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[How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?](#)

Crisis as an Opportunity

The Potential of Moderate Forces in Chile

Olaf Jacob

Chile has long been regarded as a model country in Latin America. However, social unrest, the decline in economic growth as well as the increase in organised crime and disenchantment with political parties have contributed to the political polarisation and fragmentation of society in recent years. With the Christian Democratic Party, a traditionally moderate player in the Chilean party system has also moved away from the centre towards the left. Who can fill this vacant space?

The Social Unrest of 2019 and the Role of the Traditional Centre Parties

Since returning to democracy in 1990, Chile has experienced almost 30 years of political stability, social peace and steady economic growth. Chile was considered a model country in the region. Between 1990 and 2019, it recorded average annual economic growth of just under five per cent¹, accompanied by comparatively low inflation of around three per cent per year since the end of the 1990s.² According to the World Bank, per capita income rose from around 2,500 US dollars (1990) to around 15,000 US dollars (2019)³ during this period; amounting to a six-fold increase. This positive development was partly facilitated by liberal trade and economic policies that have encouraged the opening up of the country to foreign investment and trade. The country's infrastructure (ports, motorways, airports) has also been significantly expanded. These trade and economic policies were accompanied by social policies aimed at strengthening the middle class. The Gini coefficient for measuring inequality fell from 0.57 to 0.45 points⁴ between 1990 and 2017, while the poverty rate fell from 40.0 to 8.6 per cent in the same period.⁵

In political terms, Chile enjoyed almost three decades of political stability. The binomial electoral system⁶, used from 1989 to 2013 and which practically enabled the formation of a two-party system through electoral alliances, prevented an early fragmentation of the political landscape. The abolition of the binomial system

from the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections encouraged the formation of smaller parties, which in turn contributed to fragmentation from 2019 onwards. With the onset of social unrest in October 2019, the so-called *estallido social*, the political landscape in Chile changed radically and in a way that was unprecedented since the return to democracy. The nationwide, violent unrest was triggered by an increase in public transport fares. An estimated 1.2 million people took to the streets of the capital Santiago de Chile on 25 October 2019 to protest against the social policies of the liberal-conservative government under President Sebastián Piñera (Renovación Nacional). It was the largest political demonstration in Chile's history.⁷ The protests were overshadowed by violent clashes. Several metro stations, ministries and a number of public and private buildings were heavily damaged. The UN Climate Change Conference (COP 25) and a planned APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit in Santiago had to be cancelled. The presidential palace La Moneda, the official residence of the Chilean president, was about to be violently taken over by communist and anarchist groups.

In this context, the large, traditional parties of the political centre, the social democratic Partido Socialista (PS) and the Christian democratic Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), reacted in an extremely ambivalent way. Despite the clashes having been formally criticised, there was no clear condemnation of the violence during the protests. The impression

was that the sometimes violent demonstrations were met with understanding and even covert sympathy by elected representatives of the traditional centre parties. The risk of destabilisation and the potential overthrow of the liberal-conservative government under President Piñera were accepted. This led to a first wave of resignations from the PDC. Party members and officials belonging to the conservative camp left the Christian Democratic Party.

The social unrest of 2019 was resolved when the entire political party landscape in Chile created the conditions for drafting a new constitution by a Constituent Assembly by consensus. The draft of the new constitution, presented in July 2022, contained radical, socialist and in some cases unrealistic elements, such as the abolition of the Senate, equal rights for the indigenous judiciary, the definition of Chile as a plurinational state, disproportionate rights for indigenous groups or even the recognition of animals as subjects in the constitution. The Christian Democratic Party supported the new draft constitution with remarkable vehemence. Numerous party members and officials who publicly opposed the draft were expelled from the party, culminating in a second, massive wave of resignations from the PDC in the last quarter of 2022. The draft constitution was rejected by a majority of Chileans in a plebiscite in September 2022.

