Healing History’s Wounds:
Michelle Bachelet, the Narrowing of Chilean Political Subculture, and Lessons for Latin America
Michael Chaitkin
PWR 2-2: Cross-Cultural Rhetoric

Woman, atheist, socialist, mother, single, former exile, traitor’s daughter: Michelle Bachelet. On January 15, 2006, Chileans elected their first female president. In a country still reeling from Augusto Pinochet’s tyrannical regime, the election of a woman, not to mention someone directly victimized by Pinochet’s policies, represents an important step for national healing. On one hand, Bachelet faced an older, conservative generation collectively stigmatized by its association with Pinochet and clinging to the value of order, Christianity, patronage, and state control. Conversely, to energize her own base, Bachelet appealed to younger, more progressive voters of whom many were Pinochet’s victims. Media coverage of Chile’s presidential election and Michelle Bachelet’s website reveal a leader who narrows the gap between two post-Pinochet political subcultures with her tempered populism and moving personal history; while her victory will be hollow if she fails to deliver on her campaign promises, Bachelet’s rhetorical approach models how other Latin American leaders can lead their constituents from the depths of domestic trauma.

Defining Political Subculture

Before considering Bachelet’s rhetorical strategies, the concept of political subculture must be defined and applied to Chile. The American Heritage Dictionary defines ‘subculture’ as “A cultural subgroup differentiated by status, ethnic background, residence, religion, or other factors that functionally unify the group and act collectively on each member.”1 For the purposes of this analysis, ‘political subculture’ refers to a subculture whose collective identity

1 American Heritage Dictionary
motivates a particular set of political preferences. My argument treats two distinct political subcultures, easily categorized as the political left and right, respectively. The left comprises Bachelet’s political base. They are young, progressive, secular, typically of the lower- and middle-classes, and identify strongly with those persecuted by Pinochet’s regime. In fact, a substantial proportion of them are former victims or children of victims. Conversely, the right constitutes Bachelet’s political opposition. They are older, conservative, devoutly Catholic, wealthy, and identify strongly with—either as former associates or descendents thereof—the remnants of the regime. The right constantly combats the stigma of having been party to Pinochet’s reign. This sub-cultural divide reflects a rift in perceptions of the Pinochet era, and mirrors the bisected polities in many other Latin American democracies.

Chile’s neighbors can empathize with the problem of corrupt, oppressive states and deeply divided societies left in their wakes. In Peru and Ecuador, for instance, new leaders reallocate political resources to indicting deposed presidents rather than confronting their myriad domestic problems. Much like Chile, these nations need to transcend the desire for retribution and focus on substantive policy. They face similarly polarized electorates with differing perceptions of how to recover from political disaster. After explicating Bachelet’s rhetoric and projecting its impact on Chile, I will comment on how her strategies might facilitate such recovery throughout Latin America.

Pragmatic Campaigning

Bachelet galvanized her base by promising them precisely what they want. In her proposed Government Program, Bachelet proclaimed on the cover page, “Estoy Contigo.”

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2 “Programa de Gobierno,” p. 1; “Estoy Contigo” means “I am with you”
Hungry for leadership connected to the people, Chilean voters appreciated a brochure featuring a picture of the candidate surrounded by ordinary women and children. Her website\(^3\) emphasized the social aspects of her agenda. It offered ample information about Bachelet’s goals and strategies for employment, social security, education, equality, and healthcare, the issues of greatest concern to her strongest supporters. The “Plan 100 Días”\(^4\) epitomized social democracy. Each section addressed a specific realm of domestic policy, and each clause succinctly described a desired policy and its intended result. For example, policy twenty-six, within the section on globalization, would require and pay for anyone preparing to teach English to spend a semester studying in an English-speaking country.\(^5\) This policy, concisely articulated and aimed at improving education, was just one of many developed specifically to court leftist voters.

