somewhat less attention, but is equally dramatic. Throughout the region, women are entering the political arena in greater numbers, and, in a region dominated by machismo, women have become prominent figures in many presidential contests. On January 15, 2006, Chileans elected Michelle

Bachelet president,¹ and in neighbouring Peru, Lourdes Flores has a possibility of becoming president in that country's April elections. Women currently rank among Argentina's most popular political leaders, and there is speculation that senator Cristina Fernández, wife of current president Néstor Kirchner, may be the Peronist party's next presidential candidate.

In Chile, both of these trends are evident. Upon the return of democracy in 1990, Chileans elected the centre-left Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia. The Concertación has won every set of elections since that time. While the first two presidents from this coalition came from the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano, the third Concertación president, Ricardo Lagos, was a Socialist. Recently elected Michelle Bachelet also comes from the left wing of the Concertación and, in that sense, represents continuity with the Lagos administration. Bachelet also represents an important change, however, one that is part of the trend that is bringing more women to politics. Bachelet is the first female president in Chile's history, and is the first female president anywhere in Latin America who rose to political prominence without being linked through marriage to a high profile male leader. Another important trend in Chile today that is part of the two trends previously noted is the declining force of conservatism, a significant development in a country well-known for the dominance of the Catholic Church and lingering pockets of support for former dictator Augusto Pinochet.

These developments, culminating in the election of a president that is both socialist and a woman, have generated many celebratory analyses about the monumental cultural and political changes that have occurred in the country. Many have interpreted these changes as an indication of substantial progress toward equality, especially for women. While I do not wish to undermine the significance of Bachelet's election, I believe that we must be careful not to interpret recent developments as evidence that women have won their struggle for equality. More women in politics does not automatically produce a more egalitarian society. Also, some of the factors that have created opportunities for women's greater involvement in politics are linked to political changes that have little to do with challenging gender inequality. Finally, we must be aware of the obstacles that female political leaders confront when it comes to promoting gender equality policies, especially if these policies clash with deeply held values about women's traditional roles in the family or with development models that prioritize open markets, free trade, and fiscal restraint. In this context, the factor that is most likely to translate Bachelet's success into success for all Chilean women is the existence of a vibrant women's movement capable of mobilizing to keep pressure on Bachelet

¹ Bachelet received 53.4 percent of the vote, while her competitor received 46.5 percent.

to fulfill her commitments to gender equality, and to show the rest of Chile's political class (predominantly male) that a large portion of Chilean society firmly supports a gender equity agenda. It remains to be seen whether such a movement currently exists in Chile and whether Bachelet's gender equality agenda can be turned into reality.

The growing presence of women in politics

Latin America has been at the forefront of a global trend toward expanding women's access to political office. Eleven countries in the region have adopted gender quota legislation, something that is truly phenomenal when compared with the timid measures adopted to expand women's access to electoral politics in North America and Europe.² Unfortunately, this trend has not been as strong in Chile, where there is no quota law and women's representation in parliament remains low. In the most recent parliamentary elections this past December, women represented a mere 15 percent percent of candidates. Women have fared better at the ministerial level, with both the Frei and Lagos governments including a substantial portion of women in their cabinets. Indeed, it was president Lagos who first appointed Michelle Bachelet to office, as Minister of Health in 2000, and as Minister of Defence in 2002. Bachelet, along with another woman in Lagos' cabinet, Foreign Relations Minister Soledad Alvear, soon became Chile's most popular and highly regarded political figures.³ Significantly, the posts of Minister of Defence and Minister of Foreign Relations are the most traditionally "masculine," and putting women in those positions represented an important challenge to existing ideas about appropriate roles for women in politics.

The increased presence of women in politics throughout the region is a result of a complex array of both national and transnational factors. In many countries, and especially in Chile, women's movements were at the forefront of struggles for democracy and human rights, leading incoming democratic governments to respond positively to some of women's demands for equality. It was in this context that many countries (although not Chile) adopted gender quota legislation. All countries in the region created state-level agencies to pursue women's equality through public policy. International factors also played an important role in these developments. Many of the newly democratizing states in the region were eager

² The Latin American countries that have quota legislation include: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Mexico, and Venezuela. Only two European countries (Belgium and France) have such legislation.

³ Until May 31, 2005, Soledad Alvear was also a contender for the Concertación's presidential nominee. She withdrew after consistently lagging behind Bachelet in the polls. She went on to win a senate seat in the December 11, 2005 elections.

for enhanced international legitimacy and the confidence of international investors. Consequently, governments willingly adopted policies to promote women's equality, policies that were encouraged by the United Nations and the Organization for American States. As a result, women made important gains in the 1990s throughout the region, as countries adopted domestic violence legislation, equal opportunity plans, and programs targeting the gender-specific sources of poverty. All governments claimed a commitment to expanding the presence of women in politics, although women's representation improved more substantially in those countries with effective quota laws (such as Argentina and Mexico) than in countries without (such as Chile).

