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# Michelle Bachelet's Government: The Paradoxes of a Chilean President

Gregory Weeks and Silvia Borzutzky

**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to explain the contradictions in Michelle Bachelet's presidency by focusing on the paradoxical nature of presidential power, the limits on the executive in the Chilean constitution, and how those limits affected President Bachelet's government. At the outset of her presidency, she faced the problem of wanting to promote inclusive policies while simultaneously experiencing political pressure to maintain elite consensus. Due to institutional and political constraints, Bachelet's rhetoric of inclusion could not be realized, and she eventually decided to opt for the more traditional elite consensus approach. In our view, the emphasis on achieving elite consensus produced contradictory results. It sustained Bachelet's personal image as a national leader, but limited her ability to get effective legislation passed. Indeed, the Concertación itself was blamed for inaction rather than the president as an individual.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explain the contradictions in Michelle Bachelet's presidency by focusing on the paradoxical nature of presidential power, the limits on the executive in the Chilean constitution, and how those limits affected President Bachelet's government. It also sheds light on the contradictory results produced by her administration: on one hand, the president's massive popular support and on the other, the inability of the ruling coalition to capitalize on that support and win the 2009 presidential elections. Why did such a popular president leave no coattails to ride?

Bachelet, the first female president in Latin America to not follow a male relative in power, struggled to manage and control her administration, ultimately succeeding in becoming the most popular president in Chile's modern history while at the same time failing to transfer that popularity to the Concertación (the center-left coalition of the president that has held the presidency since 1990), or to the coalition's presidential candidate, former president Eduardo Frei. At the core of Bachelet's performance are critical institutional and personal issues. From an institutional standpoint the Chilean political system is based on divided government and separation of powers, which largely limits the power of the president but also shields him or her from public opinion, if the president so wishes. Moreover, the 2005 constitutional reforms limited the president's term to four years with no immediate reelection. From a personal standpoint, Bachelet's approach to the institution was based on an initial desire to portray herself as a relative outsider seeking more inclusionary policies in an environment dominated by strong political parties within two main coalitions, and the need to be a consensual and inclusionary leader in an environment of social conflict and inequality. Thus, we see the issues of limited constitutional powers and her desire to be a consensual policymaker as the two most dynamic elements in her administration, in her policymaking style, and in determining the historical legacy of her government.

Due to institutional and political constraints, Bachelet's rhetoric of inclusion could not be realized, and she eventually decided to opt for the more traditional elite consensus approach. In our view, the emphasis on achieving elite consensus produced contradictory results. It sustained Bachelet's personal image as a national leader, it allowed her to finish her term with the highest level of popular support, but limited her ability to obtain effective legislation. Indeed, the Concertación itself was blamed for inaction, rather than the president as an individual.

## Paradoxes of Chilean Politics

Chile's transition to democracy was defined by the Constitution of 1980, drafted during the authoritarian government of General Augusto Pinochet. The constitution established an eight-year presidential term for General Pinochet and included provisions for a referendum in 1988 to ask Chileans if they wanted another eight years of Pinochet's rule. They voted no, and democratic elections took place in 1989.

As Siavelis argues,

The political model inherited by democratic authorities was designed to protect [...] the economic legacy of the government of Augusto Pinochet and to prevent the reemergence of the dynamic of polarization and instability that had characterized the early 1970 (Siavelis 2000: 1).

In fact, this was an authoritarian constitution that centered on requiring the approval of the right to pass any legislation. The process of adapting the constitution to democracy has been slow and painful. The desire to democratize the constitution expressed by center-left politicians was checked first by General Pinochet, who, as commander-in-chief of the armed forces until 1998, wielded what amounted to veto power over the political system (Weeks 2003). Later on, democratization efforts were stifled by the right wing political parties, particularly the Independent Democratic Union (UDI), which was determined to prolong the life of the Pinochet regime. In an interview, the first democratically elected president, Patricio Aylwin, spoke vehemently about his administration's weaknesses and UDI's unrelenting opposition to reform.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, through the 17 constitutional reforms that took place between 1989 and 2005, the political structure of the country changed (Montes and Vial 2005). Overall, these reforms were geared to reducing the unprecedented amount of power that the 1980 charter concentrated in the president, the military, and the right wing political parties that had supported the Pinochet regime (for a discussion of constitutional reforms, see among others, Siavelis 2000; Garretón 2003; Squella and Sunkel 2000; Garretón 2007). Two points merit particular mention: First, the president serves a four-year term without the possibility of immediate reelection. That means lame-duck status comes about quickly. Second, still unreformed is the binomial electoral system in the legislature. Coalitions nominate two candidates per district, and in order to win both seats a coalition must win over two-thirds of the total vote. Otherwise, the second seat goes to the coalition with the

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1 Personal Interview, Santiago, December 2010.

second-most votes. In practice this has served to over-represent the right, which generally receives more seats than votes. It also ensured the emergence of a system dominated by two coalitions, as small independent parties find it difficult to win enough votes to gain a seat. From a policy perspective, this means the president must often compromise and find consensus to pass legislation.

From a legislative standpoint, the president has the power to initiate legislation dealing with taxes, social security, public debt, new public services and collective bargaining (Perry and Leipziger 1999). However, given the nature of the electoral system and the two-coalition structure of the Chilean congress, the president's promises and ambitions have often been limited by a more conservative legislature. For instance, during the passage of the pension reform law, Bachelet's landmark legislation, the government was forced to compromise on key provisions of the law although it had a majority in congress (Borzutzky 2010: 101). Similar compromises took place in other critical areas such as education, labor and gender issues (see Kubal 2010 and Sehnbruch 2010).