Popular slogans and simple messages endeared Bachelet to her electoral base. As Larry Rohter argues, Bachelet “promised ‘change with continuity’ and showcased her warmth and affinity with ordinary people.”\(^6\) As a special gesture to Chilean woman, Bachelet always referred to the women and men of Chile, contrary to the political and linguistic custom of listing men first.\(^7\) The motto, ‘change with continuity,’ was paradoxical, yet it spoke precisely to what Chilean voters wanted from their new president. A reasonable interpretation would be a change of president with continuity of policy. Despite her unique qualities, Bachelet hailed from the incumbent coalition, Concertación, which has ruled the country since Pinochet fell from power. She conceded the inevitable differences between any two administrations, but guaranteed that the core agenda of development and liberalization that has been a boon for Chile for fifteen years

\(^3\) Bachelet Campaign Website  
\(^4\) Ibid.  
\(^5\) Ibid.  
\(^6\) Rohter 16 January 2006 (1)  
\(^7\) Polgreen and Rogter 22 January 2006
will remain intact. For all the emphasis Western media puts on Ms. Bachelet’s gender and beliefs, scholars perceive the results differently. Dr. Ivan Jaksic, a Chilean scholar of Latin American history and politics and director of Stanford University’s overseas program in Santiago, explains, “Ultimately, Chileans voted for continuity above all else.” Her personal qualities played an important role, Dr. Jaksic continues, “but [Bachelet won] also because she is at the head of that successful coalition.”

Bachelet attracted disenfranchised peasants and women with messages targeted directly at them. Concurrently, repeated pledges of continuity reassured her centrist allies that she bears no radical agenda.

By moderating her populist message, Bachelet bridged the sub-cultural gap in Chilean politics. In fact, her approach conformed to a general strategy observed by Francisco Panizza of the London School of Economics. He concludes, “left-of-centre parties are right in accepting that there is little room in the region for an anti-systemic model and that instead the emphasis should be placed on making states, markets and democracy work better to secure development, address social demands and attack the root causes of discrimination and inequality.” In other words, coalitions like Concertación win elections because they address problems rather than promote ideas. Since “the new politics is more pragmatic and less ideological,” Bachelet could present her position to opposition voters without being labeled a radical leftist. The de-radicalization of leftist movements in Latin America facilitated dialogue between Bachelet and the political right.

Bachelet harnessed historical leaders’ images to buttress her moderated populist message. The opening of her “Letter to the Chilean People” was reminiscent of one of Latin America’s

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8 Jaksic
9 Panizza 2005, p. 716
10 Ibid., p. 724
most beloved female leaders: Eva Perón. Bachelet introduced herself to the nation as an ordinary woman: “I was not raised for power, nor did I do anything to obtain it,”\textsuperscript{11} she wrote. Chileans reading the brochure recalled Evita’s famous speech on the balcony of the Casa Rosita during which she proclaimed that she was just a simple girl no better than the Argentines she served. A voter remembered how many strides Evita made for Argentine women and workers and hopes for similar progress under Bachelet’s leadership. The president-elect also channeled the persona of America’s most important social democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt. A clear allusion to the first hundred days of Roosevelt’s first term, during which Congress adopted the core New Deal legislation, Ms. Bachelet’s 100 Days Plan aimed to reinvigorate social policy in Chile. Much as the New Deal is accredited with transforming the United States into the world’s premier economic power, Bachelet expected her constituents to admire her 100 Days Plan for its same transformative power. The plan’s thirty-six clauses enumerated policy objectives to make Chile more efficient, socially conscious, and competitive.\textsuperscript{12} Given where the United States stands today, Chileans could not help but emulate monumental American social policies. An allusion to Perón animated Bachelet’s base, while association with FDR made her social agenda palatable to the opposing subculture.