Although increased levels of women's representation in politics in Latin America should be viewed as an important advance toward women's equality, it is important to note that some of women's equality gains resulted from cynical calculations by political leaders. For example, it has been speculated that male party leaders support gender quota legislation as a strategy to retain centralized control over the process of candidate nomination. That is, when confronted with demands to democratize party structures, leaders can appear democratic by instituting gender quotas, which are difficult to reconcile with the use of primaries, a mechanism promoted by those urging party democratization.⁴ In Perú, it was under former president Alberto Fujimori that a number of gains for women occurred, including quota legislation and social policies targeting poor women. However, it seems clear that many of Fujimori's policies were geared toward expanding his support among female voters, as well as deepening clientelist ties between poor women and his political party.⁵

In the case of Chile, there are also some cynical explanations for the emergence of Michelle Bachelet as presidential candidate. Because the Concertación has governed Chile since the return of democracy in 1990, it needed to signal some kind of change to avoid criticisms that it had been in office too long. Ricardo Lagos suggested this himself, saying that "the greatest indication of change would be to have the first female president in the country."⁶ But there are actually two reasons

⁴ See Lisa Baldez, "Elected Bodies: The Adoption of Gender Quota Laws for Legislative Candidates in Mexico," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* vol. 29, no. 2, 2004: 231-258; and Mala Htun and Mark Jones, "Engendering the Right to Participate in Decision-making: electoral quotas and women's leadership in Latin America." In *Gender and the Politics of Rights and Democracy in Latin America*, eds. Nikki Craske and Maxine Molyneux, (London: Palgrave, 2002), 32-56.

⁵ See Virginia Vargas and Cecilia Olea, "An Agenda of One's Own: The Tribulations of the Peruvian Feminist Movement." In *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, eds. Nira Yuval-Davis and Prina Werbner, (London: Zed Books, 1999), pp. 246-261; and Cecilia Blondet, "Lecciones de la Participación de las Mujeres." (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2001).

⁶ Quoted in *El Mercurio*, February 3, 2004.

why the Concertación wants to signal a change right now. The first reason is that they have been in office for fifteen years already. The second reason is that, despite the personal popularity of president Lagos, a series of bribery scandals involving both deputies and ministers from the Concertación have damaged the coalition's reputation. Pollster Marta Lagos believes that the overwhelming popularity enjoyed by Michelle Bachelet, as well as former presidential pre-candidate Soledad Alvear, was due to the popular perception that women are outside of political networks of corruption. Lagos noted that, "both of these women have emerged not so much because they are women but because of a vacuum and a disenchantment with politics."⁷ In Chile, as elsewhere in Latin America, the public holds profoundly gendered assumptions about men and women's behaviour in politics. Women are believed to be more honest and less corruptible. Consequently, when public levels of distrust with traditional politicians increase, then female candidates, traditionally viewed as "outsiders," tend to do better in electoral contests. In selecting Bachelet as a candidate, the Concertación was clearly hoping to benefit from these kinds of public perceptions about gender.

The success of the left

The election of leftist governments has important implications for women. It is well-known that leftist parties are more sympathetic to calls for gender equality. Throughout the region, it has been parties of the left that have adopted internal gender quotas and supported policies that address women's economic marginalization. In Chile, it is the left-leaning Partido por la Democracia (PPD) and the Partido Socialista (PS) that use "positive discrimination" to increase the number of female candidates. Consequently, in the parliamentary elections of December 11, 2005, women represented 26.7 percent of candidates for the PPD and 27.3 percent of candidates for the PS. In contrast, the more centrist party in the Concertación coalition, the PDC included only 11.7 percent female candidates. Thus, one of the ways in which women benefit from the success of leftist parties is that these parties are more likely to further expand women's access to politics.