Christian Democrats' Shift to the Left and the "New Centre"

The unanimous decision by the PDC party leadership to support the socialist-influenced draft constitution of 2022 marked the climax of the party's shift to the left, which had been in the making for many years. For many leaders, party members, incumbent MPs and senators as well as former high-ranking officials and members of the PDC, the unconditional approval of the draft constitution signalled the end of an era of political moderation and positioning as a "democratic centre party" since its founding in 1957. This resulted in party expulsions as well as voluntary and forced resignations of PDC members who belonged to the party's moderate wing. This

development accelerated the party's gradual loss of importance that had been apparent since the early 2000s. While the PDC still achieved 26 per cent of the vote in the first democratic election following the military dictatorship in 1989 and was thus the strongest political force in the country, only 4.2 per cent of Chileans eligible to vote voted for the Christian Democratic Party in the 2021 parliamentary elections.⁸ Several reasons played a central role in the debacle of what was the "most successful party in Chile's recent history".⁹ One of the decisive factors was the shift to the left by increasingly strong groupings within the PDC since the 1990s. The associated distancing from moderate positions, internal party disputes, the party's identity crisis and the loss of proximity to the people acted as catalysts for the decline of the PDC.¹⁰

However, the decline of the Christian Democrats opened up opportunities for new political initiatives that aimed to establish a "new political centre" from the end of 2022. The first successful attempt was the creation of the political movement *Amarillos por Chile*. The founder of the movement is the poet and literature professor Cristián Warnken, who, in early 2022, warned in a public letter of the danger of a socialist-influenced "refoundation" of the Chilean state due to the socialist nature of the draft constitution of 2022. In April 2023, the movement was constituted as a registered political party. The founding declaration refers to the need for a strong political centre in the country. *Amarillos por Chile* should take on this role. It is still considered a small party, but one that is extremely competent when it comes to substantive issues. Its members and officials are considered experts and used to represent the political and intellectual elite of Christian democracy. The party's leaders include former Christian Democrat ministers of defence, the interior, labour, transport and education, for example, who have played a key role in Chile's modernisation since the end of the military dictatorship. The former director of the National Human Rights Institute and the former director of the Museum of Memory (of the victims of the military dictatorship) and Human Rights have also



adopted leading positions in the party. Although Amarillos por Chile has outstanding expertise in almost all areas of domestic, economic and social policy, it is accused of being out of touch with the everyday problems and challenges of Chileans. Amarillos por Chile is often perceived as a party of Chile's intellectual elite.

Alongside Amarillos por Chile, Demócratas is the second newly founded party of the “new

political centre” in Chile born following the constitutional process. The party was founded on 2 November 2022 by former Christian Democrat senators Ximena Rincón and Matías Walker. It was officially enrolled in the party register at the end of July 2023. Rincón and Walker are considered to be knowledgeable and very experienced politicians. As Christian Democrat senators, they have shaped numerous discussions, including the debates on necessary pension



Burning barricades: Following an increase in public transportation fares, violent protests broke out in Chile in October 2019. Photo: © Jorge Silva, Reuters, picture alliance.

accused of trying to shift the PDC to the right. To avoid their expulsion from the party, Rincón, Walker and other leaders resigned from the party at the end of October 2022 and subsequently founded Demócratas.

Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas both claim to represent the political centre.

Just like Amarillos por Chile, Demócratas positions itself in the political centre and claims to represent the legacy of the successful Concertación, which governed the country from 1990 to 2010 as an alliance between Christian Democrats and Social Democrats following the military dictatorship. Unlike Amarillos por Chile, Demócratas has a significant presence in parliament. In addition to Rincón and Walker in the Senate, four representatives of the party are members of the House of Representatives, including three former Christian Democrats. In both chambers, the representatives of Demócratas often tip the scales when it comes to political decisions, as the majorities in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies are balanced. This gives Demócratas political visibility and a chance to exert political influence that Amarillos por Chile does not have in this form. Demócratas is also a party with a relatively broad base within all social strata of the country and has nationwide organisations. The party structure is vertical, with both party founders as chairman and deputy chairman. Amarillos por Chile, on the other hand, is attempting to strengthen horizontal party structures, often resulting in delays in urgent decisions.

and healthcare reforms. Similar to Amarillos por Chile, Demócratas emerged as a reaction by leading Christian Democrats to the PDC's unconditional and institutional approval of the socialist-influenced draft constitution of 2022. Both senators had publicly articulated their disagreement with the party leadership and their rejection of the draft constitution. Rincón and Walker were subsequently brought before the PDC's Supreme Court (Tribunal Supremo),

Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas have many things in common: they occupy the same

political space and claim to represent the political centre. The background to their founding and development as a political force in Chile is comparable; their leaders were shaped by the ideals of Chilean Christian democracy. Both parties show clear parallels in their public statements and political positioning. What is different is the degree of political influence and voter perception. In this context, the question emerges as to why the two parties, which have complementary characteristics but hardly differ ideologically, do not merge. Political and personal ambitions as well as the conviction of both parties' political

leadership that they should not lose their own identity, have so far prevented the parties from merging. At the very least, both parties adopted an electoral alliance on 7 April 2024 to jointly vote for candidates in view of the local and regional elections at the end of October 2024.¹¹

Chileans generally lean towards the centre politically.