\textbf{Defeating Piñera and Defeating Pinochet}

Unlike her opposition, Bachelet capitalized on shifts in electorate preferences by speaking about government performance rather than ideology. According to Fernando Henrique Cardoso of the Inter-American Dialogue, Bachelet and Sebastian Piñera, the opposition candidate, actually “share, in spite of all, a consensus when it comes to the basics of the social

\textsuperscript{11} “Programa de Gobierno”, p. 3
\textsuperscript{12} Bachelet Campaign Website
and economic ‘model’ set up by the three Concertación administrations.”¹³ That could explain why Piñera took that consensus for granted and decided to emphasize ideology. Rohter observes that Piñera counted on support from the Christian Democrats, but failed to lure them away from Concertación “despite his emphasis on moral and religious values.”¹⁴ Clearly, the values that dominate our political discourse meant far less in Chile, since the Christian Democrats remained allied with the other Concertación parties and Mr. Piñera lost the election. Dr. Jaksic suggests a general change in values, especially since “the population is overwhelmingly young…People…are focused on performance.”¹⁵ In contrast to Piñera, Bachelet focused on policy issues, at least in the abstract, pledging to “do more to tackle inequality” between men and women, rich and poor, and young and old.¹⁶ Additionally, she promised “more open government when she takes office on March 11th,”¹⁷ something from which every Chilean would benefit. By recognizing and speaking to emerging preferences among Chilean voters, Bachelet garnered enough support from beyond her expected political base to win the presidency.

Bachelet’s experience fortified her image as the right person to lead Chile into a new era. Isabel Vincent notes, “Few dispute Bachelet’s political credentials.”¹⁸ Not only was she a successful physician, but Bachelet has also headed the Ministries of Health and Defense under previous Concertación administrations. Her role in previous governments allows her to take credit for Concertación’s successes. As she told voters, “Today, thanks to the efforts of the three Concertación governments, we Chileans can look to the sky with our feet rooted to the ground. We know that development with justice and peace with liberty are not just empty words, but

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¹³ Inter-American Dialogue January 2006, p. 6
¹⁴ Rohter 16 January 2006 (2)
¹⁵ Jaksic
¹⁶ The Economist 19 January 2006
¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Vincent 2006
goals we can achieve. They only depend on us learning how to work together.”19 As a member of the government she paved the way to development, justice, peace, and liberty. As a presidential candidate, she rallied her people to collaborate to complete the journey. By acknowledging the need for cooperation, Bachelet exemplifies how to surmount the divide wreaked by Pinochet.

In her coming term, Bachelet’s personal history will propel Chilean politics past the current sub-cultural schism. La Nación, a Santiago-based newspaper, states, “Bachelet’s life runs parallel to the course of our history.”20 Bachelet was imprisoned and tortured by Pinochet’s forces after the coup d’état that deposed Salvador Allende in 1973. Her father, an air force general and supporter of Allende, died in prison, but the new regime allowed Bachelet and her mother to flee to Europe in 1975.21 Since 1990, when Pinochet left power, deep-seeded trauma and resentment have embroiled Chilean politics. Bachelet’s charisma stems from her desire not for revenge, but for reconciliation. She advocates a new paradigm of healing largely foreign to a populace deeply divided in its perception of the Pinochet era. Rightist parties defend their previous associations with the regime as inescapable political realities, while leftists abhor such justifications. More recently, however, conservative parties have sought to escape the stigma of association with Pinochet, and Bachelet is offering them a helping hand. World famous Chilean novelist Isabel Allende explains, “‘She doesn’t want to torture her torturers or assassinate the assassins of her father.’”22 She only wants to help her people fulfill their potential, a goal more unifying than any message of revenge or retribution.

19 “Programa de Gobierno,” p. 3
20 BBC News 16 January 2006
21 Vincent 2006
22 Ibid.
By healing perpetrators and victims together, Bachelet leads all Chileans out of the post-Pinochet darkness. “The symbolism,” Rohter asserts, “of her leadership of the institution that had killed her father appealed greatly to Chileans trying to reconcile with their bitter past.” With distrust of the military rampant throughout Chilean civil society, he further explains, Bachelet “was better prepared than her rivals to heal her society and reconcile the Chilean military with the victims of its rule.” Bachelet obliquely refers to the task when she says, “We are autonomous, free, responsible, and now without protective parents who tell us what we should think, do, or dream.” She speaks to the maturation of her generation and of Chilean democracy, but also to the potential of a society free from a controlling state.