While parties of the left are more likely to promote gender equality than conservative parties, the significance of the shift to the left in Latin America should not be overstated. With the exception of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and recently elected Evo Morales in Bolivia, most of Latin America's left-leaning presidents favour policies that include balanced budgets, continued debt-servicing, and export-oriented growth. In other words, there is more continuity than change, particularly in economic policy. Brazilian president "Lula" da Silva's government

⁷ Quoted in *New York Times*, December 20, 2004.

has kept spending levels low to ensure continued debt payments, and Argentina's Néstor Kirchner has maintained Carlos Menem's neoliberal tax policies, despite a rhetoric that is more critical of neoliberalism.⁸ Chile's Ricardo Lagos emphasized "crecer con igualdad" and implemented social programs like Chile Solidario, aimed at families living in extreme poverty. However, he has done very little to reverse the growing gap between rich and poor in Chile. In fact, Chile's distribution of income is among the most unequal in Latin America and has not been decreased at all since the return of democracy in 1990. Rhetorical commitments to social justice and poverty alleviation have not produced far-reaching economic or social change in Chile or in neighbouring countries like Argentina and Brazil.

Michelle Bachelet comes from the left wing of the Concertación, and speaks frequently about the need for greater social justice, equality, and inclusion. At the same time, during the campaign, she took great care to emphasize her continuity with Lagos and his social and economic policies. It is significant that Bachelet frequently described as representing both "continuity and change." This factor has ambiguous implications for women's equality goals in Chile. On the one hand, the "change" that Bachelet represents is a type of change that challenges dominant ideas about politics as a "man's world" and breaks down stereotypes about women's lack of capacity to govern. In fact, one of the most interesting things about Bachelet's political personality is that she neither draws excessively on a maternal identity, as did former president Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua, nor does she play down her female characteristics in favour of an aggressive style, as did Britain's former president, Margaret Thatcher. In an interview with *El Mercurio*, Bachelet admitted that being a woman has helped her to win more votes among women, but also that there is a great deal of machismo remaining in the country which has cost her votes among men.⁹ However, when Bachelet's opponent, RN presidential candidate Sebastián Piñera, and other members of the political right, drew on her gender in a derogatory way, insisting that she did not have the capacity to govern, that she was indecisive, and that she showed emotional weakness, some analysts reported that the strategy backfired. It appears that Bachelet's style of leadership, a style that viewed as more open and straightforward, is challenging existing ideas about how women in politics should behave, thereby removing some of the obstacles to women's participation in the political arena.

⁸ Inter-Press Service, December 29, 2005

⁹ *El Mercurio*, 25 diciembre 2005.

Whereas the change that Bachelet represents is primarily a change in style and stereotypes about politics (due largely to her gender), a change that will undoubtedly benefit women, the continuity that Bachelet represents has more ambiguous implications for women. That's because many of the sources of women's inequality derive from Chile's economic order and a development model that Bachelet is not likely challenge. The problems that Chilean women confront today include high levels of gender-based discrimination in the labour force, a stubbornly persistent salary gap between men and women, and widely held assumptions about women's primary roles as mothers and homemakers. In the private sector, women earn 75 percent of what men doing the same job earn.¹⁰ In the last decade, women's rates of unemployment have remained significantly higher than men's, especially in periods of high unemployment.¹¹ The private sector continues to discriminate against women in their child-bearing years, and job advertisements routinely ask the age and marital status of applicants. Employers also discriminate by frequently requesting photographs of applicants, noting that they are seeking applicants "*de buena presencia*," which basically means light-skinned, young, and attractive. Chile's export-oriented neoliberal economy has also created a more gender segregated workforce, with women comprising a majority of temporary workers in the agricultural sector and the domestic service sector. These workers often lack contracts and thus, enjoy fewer rights and social benefits than full-time, permanent workers.

What sort of changes would Bachelet bring about to resolve these problems? Bachelet has committed herself to improving the situation of those sectors of Chilean society that have not benefited from the last two decades of economic growth in the country. She has promised skills training for the young, an expansion of public health care services and early childhood education for the poor, guaranteed child care for working women, and the creation of a non-discrimination code for women in the workforce.¹² But these policies represent continuity with the kinds of social policies promoted by the Lagos government, policies which deserve some praise for slightly raising the standard of living of society's poor and vulnerable. The problem is that these policies do not alter an economic order that reproduces social inequality, and a development model that benefits the country's wealthy elite while providing merely palliative measures to those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. Bachelet will face the same constraints as did Lagos when it comes to turning her discourse of equality and

¹⁰ "Las mujeres chilenas registran avances notables" *cimacnoticias.com*, 20 de junio, 2005.

¹¹ Susan Franceschet, *Women and Politics in Chile*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishing, 2005), p. 30.

¹² "Bachelet anunció 36 medidas para sus 100 primeros días de gobierno" *Radio Cooperativa* January 3, 2006.

inclusion into reality. In this sense, she represents continuity, and continuity with a set of policies that do not address the economic sources of women's inequality.