Thus, much as argued by Genovese in the case of the United States, a warning label should be attached to the presidency: "Beware! Powers may be smaller than [...] they appear from [a] distance" (Genovese 2008: 6). In the words of Richard Neustadt, the election of the president does not guarantee his or her success or even much power. To be effective, the president has to maximize his or her power, and the only way to do that is by persuading others to follow you (Neustadt 1960). As Angell and Reig have noted, the Chilean electorate – much like that of its North American counterpart – seems to prefer candidates who portray themselves as outsiders, yet being a party insider is essential to winning (Angell and Reig 2006). Unlike her predecessors, Bachelet raised expectations that were impossible to fulfill given the long-standing institutional constraints, but then began governing in a traditional elite consensual style.

## The Politics of Consensus

President Bachelet's tenure in office was quite remarkable. When she was inaugurated in March 2006 after a hard-fought runoff election against Sebastián Piñera of the conservative Alianza ("Alliance") coalition, she brought with her considerable promise of change. Within months, however, her approval ratings had plummeted, members of her own Socialist Party (Partido Socialista – PS) were in the streets protesting, and her cabinet had undergone multiple transformations. Like the administration of Ricardo Lagos (2000–2006) before her, President Bachelet chose not to challenge the main

bases of the political consensus: the continuation of market-oriented fiscal moderation along with the maintenance of a unified party coalition during the presidential election campaign.<sup>2</sup> This elite consensual emphasis has its historical roots in the breakdown of Chilean democracy, which culminated in the violent coup that overthrew socialist president Salvador Allende in 1973. By the early 1970s polarization had reached the point that even the Christian Democratic Party (Partido Demócrata Cristiano – PDC), led by future president Patricio Aylwin, and long the political anchor of the center, supported the coup and asserted that Allende had violated the constitution. Since party leaders assumed incorrectly that the armed forces would soon hand power back to civilians and call for new elections, political moderation seemed unnecessary. Under that assumption, the military cut the Gordian knot and deposed the president. As Aylwin would later write about his party's support for the coup, "we felt liberated from the enormous weight we had been carrying" (Aylwin Azócar 1998: 31). The military, which viewed the Christian Democrats with almost equal disdain as it did leftist parties, suspended the constitution indefinitely and democracy would not return for nearly 17 years.

Given its historical background, the Concertación as a whole strongly emphasized the need to work together, compromise, and avoid serious conflict as much as possible, both internally and vis-à-vis other political actors.<sup>3</sup> As Heraldo Muñoz, the Chilean ambassador to the United Nations under Bachelet, put it, "a new social bloc had to be created based on mass struggle and political consensus" (Muñoz 2008: 125). With his own past actions weighing on him, Aylwin also focused on developing consensus among those opposed to the military government.

Institutional and historical factors led to economic policy consensus. The market reforms first enacted in the mid-1970s enjoyed support from the right, and also within the Concertación. Reducing government spending, privatization, cutting tariffs, encouraging foreign investment, and enacting similar measures became the backbone of the Chilean economic "miracle." Many members of the coalition viewed these measures as the engine of economic growth that brought macroeconomic stability and a continued flow of investment. Any substantive change to the model, the argument went, would discourage investors, spur inflation, and slow growth. As market-oriented policies entail a relatively small role for the state, any reforms putatively aimed at fighting poverty, such as social security, education, wom-

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2 For a detailed discussion of the Concertación and the Lagos administration, see Silvia and Oppenheim 2006.

3 In addition to Christian Democrats and Socialists, the coalition includes the Party for Democracy (PPD) and Social Democrat Radical Party (PRSD).

en's rights, and indigenous rights, were characterized by market solutions, and by definition did not involve any challenge to the economic status quo (Borzutzky and Weeks 2010).

Within the elite consensus, economic success has been viewed more often in terms of growth than equality, and job creation was framed in terms of expanded international trade; thus, the government signed free trade agreements (FTAs) that include the United States (along with Canada and Mexico), South Korea, China, the European Union, Japan, Central American countries, as well as a multilateral FTA with Brunei, New Zealand, and Singapore. With over 50 FTAs, Chile has access to over 86 percent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Olivares and Castañeda 2006; *El Mercurio* 2007). Far from challenging the central tenets of the model, post-authoritarian presidents have enthusiastically embraced it, pursuing new market-based opportunities globally and touting Chile's economic growth potential. This has helped to forge links between the Concertación, the political right, and business (both domestic and international) based on a shared vision of economic policy.

Elite consensus thus meant a concerted effort to avoid returning to a conflictive past that had ripped Chilean democracy apart in 1973. From a comparative political perspective, it has proven very successful. The Concertación has been by far the most stable and successful political coalition in contemporary Latin America. To what extent the coalition has evolved and adapted to a new society after 20 years in power has become a matter of debate. This debate became particularly important after the 2009 elections: although on one hand the Concertación's composition and leadership has evolved over time, such that it has never been dominated by only one party or personality, on the other hand there has been a tendency to rely on a small political elite that has controlled the appearance of new faces capable of challenging the status quo. The focus on consensus won the coalition four free and fair presidential elections and, by the time Bachelet left office, 20 years in the presidency.