Experienced centrist politician: Ximena Rincón – pictured in 2016 as Minister of the Presidency – left the increasingly left-leaning Christian Democratic Party at the end of 2022, along with many other members. She became a co-founder of a new centrist party: Demócratas. Photo: © Presidency of Chile, epa, picture alliance.

Renovación Nacional: The Reinvention of a Traditional Party

The Renovación Nacional (RN) party, founded in 1987 from the merger of three parties from the conservative camp, was long regarded as the bastion of rigid conservatism in Chile. In contrast to the Chilean Christian Democrats, the RN positioned itself in the 1988 referendum in favour of continuing the de facto government of Augusto Pinochet. Under the presidency of Sebastián Piñera and during his terms as president (2010 to 2014, 2018 to 2022), the party underwent a phase of modernisation. Renovación Nacional, like Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas, recognised the danger of introducing socialist elements in the draft constitution presented in 2022. This led to a rapprochement between the traditional party and the newly formed parties of the new political centre and joint votes in parliament.

As part of a dialogue programme in Germany organised by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, also attended by the party leaders of Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas, RN party chairman Rodrigo Galilea sent out a clear signal for political positioning in the centre of the spectrum. In an interview in Berlin with the daily newspaper *La Tercera*, Galilea emphasised that the trip to Germany represented a “before” and an “after” in relations between the Renovación Nacional, Demócratas and Amarillos por Chile parties. In his view, the parties involved are setting an example of moderation in politics and following the principles of Christian humanism. The trip was a step towards closer and deeper coordination between the centre parties.¹² Although Renovación Nacional will probably not take part in a possible merger of the Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas parties, the party has already turned towards the political centre, which means an electoral alliance cannot be ruled out in the near future.

Prospects for the New Political Centre in Chile

The renowned Chilean social scientist Sergio Micco has established that Chileans generally

lean towards the centre politically. According to the Estudio de Opinión Política CEP 90 survey from the last quarter of 2023, 22 per cent of Chileans said that they would place themselves on the left-wing political spectrum. Fifteen per cent lean towards right-wing positions, while a clear majority of 37 per cent opt for the political centre. These results are consistent with a similar survey conducted in 2006. At that time, 23 per cent of Chileans identified with left-wing positions, 15 per cent with right-wing positions and 37 per cent with the political centre.¹³ In Chile, extreme positions seem to gain in importance when society is unable to find a way out of political, economic and social crises. However, Chileans generally prefer moderate positions of the political centre.

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Chile experienced an extreme crisis following the social unrest in October 2019. This resulted in a polarisation of society that was reflected in the 2021 presidential run-off between right-wing populist candidate José Antonio Kast and the leader of the left-wing student movement Gabriel Boric. Although Chile is currently experiencing a difficult economic situation with low growth rates and a tense social situation due to an exponential rise in organised crime, the population does not perceive this situation as a threat to the continued existence of the rule of law. Although the democratic legal order in Chile is not in danger, unlike after the social unrest in 2019 and around the draft constitution of 2022, the current government has not made any significant progress in key areas such as security, migration and foreign policy or with regard to pension and healthcare reform. The positions and proposals of the current governing coalition and the parties of the new political centre differ in these



areas. In terms of foreign policy, for example, the governing coalition takes an ambivalent and unclear stance towards Israel. Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 was condemned, yet Israel's right to defend itself was repeatedly called into question. In contrast, the parties of the new political centre have clearly positioned themselves and expressed their support for the Israeli people. In security and migration policy, the parties of the new political centre have spoken out in favour of more restrictive measures with regard to illegal immigration and a tightening of the penal code and the penal system for serious crimes. The pension and healthcare reform announced by the governing coalition since taking office has not yet materialised. Reform proposals from the parties of the new political centre have so far received little attention. Given the incumbent government's passivity on key issues affecting Chilean society, there is a possibility that the new parties of the political centre will be strengthened and that traditional parties of the centre-right, such as Renovación Nacional, will further advance their positioning in the centre of the party spectrum.

Lasting Success?