This message, above all, draws many of Chile’s business and political elites to Bachelet’s side. If there is one shortcoming of Chile’s progress since 1990, it is the lingering face of Pinochet. Chileans of all classes, and especially those interested in foreign investment and trade relationships, lament how people outside Chile perceive their country. Capable of navigating her country past this post-Pinochet lethargy, Bachelet emerged the top candidate for those whose interests depend on how other states perceive Chile. After all, “many Chileans find it galling that their country is known abroad almost exclusively for General Pinochet, rather than for its booming economy.” Other misperceptions of Chile are ubiquitous in the Western media. For instance, Rohter’s column the day after the election characterized Chile as a “male-dominated, prosperous and deeply religious nation.” When I asked him, “Do you think the existing political values or norms in Chile were compatible with a female, atheist, single mother?” Dr.

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23 Rohter 16 January 2006 (1)  
24 Polgreen and Rohter 22 January 2006  
25 “Programa de Gobierno,” p. 3  
26 Polgreen and Rohter 22 January 2006  
27 Rohter 16 January 2006 (1)
Jaksic replied, “One has to question the perception” that Chilean preferences were previously so monolithic. Purging Pinochet from Chile’s image is a powerful message for Bachelet, one around which both subcultures will rally.

**Making Messages Meaningful**

To legitimate the hype surrounding her election, Bachelet will have to meet growing expectations. Though she will not take office until March 11, her pending administration already elicits anticipation by scholars and journalists of a new era for Chile. *La Nación*, a local newspaper, boasted, “Bachelet’s arrival at La Moneda Palace is a civic achievement that will have a huge impact on our social and cultural development.” I contend that her arrival in La Moneda Palace better represents the culmination of social and cultural development fueled by her predecessors. If she wants to further impact Chile’s development, she will have to transcend her messages and persona and lead effectively. As *The Economist* succinctly argues, “Her personal warmth has won her many friends. Whether her election will indeed presage further change in Chile’s democracy, and more women in politics, depends on how effectively she governs.” Confident and productive leadership will have to supplant Bachelet’s powerful campaign appeals.

Regardless of Bachelet’s presidential legacy, her paradigm of national healing offers lessons to other Latin American leaders about how to lead in the wake of domestic turmoil. The most salient message Bachelet transmits is her refusal to pursue retribution for the past. Her focus on the future and how to build a new Chile trump any discussion of punishing the

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28 Jaksic  
29 BBC News 16 January 2006  
30 The Economist 19 January 2006
perpetrators of the Pinochet regime. Leaders in countries like Peru and Ecuador should similarly look past historical trauma and expedite efforts toward development, liberalization, and modernity. They too often fixate on the symbolic importance of exacting justice on political criminals. Instead, they should realize, as Bachelet does, the symbolic power of transcending history. If Peruvians ceased their costly efforts to extradite ex-President Fujimori, they could prioritize education and land reform. If Ecuador’s Congress spent its time legislating on gender equality and workplace safety rather than trying to track down deposed leader Gutiérrez and his cronies, they could make real social progress. If Latin Americans struggling to recover from abusive regimes heeded Bachelet’s call for collaboration and reconciliation, the whole region might finally confront its more pressing matters that cause social unrest, economic instability, and frequent political upheaval.

Conclusion

A century from now, scholars might identify Michelle Bachelet’s election as a watershed in Latin American history. Her tempered populist agenda, combined with a pragmatic appeal to her opposition and an emotional message for all Chileans, Bachelet seized popular support and could usher in a new era for her country. Her campaign rhetoric promised progressive and practical solutions to Chile’s social inequality. Her personal history resonates with all Chileans struggling to cope with their checkered past. Her message of healing and hope galvanized an electorate and began an important process of reconciliation between two distinct and embittered subcultures. History will withhold judgment for some time, but Bachelet already enhances her country’s identity and exemplifies an innovate approach to narrowing sub-cultural divides.
Works Cited