That strategy, however, has gradually chafed. As the exasperated main character of Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* lamented with regard to human rights, "There's freedom to say anything you want as long as you don't say everything you want" (Dorfman 1991: 39). Or, as political scientist Alexander Wilde put it, Chile's public life "has had a certain muffled quality of what might be called a 'conspiracy of consensus' originating among political elites but permeating the whole society" (Wilde 1999). Just below the consensual surface, unmet economic and political demands continue to simmer, and after Bachelet's election, protests challenged that "muffling."

This does not mean political paralysis, but rather that change, when it happens, has been most often extremely slow and gradual. In the post-authoritarian era, Chilean administrations have set up the cabinet-level Servicio Nacional de la Mujer (SERNAM) to address women's issues, enacted judicial reform, pursued greater (though still limited) numbers of human rights cases (particularly after Pinochet's 1998 arrest in Great Britain) and in 2005 even amended the constitution to remove many military prerogatives and authoritarian enclaves. Labor and tax reform, infrastructure development, and health care reform have also been implemented. All these achievements represented steps in an overall process of economic development and democratization, and should be recognized as such, but they did not constitute any fundamental change to the prevailing consensus and market model. While Lagos celebrated the 2005 political reforms and noted other reforms – particularly electoral – that remained pending, he provided less assistance to marginalized groups that were still outside or on the periphery of the consensus.

Even as it celebrates its achievements, the Concertación has experienced increased competition from the right as well as internal strains. The former was evident in the results of the 1999 presidential election, in which Lagos was virtually tied with Alianza candidate Joaquín Lavín (47.96 percent to 47.51 percent, respectively). Lagos then won the runoff election (according to Chilean law, if no candidate receives a majority, then the top two face each other in a runoff election). By contrast, the previous two Concertación presidents (Patricio Aylwin and Eduardo Frei) had won solid majorities in the first round, so support for Concertación presidents was clearly fading.

The parties within the governing coalition have also squabbled, especially in terms of the Christian Democrats' dominance of the coalition. However, the nomination of Ricardo Lagos, a former leader of the PS, who was also a founding member of the center-left Party for Democracy (PPD) alleviated concerns about Christian Democrats controlling the coalition. Nonetheless, in 2009 a young Socialist deputy, Marco Enríquez-Ominami, resigned his membership of the party and announced an independent candidacy, an act that highlighted the divisions that continue to exist within the coalition. At least for now, the many predictions of the Concertación's demise have not come to pass, as for the time being the members parties see more benefit in presenting candidates together than doing so alone. The emphasis on consensus, therefore, also held within the coalition itself, albeit tenuously. However, the defeat in the 2009 elections seriously damaged the Concertación. These results are analyzed below.



## Bachelet's Efforts to Break Out of the Consensus Model

Predictions of the Concertación's division and demise have been around since the late 1990s when members of the coalition started moving in their own political directions, and its once-broad appeal began to shrink. Its original *raison d'être* – creating a united front against the dictatorship and its allies among the political right – no longer existed, and one of Lagos' primary challenges was to rejuvenate the coalition and prevent it from becoming simply a marriage of political convenience. Bachelet's background appeared to offer a fresh chance for the coalition to rebound and regroup, but her freshness also entailed some risks because she did not have a broad base of support with the dominant political elite.

Michelle Bachelet was an unknown political quantity when Ricardo Lagos appointed her minister of health in 2000. Certainly, her background was quite different from other high-profile members of the Concertación. In a country well known for its cultural conservatism, a female presidential candidate was a new phenomenon. Yet she was also a divorced, single mother of three, a member of the PS and an agnostic. She had suffered deeply as a result of the dictatorship. Her father, Air Force General Alberto Bachelet, was arrested after the 1973 coup, tortured, and then died in prison. Michelle Bachelet was detained in 1975, tortured together with her mother at the infamous Villa Grimaldi political prison, and then exiled for four years. Upon her return to Chile, she completed studies for a medical degree, worked at a children's hospital, and ultimately worked for the Ministry of Health (Insunza and Ortega 2005).

As minister, her political stature rose as she was associated with Plan AUGE, a reform of the health care system that expanded coverage and increased the role that the public health sector plays in Chilean society. In 2002, Lagos named her minister of defense, the first female to serve in that capacity in Latin America. She was, in fact, more qualified for the position than many others who have served in it, since she had taken courses at the Inter-American Defense College in the United States, and later received a master's degree from the Chilean Army War College. She worked well with the armed forces and received the respect of the military leadership. From there, her star rose quickly, and in 2006 she won the presidential runoff. She had overcome substantial odds and appeared to symbolize a revitalization of the Concertación. Despite receiving only a plurality in the first round, and receiving just over 50 percent in the runoff election, one month into her tenure she enjoyed an approval rating of 62 percent.

Bachelet's campaign had a clearly inclusionary – if not entirely populist – inclination, as she emphasized socioeconomic change from below in response to societal demands, or, what her campaign called “citizen government” (*gobierno ciudadano*). She also proposed a policy of gender parity in the distribution of government posts that would open the political system to more women and that was going to give women a new political voice in the highest spheres of government, as well as the “no second helpings” policy geared to prevent previous members of the cabinet from serving again in her administration. Bachelet emphasized gender by drawing on her own personal experiences, portraying herself as apart from the traditional elite (Thomas and Adams 2010).

