



Language

The mass protests that erupted across Chile in October 2019, triggered by high school students refusing to pay higher fares on the Santiago metro, evolved into the most extensive and important mass mobilization since the overthrow of the Pinochet dictatorship. The movement surprised outside observers as Chile had seemed to be (especially within a Latin American context) a stable parliamentary democracy as well as economically prosperous. The last major waves of protest had occurred in 2006 and 2011, when high school and later university students rebelled (with major popular support) against privatization and high fees, demanding free high quality education for all. [These student protests are covered in [Vol. 2. H. 'Protests Against Government'](#) [1], [H.1.a. Chile 2011-12](#) [2]].

Nevertheless, as the protesters themselves, as well as journalists and commentators, soon made clear, the revival of parliamentary democracy had not swept away all of Pinochet's legacy, or the continuing impact of key parts of his 1980 Constitution. At a political level the constitution still vested considerable powers in the presidency and also promoted the centralization of control in Santiago. But the most immediate cause of the protests was Pinochet's social and economic legacy: the neo-liberal ideology enshrined within the constitution, which deliberately minimized the role of the state in favour of freedom for business. For example, an earlier attempt to strengthen the Consumer Protection Agency by allowing companies to be fined was ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Protection Tribunal. The protesters therefore rejected a system in which national prosperity overwhelmingly favoured the rich.

The coalition of social groups that joined in the protests included students, workers, women, the poor and indigenous peoples, as well as ideological leftists and feminists. Issues raised early during the demonstrations included high transport costs, the lack of proper old age pensions, and inadequate health care: the privatization of education, pension provision and health care was written into the Pinochet constitution. The protests were predominantly peaceful marches and rallies, though a minority engaged in serious rioting which was often highlighted by the media. The extreme violence used by the police, which led to at least 30 deaths and hundreds of injuries after the first month of protests, created a new source of anger.

The demonstrators also opposed many aspects of the political system: not only the ruling Conservative government, but the behaviour of many other political parties, which had led to growing political corruption since 2000. Scandals included business interests influencing policy through large donations to parties. Civil society bodies, including unions, with support from some political parties, sought to coordinate diverse demands into a unified policy. The result was pressure for a referendum to authorize the creation of a new constitution. This procedural approach, which the government decided it would be prudent to accept, was referred to the parliament, which formally agreed on 15 November 2019 to hold a referendum in April 2020 on whether to change the constitution. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic subsequently delayed the referendum to October 2020. Protests continued into 2020, a period of rising human rights violations in the country, culminating in a mass demonstration on the anniversary of the first major October protest in 2019.

The results of the referendum of 25 October were dramatic and led to widespread jubilation. The turnout for the referendum was 50.9 per cent (higher than for the recent presidential election) and 78.3 per cent voted in favour of a new constitution. Voters also had to choose between two kinds of constitutional assembly: one which was made up of directly elected representatives, and one which had a bloc of parliamentarians to balance those elected. They opted for a fully elected assembly. It had already been agreed that half of the assembly would be women.

The next stage in the process of constitutional change was the election of representatives to the constitutional assembly in April 2021, which took place at the same time as local elections and elections for regional governors. The turnout for the vote was low - just over 41 per cent of the electorate - but the outcome offered the possibility of significant change. The ideological leanings of those elected from political parties was well to the left, with most voters rejecting not only the usually well-supported conservative coalition (who gained just 24% of the vote), but also the centre left parties that had played a major role in post-Pinochet politics. They won less support than the alliance between the Communist Party and the Frente Amplio (set up by the 2011 student leaders) who jointly won 18 per cent of the vote. The largest group were the independents. A number of community leaders and activists were elected, as well as academics from varying disciplines and constitutional experts. Electoral adjustments were



made to ensure the 50 per cent representation of women.

The constitutional assembly, composed of 155 members (138 elected and 17 representing different indigenous groups) had to agree on a draft constitution in 2022. For the new constitution to be valid it required the backing of two thirds of the delegates. Commentators suggested the 50 per cent representation of women and the role of indigenous groups should result in more legally protected rights for women and greater security for indigenous rights to their land and cultural inheritance. Others hoped for a move towards securing social and economic rights and a fairer society. The need for a two-thirds majority imposed pressure to compromise but might also allow groups to make support for their own priorities a prerequisite of a final agreement. The strength and duration of the popular mobilization in 2019-20 raised fears of serious violence or a possible military coup, but the election of a constitutional assembly appeared to have created a peaceful and legal pathway to political change.