Cultural change in Chile: the decline of conservatism

Chile is commonly perceived to be one of Latin America's most conservative countries. Legal divorce was absent until 2004, the Catholic Church enjoys widespread legitimacy, and fewer Chilean women participate in the workforce than do women in most other Latin American countries. Women blame the culture of machismo for limiting their access to arenas of power, and politically active women place particular blame on the political parties for failing to open up sufficient space for women who want to be candidates.¹³ Former president Eduardo Frei unleashed controversy in early 2004 when he claimed that it would be very difficult for the Concertación to have a female presidential candidate because "we are very machista in Chile...and the women are more machista than the men."¹⁴

However, the reality in Chile no longer appears to support the perception that Chile is one of the region's most conservative countries. In a recent Latinobarómetro survey, the attitudes of Chileans toward women is far more modern than the attitudes of citizens in the majority of other countries, with the exception of Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay. Only 26 percent of Chileans agreed with the statement that "los hombres son mejores líderes políticos que las mujeres," compared to 50 percent in the Dominican Republic and 35 percent in Venezuela. Only 29 percent of Chileans agreed that women should concentrate on the home while men should work, compared to 67 percent of Hondurans and 48 percent of Colombians.¹⁵ The widespread popularity of political leaders like Michelle Bachelet is therefore part of a broader process of cultural change underway in the country.

Numerous commentators have noted recently that Chilean society is undergoing profound cultural change. Pedro E. Güell, for example, explains that the country is in transition from "an authoritarian and conservative culture to a culturally modern society."¹⁶ He points to two recent phenomena as evidence of this change: first, a more assertive media, and second, an increase in the public's demands for

¹³ Franceschet, *Women and Politics in Chile*.

¹⁴ Quoted in *Santiago Times*, February 3, 2004.

¹⁵ Latinobarómetro "Informe: Resumen Latinobarómetro 2004: Una Década de Mediciones," 13 de agosto 2004.

¹⁶ Pedro E. Güell, "Chile Has Changed...but in what ways has it changed?" *ReVista/Harvard Review of Latin America*, Spring 2004.

autonomy and liberty. The first phenomenon is evident in the media's aggressive reporting of recent corruption and bribery scandals and the second is evident in the public's support for divorce legislation, despite the Catholic Church's repeated warnings about the harm to society that legalized divorce would create. There are numerous other indications of Chile's ongoing cultural changes, but perhaps one of the most significant is the declining electoral fortunes of the UDI, the ultra conservative party that has least distanced itself from the Pinochet legacy, and the growth of support for the leftist parties in the Concertación coalition, particularly the Socialists. In the first round of the 1999 presidential elections, Concertación candidate Ricardo Lagos and the Alianza por Chile¹⁷ candidate, Joaquín Lavín, were virtually tied, with Lagos winning 47.9 percent of the vote and Lavín winning 47.5.¹⁸ In the first round of the recent presidential elections, there were two candidates from the Alianza, with Lavín again being the candidate for the UDI, and Sebastián Piñera the candidate for the RN. Piñera, a Harvard-trained economist and millionaire businessman, represents a more moderate segment of conservatism in Chile.¹⁹ Significantly, Piñera received more votes than Lavín, and thus proceeded to the second round to face Bachelet. Another indication of the shift to the left occurred within the Concertación, where the Christian Democrats lost four seats in the lower chamber and the Partido Socialista gained four seats. The Christian Democrats are no longer the largest party in the chamber, thereby shifting the balance of power within the coalition from the centre to the left.

These trends are clearly significant, and Bachelet's ascendancy is a large part of them. On the one hand, Bachelet herself is a beneficiary of the social and cultural changes that have occurred since 1990, with successive Concertación governments publicly professing a commitment to gender equality, and carrying out concrete actions such as creating the Servicio Nacional de la Mujer and introducing two Equal Opportunity Plans for Men and Women. A Bachelet presidency will contribute even further to a culture of modernization in the country, in particular, to the further decline of regressive attitudes about women's capacity to participate in arenas of power. All of these things give cause for celebration. On the other hand, we must be aware of the profound obstacles Bachelet faces, and recognize that despite cultural change, a number of ambiguities and tensions remain, in particular, contradictory attitudes about women's roles as mothers.

¹⁷ This coalition is comprised of the Renovación Nacional and the Unión Demócrata Independiente.

¹⁸ www.elecciones.gov.cl

¹⁹ It is well-known that Piñera voted "No" in the 1988 plebiscite on the continuation of Pinochet's rule for another eight years. It was the successful "No" vote in the plebiscite that ushered in the transition to democracy in Chile.