The *gobierno ciudadano* called for the establishment of a direct connection between the government and key social sectors in order to enable them to become central actors in the process of policy and institutional reform, empowerment and inequality reduction. However, this approach was not entirely successful, even during the campaign, and as a result party leaders decided that to win the runoff against her opponent, Sebastián Piñera, there was a need to shift to a more traditional “*concertacionista*” emphasis on continuity with previous policies. Thus, from early on we find two Michelle Bachelets: the female, socialist leader who wants to empower women, workers and the youth to transform society from below, and the Concertación politician who leads a diverse coalition of political parties that include many followers of the market model. Very quickly, however, Bachelet had to decide who was going to govern.

Initially, cabinet and other high-level appointments were guided by the gender parity and the “no second helpings” policy. Ideologically, the members of the cabinet represented a wide array of positions ranging from a neoliberal minister of finance, Andres Velasco, to a populist minister of labor, Osvaldo Andrade. However, very soon after the election, the lack of technical and political skills of many of the new appointees forced Bachelet to abandon her initial commitments. The selection of Edmundo Pérez Yoma as minister of the interior in early 2008 clearly demonstrated that, faced with a serious political crisis, she decided to fulfill the needs of the political parties, especially the fractured PDC, and called for the presence of experienced politicians in her cabinet. From an ideological standpoint, the president consistently supported the fiscally conservative policies of Mr. Velasco, thereby signaling her commitment to the market model (see for instance, *El Mercurio.com* 2008a).

As for gender parity, the new president soon realized that maintaining it was costly from both a political standpoint and the standpoint of skill and experience. Thus, by early 2010 only 10 of the 22 ministers, and only 8 of

the 31 undersecretaries were women. The situation was no better when one looks at the number of women in charge of provincial governments, or *intendencias*: at the end of Bachelet's administration only 5 of the 15 presidentially appointed governors were women. New faces became even scarcer than female faces because many of the ministers were getting not only a second helping but also a third and a fourth (*El Mercurio.com* 2009a). Thus, many important ministers such as Francisco Vidal, Edmundo Pérez Yoma, Sergio Bitar, René Cortázar and Alvaro Erazo had served under previous presidents and more often than not were called by Bachelet to deal with imminent crises such as the Transantiago (the new and unpopular transit system in Santiago), the student strikes, and others. A study conducted by the think tank Instituto Libertad established that from the beginning of the transition to democracy until 2009, cabinet members have held office for an average of 13 years, and that Ministers Edmundo Pérez Yoma, Francisco Vidal, Marigen Hornkohl, Sergio Bitar and René Cortázar served under several other presidents as well. In fact, the study argues that Bachelet not only failed to fulfill her promise of "no second helpings," but also contributed to the ossification of the Concertación leadership and preempted political renovation. As for the provincial authorities, the *intendentes* (regional authorities in the unitary system) have been in power for an average of 15 years each, serving under at least three Concertación presidents (*Chile Hoy* 2009).

One of the most inclusionary elements of Bachelet's campaign proposal was the idea of the *gobierno ciudadano*, which was intended to empower excluded social groups and make them critical actors in the policy process. According to the government, the notion of *gobierno ciudadano* was geared toward strengthening democracy and incentivizing social participation in the construction of a better country. Its main planks were "a participative public policy process, strengthening the capacity of Chileans to form associations, the citizen's right to public information, respect for diversity and opposition to discrimination" (Gobierno de Chile n.y.). These principles, established in a presidential document and published on the government website, also emphasized that public policies are more legitimate and efficient if they are designed and executed with the involvement of the society. As a result, ministries and public services were called to create the institutional conditions, procedures and instruments geared to incorporate citizen participation in the formulation, execution and evaluation of public policies that would institutionalize the participation of the citizenry into the policy process. The presidential document also called for the formation of Consejos de Sociedad Civil in each government office, formed by representatives of relevant sectors of civil society, and also for the formation of an intra-ministerial com-

mittee of social participation geared toward incorporating issues of concern to the citizens and making sure that ministers and other government agencies were pursuing that agenda.

The president was also interested in promoting the formation of civil society organizations through the allocation of public funds and technological support to those organizations. In fact, in her first official speech to the nation in May 2006 Bachelet called for the development of a legal framework intended support civil society organizations. Specifically, Bachelet asked congress to approve a new law of associations and social participation in public policies.

Why did President Bachelet abandon the politics of empowerment that were crucial to achieving socioeconomic reform and the satisfaction of popular demands? The students movement, also called the “Revolution of the Penguins” (based on the appearance of the students’ uniforms), taught Bachelet a clear lesson soon after she was elected: to satisfy the demands of the students, and those of other groups in the future, she had to radically reform the economic system, alter the fiscally conservative policies of her predecessors, and devote lots of resources to education and other social programs. Thus, by the end of 2006, calls for empowerment disappeared from her speeches, and Minister of Labor Osvaldo Andrade remained for a while the sole figure that supported working-class demands and other social movements. Inclusion, therefore, remained a rhetorical device, and never entered into policy.