[We Will Make a New Chile: Interview with Isidora Cepeda Beccar](#) [3], Jacobin Magazine, 2019

An interview with a political activist in Santiago in the context of 'the largest demonstrations in Chile since the return of democracy', which had developed into demands for a new constitution and comprehensive political reform. Beccar argues that the post-Pinochet reforms had primarily benefited a small elite.

Bartlett, John, [Chile's Protesters Have Won a Path to a New Constitution](#) [4], 15/11/2019,

Bartlett briefly traces the evolution of the movement. from high school students protesting about metro fare increases to major demonstrations in Santiago and across the country voicing numerous demands. The article analyzes both the socio-economic problems creating anger, and the neo-liberal nature of the Pinochet constitution, designed to maximize the role of private businesses and minimize the social and economic role of the state. It also notes the role of civil society groups in promoting public debate and crystalizing demands for a new constitution.

Castello, Nicolas, [Social Upheaval in Chile: No One Saw It Coming?](#) [5], Latin American Policy, Vol. 11, issue 1, 2020, pp. 154-164

Castello outlines the evolution of the movement that erupted on October 18, 2019 (ending the period of political calm in the country) and the government responses to try to deal with it.

Cruz, Melany, [Today is Chile's Chance to Bury Pinochet's Legacy](#) [6], Tribune, 2020

This article appeared on the day of the 2020 referendum on whether there should be a new constitution, and if so how it should be drawn up. Cruz explains that voters can choose between two kinds of convention, one based solely on members elected by voters (the option generally favoured by the left), and the other composed half of elected members and half of parliamentarians (many of whom did not want a new constitution). an option seen as favouring the right wing government of Sebastian Pinera. The article then looks back at Chilean politics since the fall of Pinochet.

Gonzales, Ricardo ; Moran, Carmen Le Foulon, [The 2019-2020 Chilean Protests. A New Look at the Causes and Protesters](#) [7], International Journal of Sociology, Vol. 50, issue 3, 2020, pp. 227-235

The authors stress that it is too early to provide either a comprehensive or definitive account of the unfolding protest movement. Their aim is to cover the main events, to outline the immediate background to the protests, and to draw on current research and surveys to indicate some explanations.

Luna, Juan-Pablo, [Chile's Fractured Democratic Consensus](#) [8], In in Thomas Carothers and Andreas Feldman, eds., Divisive Politics and Democratic Dangers in Latin America,



An informed political assessment of the problems of Chile's political system, and the social and political divisions revealed by the 2019 protests and exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. Luna, a professor of politics, concludes with some brief suggestions on how international actors could contribute positively to the political debate by promoting moderate reforms.

Piscopo, Jennifer ; Slavelis, Peter M., [Chile's Constitutional Moment](#) [9], Current History, Vol. 120, issue 823, 2021, pp. 43-49

The authors comment on the significance of the nearly 80 per cent support in the October 2020 referendum for a new constitution, to be decided upon by a special assembly. They also note the scale of the year-long movement which had achieved this concession by the conservative government, and the diversity of those demanding greater social and economic equality and political change. The article then focuses on the problems of both satisfying the diverse socio-economic and ideological groups involved in the struggle and of changing the institutional context that maintained the legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship.

Sehnbruch, Kirsten, [Chile's Steps Towards True Democracy are a Beacon for the World](#) [10], Guardian Weekly, 06/11/2020, pp. 17-17

An assessment of the significance, 'after one year of almost continuous protest', of the referendum vote in October 2020 to draft a new constitution. The article examines the context in Chile and also in Latin America.

See also: Sehnbruch, Kirsten and Peter M. Slavelis, eds., *Democratic Chile: The Politics and Policies of a Historic Coalition, 1990-2010*, Lynne Rienner, 2013, pp.375 for an analysis of the first 20 years after Pinochet under a centre-left coalition government, and the achievements and failures of this coalition.

Van, Lier ; Anselm, Felix, [Chile's Constitutional Moment in the Making](#) [11], OpenDemocracy, 25/11/2019,

The article starts by posing the question how protest over a subway fare increase in a seemingly stable and prosperous country turned rapidly into a constitutional revolution, which in 28 days led to political agreement on a referendum on a new constitution. It then proceeds to suggest answers.

Vessel, Linda, [Meet the Scientists Who Want to Help Write Chile's New Constitution](#) [12], Science, 13/05/2021,

Reports on 18 scientists and researchers standing for election to the new constitutional assembly tasked with creating a new constitution. The scientists are concerned to promote the role of research, but also to use their expertise on such issues as public health, resource management and climate change.

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