

3-23-2018

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## Recommended Citation

Witte-Lebhar, Benjamin. "Chile's Bachelet Bows Out after Turbulent Second Term." (2018). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14592>

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## Chile's Bachelet Bows Out after Turbulent Second Term

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Category/Department: Chile

Published: 2018-03-23

As the storm clouds of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 began to dissipate and Chileans took stock of their situation, most felt that the country had fared surprisingly well, that things could have been far worse. Michelle Bachelet, then in her first term as president (2006-2010), saw her popularity numbers soar as a result and, by the time she left office, had a gaudy 80% approval rating ([NotiSur, Jan 22, 2010](#)).

Eight years later—on March 11—the center-left leader completed her second term after returning to the presidency in 2014. Only this time around, there is a sense among many—including Bachelet's allies and supporters—that things could have gone much better, that the results of her encore performance failed to match the high expectations.

There are some, of course, who have always despised Bachelet, and for them, the past four years were an unmitigated disaster. Others continue to adore her and will forever celebrate her efforts and accomplishments. It's to the people in the middle, therefore, that pundits look as they try to assess Bachelet's second-term and gauge her overall legacy. And the story there—at least as far as poll numbers are concerned—is that after welcoming Bachelet back into the presidency with open arms, middle-of-the-road voters turned on her.

Upon leaving office this month, Bachelet's approval rating stood at approximately 40%, just half of what it was at the end of her first term. Until recently the numbers were even worse, dipping to just 20% at one point, a post-dictatorship record. There's also the unavoidable fact that Bachelet again ceded the presidency to the political right—and again to the same person: billionaire businessman Sebastián Piñera.

The three center-left presidents who preceded Bachelet following Chile's return to democracy in 1990 all handed the presidency off to members of the same coalition, known as the Concertación ([NotiSur, Jan. 14, 1994](#), and [Jan. 21, 2000](#)). Bachelet—the fourth and final Concertación representative elected president—was the only to win a second term ([NotiSur, Dec. 20, 2013](#)). And yet, twice she failed to protect the line of political succession.

"The best way Bachelet could have carried her program into the future was for someone from her coalition to win. But that didn't happen," political scientist and New York University professor Patricio Navia said in a recent interview with the digital news publication *El Libero*. "Piñera wouldn't exist as president if Bachelet hadn't been incapable of building a legacy that could be projected on someone else in her coalition. It's a failure for Bachelet and for the left."

### *Best-laid plains*

Intra-coalition divisions took a toll on the left in both the 2009-2010, and 2017 elections, though in some ways, Piñera's first victory was less surprising. Bachelet herself was wildly popular still, but the Concertación had been in power for two decades at that point and was showing signs of wear and tear ([NotiSur, Nov. 21, 2008](#)). Voters were ready, it turned out, to finally give the right a post-dictatorship leadership opportunity.

But as president from 2010 to 2014, Piñera struggled, particularly after a series of student-led protests in 2011 coalesced into a show-stopping movement for education reform that pummeled his popularity numbers ([NotiSur, Aug. 19, 2011](#)). Bachelet, upon launching her re-election bid, openly embraced the movement ([NotiSur, April 19, 2013](#)). She also broadened the Concertación—renaming it the Nueva Mayoría (New Majority, NM)—to include the far-left Partido Comunista de Chile (Chilean Community Party, PCCh) and laid out an ambitious reform agenda. She went on to win the election in a landslide.

The healthy majorities she secured in both houses of Congress were further proof, it seemed, that Bachelet had a real mandate for major change. The idea that the unpopular Piñera would make his way back to the presidency four years later seemed, at that point, more than a little far-fetched.

Except things didn't play out as expected for Bachelet and the NM. As the economy lagged—due in large part to low copper prices—the right pounced, arguing that the real reason for the slowdown was the new administration's reform program, particularly its overhaul of the tax system, which Bachelet pushed through as a way to boost revenue for her next big project, education reform.

Conservatives said that by raising corporate taxes, the president was scaring off investors. It also accused the new government of taking a "backhoe" to the country's existing structures and of rushing to destroy the status quo in an ill-conceived left-wing frenzy. Mainstream right-of-center news publications like the leading dailies *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* echoed those arguments. Critics on the left, in the meantime, said the tax reform didn't go far enough, and accused Bachelet of making unnecessary concessions to the right ([NotiSur, Aug. 8, 2014](#)). Similar complaints would hound her later attempts to reform the education system.

Complicating matters even more for Bachelet was a corruption scandal involving her son and daughter-in-law. The allegations—that the pair had used their privileged connections and insider information to make an illicit and lucrative real-estate deal—surfaced in early 2015 and took an immediate and lasting toll on the president's popularity ([NotiSur, April 24, 2015](#)).