Once elected, President Bachelet exhorted her cabinet to spend the first 100 days enacting the “Thirty-Six Measures,” a list of goals addressing a wide variety of issues. Some were accomplished quickly, such as a presidential decree granting free health care to the needy elderly. Others, like pension and education reform and changing the electoral system, proved far thornier. Faced with serious policy issues and promises of and resistance to reform, Bachelet decided that instead of risking conflict over the issues and the reforms, she would seek refuge in the establishment of presidential commissions appointed to study key problems and provide the guidelines for reform bills. As her presidency progressed, she created ad hoc commissions to study conflictive issues, including pension, education and electoral reform among others. While on one hand the commissions generated plenty of dialogue, the discussions took place within a preselected group, and some (though not all) simply failed to provide concrete solutions for policy disputes, either perpetuating or fueling more conflict. Thus, we argue that commissions as well as the proposals they generate have largely failed to solve problems and have been at the core of new conflicts. In fact, very few commissions actually saw their efforts manifest in legislation. Certainly, the

most important outcome of these commissions (specifically, the Marcel Commission) was pension reform, which succeeded in proposing a workable approach to reforming the privately administered pension system. In fact, some of the commission's proposals were soon turned into a bill that added a public pillar to the existing private pension program. The success of this commission was probably due to the high fiscal cost of doing nothing and the ability of the government to compromise with the opposition regarding proposals that would have impinged on the profits of the private pension fund administrator, such as the idea of creating a state insurer (Borzutzky 2008).

Despite the early populist rhetoric, the Bachelet administration's goals, however, were clearly set in the economic programs of past administrations. Her 2005 government program noted that the country needed to continue on the "path of economic development" that included "seriousness" (*seriedad*) and budgetary equilibrium (*equilibrio presupuestario*) while not ignoring the needy (*Programa de gobierno* n.y.). Attempting to simultaneously maintain sound fiscal policies and fulfilling her campaign promises created only more conflicts because eventually the president had to rely more and more on her minister of finance, who was more interested in the application of fiscal restraint than in the expansion of costly social policies. In modern Chile, the most important economic cabinet position is held by the finance minister. Bachelet selected Andrés Velasco, an economist with impeccable academic and market credentials including a teaching appointment at Harvard's Kennedy School. Velasco's appointment clearly signaled the importance of maintaining sound fiscal and monetary policies and the market approach. But not all the members of her cabinet were equally committed to the market. Others, like the vocal former labor minister Andrade were supportive of socioeconomic reforms, including labor market and tax reform. That generated conflict, confusion, and the appearance of a disorganized and inefficient administration, as well as a pattern of broken promises on the part of Bachelet.

## Institutions, Elections and Popularity

The emphasis on consensus and the institutional structure combined to produce a unique set of political results. Given the binomial system, for example, in the 2005 legislative elections that set the stage for Bachelet's presidency the Alianza won 38 percent of the vote, but 45 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, while the Concertación gained the same percentage for each (55.7 percent and 55 percent, respectively). In the Senate, both coalitions gained more seats than votes at the expense of smaller

parties, but the Alianza did better (38.7 percent of votes and 45 percent of seats versus 51.8 percent of votes and 54 percent of seats).<sup>4</sup> Passing legislation was thus more challenging for Bachelet than it would be in political systems utilizing first-past-the-post or proportional representation voting, either of which would have given the Concertación more seats vis-à-vis the Alianza. As more voters began to question the Concertación, an electoral system tilted in favor of the right made Bachelet's efforts at reform all the more difficult. She had to satisfy the right in order to pass legislation.

The binomial system has the additional effect of making candidate selection even more an elite affair. The leaders of the two main political coalitions make complex strategic choices about which candidates should be nominated in given districts in order to optimize the number of seats. Those decisions are made without public debate and by only a handful of party leaders, widening the gulf between the parties and the electorate, while sustaining the existing coalitions. As she did in a number of other policy areas, Bachelet appointed a commission to study electoral reform, and in 2009 did successfully pass a bill that would include a number of electoral reforms such as voluntary voting and automatic voting registration, as well as financing regulations for campaigns and political parties, and limits in the capacity of members of the administration to intervene in political campaigns. The effects of this new law will be seen in the 2013 presidential election (*El Mercurio.com* 2009c; Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile 2009).

Bachelet also inherited substantive problems from past administrations. The first serious crisis in her presidency came in April 2006, a mere three months after her inauguration, when secondary students took to the streets and took over schools to protest education costs and the structure of the educational system; although Bachelet had not created the problem, her reaction was widely deemed slow and insufficient. The protests contributed to the first drop of the president's approval rating and prompted her first cabinet reshuffling, in July, which in turn undid the gender balance Bachelet had constructed only four months prior. These changes signaled the abandonment of Bachelet's policy of *gobierno ciudadano* as the administration began to rely more and more on traditional party operators who were not interested in the inclusionary approach.

Thus, the protests highlight both the Concertación's failure to bring youth into the elite political consensus and the desire of its political leaders to keep the older generation of politicians in control. What became clear was that Chilean youth are more disaffected, less likely to register and vote than

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4 For example, the Juntos Podemos Más coalition, which includes the Communist Party, won 7.5 percent of the total vote in the Chamber of Deputies and 6 percent in the Senate, but won no seats.

their elders, and by virtue of their age have little or no personal connection to the history that produced the consensual emphasis in the first place. They are less interested in the reasons for democratic breakdown and later re-democratization, and consequently operate outside the parameters of current Chilean political discourse. For them, consensus means ignoring the issues they believe are most important (Lagos 2007: 174).