In conclusion, it can be emphasised that there is a willingness among the population in Chile to favour the political centre as the strongest force. Despite the continuing fragmentation of society, surveys clearly indicate that voters in Chile generally lean towards the political centre. The state institutions and the weakened but still existing party system promote the formation and development of structured political parties. In this respect, Chile fundamentally differs from other countries within the region, where the party landscape has completely dissolved. The Chilean population has historically voted in favour of moderate centrist political views and supported moderate positions. New centrist parties, such as Amarillos por Chile and Demócratas, therefore have a good chance of successfully positioning themselves in the party political arena, provided they develop and present clear political concepts, party programmes and proposals. This will enable them to fill the

vacuum recently created by the lack of a political centre. Chile provides a breeding ground for this, as in the wake of the social unrest of 2019 and the subsequent process in search of a new constitution, radical options from both the left and the right were ultimately rejected. Similarly, President Gabriel Boric, who advocated radical positions in the 2021 election campaign, had to moderate his political stance after being elected in alliance with the Chilean Communist Party. It remains to be seen whether the formation and development of new centrist political parties will be crowned with lasting success. The key factor is going to be the willingness of the new centrist parties' leaders to make compromises and to evaluate the possibility of a merger or close cooperation in the form of a political alliance. This, in turn, requires a willingness to set aside personal ambitions so as to achieve the goal of strengthening the political centre in Chile. Because without coalitions or alliances among themselves, the new parties of the political centre in Chile have very little prospect of establishing themselves permanently and successfully in the political system.

- translated from German -

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- 1 Own calculation based on data from the World Bank 2024: GDP growth (annual %) – Chile, in: <https://ogy.de/15va> [1 Aug 2024].
- 2 Own calculation based on data from the World Bank 2024: Inflation, consumer prices (annual %) – Chile, in: <https://ogy.de/dy32> [1 Aug 2024].
- 3 Own calculation based on data from the World Bank 2024: GDP per capita (current US\$) – Chile, in: <https://ogy.de/8ori> [1 Aug 2024].
- 4 Own calculation based on data from the World Bank 2024: Gini index – Chile, in: <https://ogy.de/wshh> [1 Aug 2024].
- 5 United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) 1990: La pobreza en Chile en 1990 (Poverty in Chile in 1990), p.1, in: <https://ogy.de/zk5j> [1 Aug 2024]; Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia (Ministry of Social Development and Family), Observatorio Social 2017: Resultados Pobreza Casen 2017, in: <https://ogy.de/dftg> [1 Aug 2024].
- 6 The binomial electoral system in Chile was a form of majority voting in which electoral lists with two candidates were drawn up in each constituency. The list with the most votes won the first seat in the constituency, while the second-placed list took the second seat. If a list received 50 per cent or more of the votes, both candidates from the same list were elected to parliament. This electoral system thus favoured the electoral victory of large political parties and coalitions, since it was difficult for smaller parties and independent candidates to gain enough votes. This led to a stable but limited representative political landscape. This system was replaced by a proportional-representative electoral system.
- 7 BBC News Mundo 2019: Protestas en Chile: la histórica marcha de más de un millón de personas que tomó las calles de Santiago (Protests in Chile: the historic march of more than one million people that swept the streets of Santiago), 25 Oct 2019, in: <https://bbc.in/3WP2CnW> [1 Aug 2024].
- 8 Herrera, Mario / Morales Quiroga, Mauricio / Rayo, Gustavo 2023: El desplome electoral de la democracia cristiana chilena (The electoral collapse of Chilean Christian Democracy), 1989–2021, in: *Perfiles Latinoamericanos* 31: 62, 1 Jul 2023, pp.1–32, here: p.1, in: <https://ogy.de/w7m3> [5 Aug 2024].
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 10 Quezada, Juan Andrés 2022: El lento desplome de la Democracia Cristiana (The slow collapse of Christian Democracy), 13 Nov 2022, *La Tercera*, in: <https://ogy.de/3n3g> [5 Aug 2024].
- 11 Carvajal, Shelmy 2024: Amarillos y Demócratas oficializan pacto electoral: buscan levantar “la mayor cantidad de candidaturas” en elecciones municipales (Amarillos and Democrats formalize electoral pact: they seek to raise “the largest number of candidates” in municipal elections), 7 Apr 2024, *La Tercera*, in: <https://ogy.de/w5m1> [5 Aug 2024].
- 12 Vatel, Alonso/Rosas, Pedro 2024: “O Republicanos o nosotros”: Demócratas propone a Chile Vamos formar una nueva coalición sin el partido de Kast (“Either Republicans or us”: Democrats propose to form a new coalition with Chile Vamos, and without Kast’s party), 19 Jan 2024, *La Tercera*, in: <https://ogy.de/v879> [5 Aug 2024].
- 13 Micco, Sergio 2024: Los partidos de centro en el marco del eje izquierda-derecha (The center parties in the left-right axis frame), unpublished manuscript.