The administration's struggles exacerbated tensions within her broad coalition, and as the 2017 elections approached, the NM proved unable settled on a single candidate ([NotiSur, July 21, 2017](#)). It was also challenged by an emerging left-wing force—the Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA)—which finished a close third in the first-round of voting, sapping momentum from Bachelet's would-be political successor, former news anchor Alejandro Guillier ([NotiSur, Dec. 1, 2017](#)). Piñera went on to beat Guillier in a runoff by an ample margin (54% to 45%) ([NotiSur, Jan. 12, 2018](#)).

## *Promises kept*

The "common narrative," given the aforementioned developments, is that Bachelet's second go-around "represented a disappointment, if not a failure," Beryl Seiler and Ben Raderstorf of the US think tank Inter-American Dialogue (IAD) wrote in a recent analysis piece for the journal *Americas Quarterly*. And yet, on closer examination, Bachelet did have some significant accomplishments in her second term. Just because she fell out of favor with voters, in other words, doesn't mean she was ineffective. "There are reasons to think that Bachelet deserves more credit than given by voters and analysts, and that her legacy will be more enduring than her poll numbers would suggest," the IAD analysts argued.

Going into her second term, she promised tax and education reform. And she delivered, cutting corporate loopholes and raising rates for top earners on the one hand and improving education

opportunities—especially at the university level—on the other. Leaders of the student-reform movement of 2011-2012 wanted free university education for all. Bachelet fell short of that goal, but did pass legislation guaranteeing cost-free university or vocational school education for students in the bottom 60% of the household-income scale. She also made it illegal for primary and secondary school to operate on a for-profit basis.

The education reforms are a good example of how the final product didn't live up to the grandiose expectations Bachelet helped create. But that doesn't mean they're unimportant. "The progress in responding to the demands of the student protests is hard to ignore," Seiler and Raderstorf wrote.

Daniel Pardo, the Southern Cone correspondent for BBC Mundo, offered a similar defense of the newly departed president in an article titled "Por qué el segundo gobierno de Michelle Bachelet es considerado por muchos el más importante en décadas en Chile" (Why many consider Michele Bachelet's second term the most important in decades in Chile). Bachelet set the bar so high with her many promises that she was all but destined to disappoint, the article suggested. And yet, her accomplishments were both copious and, in some cases, quite compelling. "Beyond the poll numbers, few dispute that Bachelet's second term has been the most transformative in recent Chilean history for the reforms made to a national system that continued to carry the legacy of the military regime of the 1980s," Pardo wrote.

### *Lasting impact*

One of those 1980s legacies was the country's blanket ban on abortion, even in rape cases or when a pregnancy puts the mother's life at risk ([NotiSur, Jan. 9, 2015](#)). Prior to her return to power, lawmakers had introduced numerous bills to loosen the prohibition, all to no avail. Undaunted, Bachelet took her own determined shot at bending then ban—despite continuing opposition from Church leaders, the political right, and even some in the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party, PDC), a key component of her own coalition. In September 2017, after nearly two years of congressional debates and court rulings, she finally succeeded ([NotiSur, Sept. 15, 2017](#)).

The same was true for the long-entrenched binomial majoritarian voting system used to elect lawmakers. The system, another legacy of the Pinochet regime, artificially fostered political parity in the legislature by making it extremely difficult for a single political coalition to control both seats in a given voting district ([NotiSur, Feb. 10, 2012](#)). Historically, the unusual system favored the right, which was understandably loath to part with it and had the numbers in Congress (due in large part to those rules) to resist reform.

The system was essentially locked in place, in other words, until Bachelet, in early 2015, used her ample majorities in the legislature to finally scrap it ([NotiSur, Feb. 13, 2015](#)). As part of her electoral reform, she also extended the vote to Chileans living abroad, and expanded the number of seats in the Senate from 38 to 50, and in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Congress, from 120 to 155.

Bachelet made her mark on the environmental front as well, overseeing the creation of more than 10 million acres of national parkland in Chilean Patagonia. She also signed into law vast marine reserves, including a protected zone of some 700,000-sq-km around the remote Pacific island of Rapa Nui, also known as Easter Island ([NotiSur, Oct. 13, 2017](#)). Under her leadership, Chile made

huge advances, furthermore, in electricity generation based on non-conventional renewable energy sources, namely wind, solar, and geothermal.

“The sheer scale of her impact over four years is important to recognize,” the IAD’s Seiler and Raderstorf wrote. “More than anything, her disappointments are perhaps a product of her own lofty ambitions. Maybe that alone is a positive reflection on her legacy. To focus on the parts of Bachelet’s agenda that were not realized, instead of the many successes, would be to punish boldness, creativity, and a reformist approach to politics.”

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