Bachelet enjoyed only a brief respite from protests. In September 2006, copper miners went on strike for better wages. Given the high price and global demand for copper, which remains largely under state control, the Bachelet administration at that time benefited from considerable state resources, but was committed to maintaining a budget surplus to avoid future deficits and to reducing the value of the peso in case copper prices fell in the future. Chile is the world's largest supplier of copper, and the price reached an all-time high of 4.07 USD per pound in July 2008, leading to an increase in export earnings of over 70 percent from 2005 (*El Mercurio.com* 2008b; *El Mercurio.com* 2008c). That strategy came under fire from many supporters who felt that they were not benefiting from the copper windfall. From their perspective, the state should have committed to greater social spending when copper revenues increased. Fiscal prudence, therefore, forged in compromises within the Concertación and supported by the right, embodied high-level political consensus, but the seeds of dissent were sown.

Such economic decisions were rendered more problematic by the fact that economic growth slowed in 2006 to just over 4 percent, after two consecutive years at approximately 6 percent. While economic growth in 2007 increased to 5.1 percent, this was still lower than during the final years of the Lagos administration, and at the same time, inflation increased to 7.8 percent, a 5 percent increase from 2006 (Gobierno de Chile 2008: 14). The slower growth also brought criticism from the right, which argued that especially given copper demand the Chilean economy should be growing much more quickly. Bachelet's approval rating fell below 50 percent for the first time in January 2007, and continued to slide. By the end of 2007, only 38.8 percent approved of Bachelet's performance, while only 31.1 percent approved of the administration's economic management. However, it is interesting to note that according to the same poll, only 19.9 percent approved of the opposition's performance.<sup>5</sup>

Then in February 2007 the new integrated public transportation system in the capital, called "Transantiago," was unveiled and immediately broke down. Unable to find scarce buses, Santiago residents were stranded or

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5 Encuesta CEP N° 56, Estudio Nacional de Opinión Pública N° 27 Tercera Serie, Noviembre-Diciembre 2007.



forced to walk. The metro was overloaded and taxis were difficult to locate, for those who could afford them. The resulting protests prompted Bachelet's second cabinet change – after only a year in office – as she fired and replaced four ministers. The fiasco also prompted another commission – this time in the Chamber of Deputies – that laid blame at the feet of both the Lagos and Bachelet administrations (in addition to the private firms responsible for providing sufficient bus service). That Transantiago had failed was perhaps one of the rare issues about which Chileans of all political stripes could agree. It also placed particular strain on the Concertación, since the system has continuously required new infusions of money to keep it functioning. As Bachelet argued in an interview, “I would like to erase February 10 [the day Transantiago was launched] from the calendar” (*El Mercurio.com* 2008d).

Santiago was rocked by protests again in September 2007, when Chile's largest union, the United Organization of Workers (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Chile – CUT), led tens of thousands to the streets to condemn inequality and the government's failure to address it. Some members of Bachelet's own Socialist Party participated, which highlighted her inability to appease even her own supporters. Further, in November 2008 public workers in the capital went on strike for four days, demanding a wage increase. This affected many key services, such as hospitals, courts and schools. The strike ended when the legislature approved a 10 percent wage increase. Finally, quick government action had resolved a crisis.

Thus, President Bachelet took office promising inclusionary change but found it difficult to enact. By late 2007 her approval ratings had fallen precipitously, into the mid-to-high 30s, among the lowest in the region, slightly increasing until the global economic crisis that began in September 2008. Interestingly, her approval ratings then rose again, in large part because Chile did not suffer as much economically as the rest of the region. However, the Concertación showed more signs of wear, as the candidacy of Eduardo Frei was criticized for its lack of energy, and the high-profile rise of Marco Enríquez-Ominami embarrassed the coalition. On the other hand, the president lost a large amount of congressional support and saw a weakened coalition during her term in office. Senators Alejandro Navarro (an ex-member of the PS), Carlos Ominami (also ex-PS) and Roberto Muñoz Barra (ex-PPD), in addition to Enríquez-Ominami (ex-PS, as well), left their parties, thus eroding the coalition's power in congress. In total, Bachelet lost 25 percent of the senators and 12 percent of the deputies. Further, three of the presidential candidates were former members of the Concertación, thus highlighting coalitional splits (*El Mercurio.com* 2009a).



What is remarkable is that Bachelet's popularity increased in 2009 yet the problems for the Concertación grew at the same time. The 2009 global recession had interesting political and economic effects in Chile. While the economy certainly suffered due to the dramatic reduction in the price of copper, the impact of the recession could be ameliorated because of the country's conservative fiscal management. According to Velasco, Chilean banks did not experience the liquidity crisis affecting the US and other international banks due to the strict banking regulations that exist in the country (*El Mercurio.com* 2008e). Most importantly, on 1 January 2009, the president announced a 4 billion USD stimulus package that included a combination of new funds to be used for road and housing construction, tax reductions and a special bonus for low-income families. The cost of the plan amounted to 2.8 percent of GDP and was financed with the monies saved from the copper bonanza of the previous years (Gobierno de Chile 2009).