Indeed, it is here where the tensions and paradoxes of Chile's modernization are most evident. While Chile's economy is one of the most open in the world, and ethos of individualism is spreading, women's autonomy is still constrained by societal values that assign women the primary responsibility for childcare. A 2002 opinion poll showed that 83 percent of Chileans believed that pre-school aged children "suffer if their mother works." The same poll showed that 66.7 percent of Chileans believed that while it's okay for a woman to have a job, most women "want a home and children."²⁰ The conflation of womanhood with motherhood in Chile, combined with the continuing moral authority of the Catholic Church on many issues, has also made the issue of women's reproductive rights highly contentious in the country. Abortion is illegal in all circumstances in Chile. Despite the total legal prohibition on abortion, Chile has one of the highest abortion rates in Latin America. Approximately one in three pregnancies is terminated.²¹ The lack of legal abortion places a particular burden on poor women, who, unlike middle and upper class women, cannot afford to pay for safe abortions in private clinics.²² Unfortunately, reproductive rights are simply not on the political agenda in the country, and even a Bachelet presidency will not change this. Bachelet has publicly stated that she will not support a change to the country's laws on abortion, noting that she would prefer to tackle the problem of preventing unwanted pregnancies from occurring in the first place.²³

There are other signs of lingering machismo, especially in the media's treatment of the two female presidential candidates, Bachelet and Soledad Alvear. Prior to Alvear's withdrawal from the race, there was a televised debate between the two pre-candidates. At one point, Alvear was asked about the meaning of her husband's absence from the event, implying perhaps that her husband did not approve of her candidacy. Alvear responded that she found the question to be "un poco machista." Others, too, have noted both the opposition and the media's focus on issues relating to Bachelet's personal life, especially her stated agnosticism and her past romantic relationship with a member of the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez (FPMR), the armed group that was responsible for an assassination attempt on Pinochet. These facts show that machismo has not disappeared. On the other hand, the fact that Bachelet's status as a single mother has not been used against her in the campaign is noteworthy. In this respect, Chile appears to be

²⁰ "Estudio Nacional de Opinión Pública" (Santiago: Centros de Estudios Públicos), December 2002.

²¹ Mala Htun, *Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce, and the Family Under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 154.

²² See Merike Blofield, "Inequality and Democratic Politics: The Catholic Church, Feminists, and Policy Reform on Abortion and Divorce in Argentina, Chile, and Spain." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003.

²³ *Santiago Times*, July 21, 2005.

more modern than the United States, where religious and conservative social values have become more rather than less important and it is inconceivable that a single mother who claimed not to be religious could become president.

Given the tensions evident in Chile's process of cultural change, and Bachelet's emphasis on continuity with Lagos' economic policies, it is unrealistic to expect that a Bachelet presidency will automatically produce equality for Chilean women. Notably, although Bachelet publicly stated support last May for a gender quota law, saying that she would use the executive's prerogative to force a parliamentary debate on the bill,²⁴ there was no mention of the quota legislation when she announced the policy measure she would promote in her first 100 days in office. Bachelet has also promised gender parity in her cabinet, a promise that some analysts have questioned, given that she failed to achieve gender parity in her campaign team, and given the reality of coalition politics and existing political norms about power-sharing within the coalition. In light of the potential obstacles Bachelet confronts in implementing a gender equality agenda, what is likely to matter a great deal is how much pressure organized women can put on Bachelet to keep her promises.

On this matter, however, the future is uncertain. Existing research on the state of the women's movement and feminism in Chile does not offer much hope.²⁵ While Chilean feminism and a highly mobilized women's movement emerged during the 1980s and played an important role in the nation's struggle for democracy, subsequent years have been marked by a decline in social movement activism. In fact, numerous scholars of Chilean politics have written about the decline of all sorts of activism, from the labour movement to the *poblador* movement since the return of democracy. This poses a potential problem because the most important gains that women have achieved, in Chile and around the world, have come from a combination of social movement mobilization and enlightened political leaders. It seems, therefore, that progressive social change requires a dual strategy: pressure from social movements "from below" in addition to the election of progressive leaders that will support such change "from above." Women in Chile, through their support for Bachelet at the ballot box, have voiced their demand for more equality. But they still have a long struggle ahead, because they will need to make their voices heard in ways other than the ballot box, so that there is strong pressure on Bachelet to keep her promises to build a more egalitarian Chile.

²⁴ *El Mercurio*, May 15, 2005.

²⁵ See, for example, Marcela Ríos Tobar, Lorena Godoy Catalán, and Elizabeth Guerrero Caviedes. *¿Un Nuevo Silencio Feminista? La Transformación de un Movimiento Social en el Chile Posdictadura*. (Santiago, Chile: CEM, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2004); and Franceschet, *Women and Politics in Chile*.