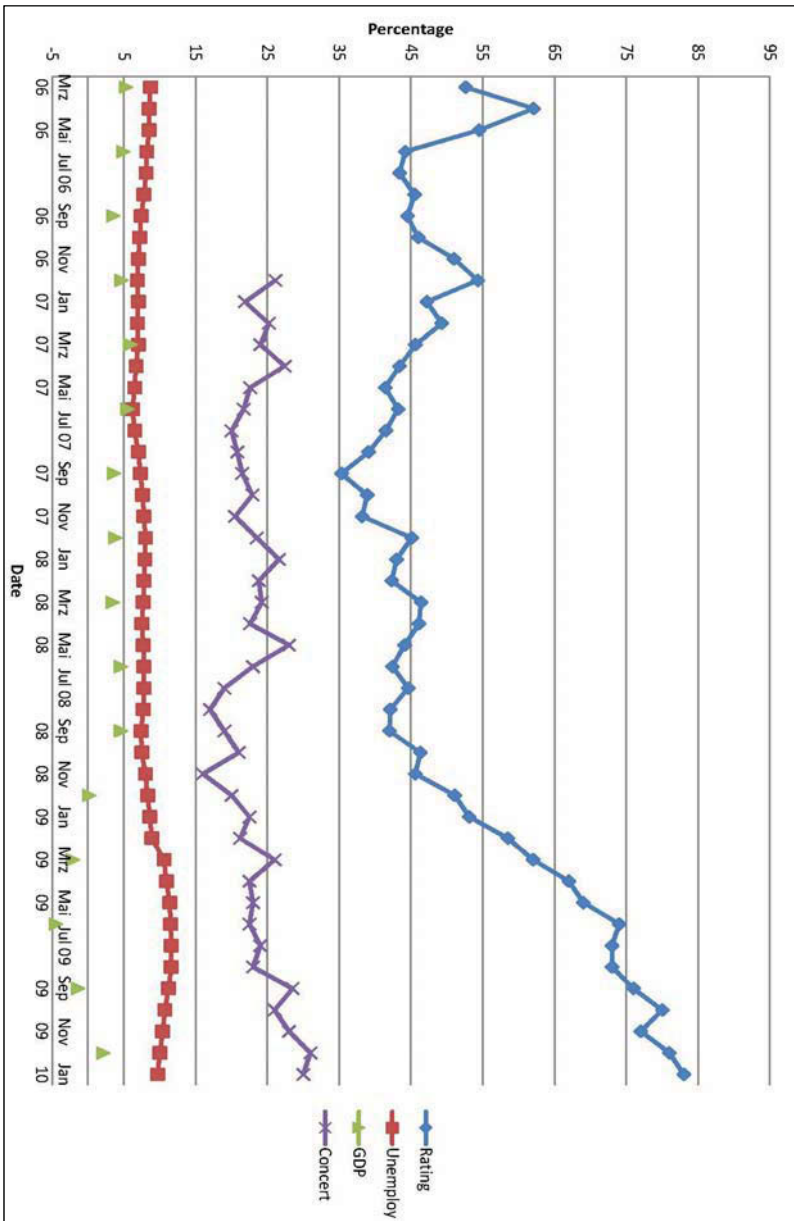
As a result, in the midst of the recession the president's popularity began to increase, reaching 67 percent in April of 2009.<sup>6</sup> By September of 2009, her popularity had increased to 72 percent and by the time of the December elections her popularity had reached 80 percent, and with that she became the most popular president of the last 20 years. She was also selected as the most admired political personality in Chile with 78 percent of those polled arguing that she had a very positive image. Simultaneously, Minister Velasco became the second-most valuable political personality, enjoying 54 percent support, with 69 percent of those polled approving of the economic management of the government. In the same poll, only 38 percent of those polled approved of the Concertación coalition, while 30 percent approved of the opposition Alianza coalition (*El Mercurio.com* 2009d).

What the polls also show is that there was a tremendous amount of personal support for the president, but not for her government. It is clear that support for President Bachelet was linked to the perception that Minister Velasco managed the economic crisis efficiently as indicated by the fact that her popularity began to increase after the government responses to the crisis were implemented (*Encuesta CERC* 2009). What is paradoxical is that while the president's popularity increased, her government was criticized for the manner in which it had managed existing problems aside from the economy.

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6 Data taken from Adimark 2009.

Figure 1: Approval and Economic Indicators, 2006–2010



Source: Adimark; Instituto Nacional de Estadística.

For instance, 84 percent of those polled rejected the administration's approach to crime, while 65 percent criticized the government because of corruption, 55 percent criticized the management of health, and 53 percent criticized the management of education. However, neither the government's lack of response to a massive teacher strike in late 2009 that lasted 46 days and left over a 1.5 million children out of school, nor the lack of attention to the protests and violence carried out by indigenous Mapuche movements seemed to affect her popularity, either (*El Mercurio.com* 2009e).

Data also indicate a decline in support for political parties. When those polled are asked to assign a grade from 1 to 7 – 7 being the highest score (which is how Chilean schoolchildren are graded) – to the performance of the parties, the PS received only a 3.4 and the opposition Alianza a 3.9. The only policy to receive a passing grade was pension reform, which earned a 4.6, while all the others were not approved by the respondents (*El Mercurio.com* 2009a).

Patricio Navia explains the delinking between the popularity of the president and the lack of popularity of the government and the coalition in terms of what he calls “cariñocracia” (“love-ocracy”), or, love for Bachelet (Navia n.y.). This love, in turn, was the result of the president's ability to be seen not as head of government but as head of state, one who leaves solving the everyday problems of the country to others while she spends time in international settings speaking about great national projects. According to Navia, this model allows Bachelet to avoid the wear and tear caused by being involved in issues – a lesson she learned after the dual debacles produced by the Revolution of the Penguins and the Transantiago. Nonetheless, Bachelet's success came at a price: it deprived her of a capacity to influence the parties within the coalition and to sustain a congressional majority. For others scholars, there is nothing new about this “distant” approach to politics, as both former presidents Frei and Lagos opted for the same strategy when confronted with labor strikes or other problems. As Navia argues, Bachelet's model is based on the idea that the ministers are responsible for the problems affecting their areas, while she deals only with foreign relations and a few other issues. Finally, Navia notes that the strategy has been successful from the standpoint of public opinion but not from the standpoint of carrying out substantial reforms, a goal that the president seemed to have abandoned very early in her administration (*El Mercurio.com* 2009e).

From our standpoint, the delinking between Bachelet's popularity and the lack of support for either the coalition's parties or her government can be explained as a result of the institutional structure and her ability to walk the fine line between elite consensus and the rhetoric of popular inclusion. To the extent that she was able to devolve the solution of problems and the

development of policy proposals to these large commissions formed by representatives of different parties, organizations, and ideologies that at the end of the day produce voluminous reports and few real or implementable solutions, the president separated herself from addressing and solving the problems affecting society and the country. This strategy succeeded in sheltering the president from the political fray, and allowed her to delay problem-solving. As a result, little or nothing was accomplished in terms of reforms that could alienate one sector of society or another, guaranteeing popular success and support for the president but also strong criticism of her government, which at the end of her term was seen as incompetent and corrupt. This strategy was so successful that in October of 2009 Bachelet proposed the institutionalization of these presidential commissions (*Comunidad Andina* 2009).

This process of delinking the president from the parties and the problems of the country became clear in the 2009 electoral process and the results of the election. First, the president distanced herself from the Concertación's decision to avoid internal primaries and simply hand the nomination to Eduardo Frei. Second, to the extent that this decision led to the eventual division of the coalition – as Marco Enríquez-Ominami decided to challenge Frei and eventually divide the coalition – the president remained largely silent. Frei's lackluster performance and Enríquez Ominami's charismatic appeal secured the success of opposition candidate Sebastian Piñera, who obtained 44.5 percent of the votes against Frei's 29.6 percent and Enríquez-Ominami's 20.1 percent in the December 2009 elections. In the constitutionally mandated election runoff of January 2010, Sebastián Piñera beat former president Eduardo Frei by a 51.6:48.4 percent margin, ending 20 consecutive years of Concertación governments. Once again the president appeared to have been untouched by the process as a poll conducted in February 2010 showed Bachelet's popularity increasing to 83 percent. The poll also showed that according to the population the president excelled in leadership, credibility and the ability to overcome the economic crisis (*The Santiago Times* 2010).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to show the unique transformation of Michelle Bachelet's presidency within the context of institutional constraints. It is clear that her selection as the Concertación candidate reflected the need for renewal that a coalition that had been in power for 16 years badly needed. She inherited a coalition and an elite policy consensus that were starting to show wear. In order to revive the coalition and appeal to

those groups that had been left out of the existing consensus, candidate Bachelet developed a more inclusive platform that called for the inclusion of women, and popular organizations in the policy process. This kind of approach was certainly not appealing to the political parties and their leaders, who distrusted the uncontrolled inclusion of new political actors.

Once elected, President Bachelet indicated her preference for this type of approach under the banner of the *gobierno ciudadano*. However, full pursuance endangered the existing consensual political model and her inclinations toward *gobierno ciudadano* were quickly undermined by the Revolution of the Penguins. From that point on, the president emphasized the traditional policy of consensus based on delegating the solving of critical socioeconomic problems to special commissions. What was unique about these commissions was their very large size, the inclusion of all sorts of groups and ideologies in the commission, and a lengthy discussion period that culminated in a voluminous report that could provide only some general guidelines to those in charge of drafting and approving bills in congress. Although the commissions could not solve any of the existing problems, they contributed to the appearance of a president who was willing to listen and to include everyone in the solution of the problems. The success of this approach is clear when one examines the unprecedented popular support for the president. Their failure is also clear when one examines the declining support for the coalition and the poor rating that the government receives when the people look at the government's ability to solve critical social problems in education, crime, or health.

In brief, what this case study illustrates is that in the context of a divided government and an executive with limited powers that is the product of a multiparty coalition, the president's chances of success and popularity increase if he or she can separate himself/herself from the day-to-day management of the government and controversial policies and concentrate of the functions of a head of state. We also learn that the president's popularity is not transferred to the government coalition because the political parties that form that coalition are seen as responsible for the unsatisfied expectations of the electorate.

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## El Gobierno de Michelle Bachelet: Las paradojas de la presidencia en Chile

**Resumen:** El propósito de este artículo es analizar las contradicciones que se dieron durante la Presidencia de Michelle Bachelet. El artículo se enfoca en la naturaleza paradójica del poder presidencial, los límites que la constitución Chilena impone sobre el poder ejecutivo, y presenta un análisis de có-

mo esos límites afectaron al gobierno de la presidenta Bachelet. La Presidenta se vio, desde un principio, en la necesidad de escoger entre promover políticas de inclusión o mantener el consenso entre las elites. Dadas las limitaciones institucionales y políticas, la retórica de inclusión no se transformó en una realidad y ella escogió una política tradicional de consenso que favoreció a las elites. Desde nuestro punto de vista, el énfasis en lograr un consenso que favorecía a las elites produjo resultados contradictorios ya que, por un lado, sostuvo la imagen personal de Bachelet como líder nacional, pero, por el otro, limitó su capacidad para obtener la aprobación de legislación que produjera cambios efectivos. En última instancia, la Concertación, y no la Presidenta, fue vista como responsable por la falta de acción.

**Palabras clave:** Chile, Bachelet, Política, Presidente, Poder Presidencial