

United, not divided: Chile votes to end Pinochet's legacy



On 25 October, Chile had an unprecedented referendum – and a historic result. Chileans were asked if they wanted to replace a constitution imposed during the dark days of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship four decades ago. Overwhelmingly, they said yes, writes [Andrea Encalada García](#) ([Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity](#)).

“Apruebo”, meaning approval for the drafting of a new constitution, was the choice of 78% of voters across the country. In addition, 79% agreed that the new constitution should be drafted by an assembly that would not only be democratically elected, but would be gender-balanced, in a massive gain for the powerful Chilean feminist movement.



“Just one year ago, the idea that citizens could change the constitution was unthinkable” (© 2020, Leticia Benforarado/[@petite.photographie](#))

On voting day, it was remarkable to see how many people were visibly touched by the significance of the moment. Many voters standing in queues at polling stations had excitement and happiness written on their faces; many more, once they had cast their ballots, left in tears. The emotion is understandable: just one year ago, the idea that citizens could change the constitution was unthinkable.

What this result tells us about the desire for change in Chile is clear. But equally important is what it reveals about a country that has long been described as “polarised”, and “a nation of two halves”. Instead, the outcome has shown that Chile is a nation of the many and the few – and on Sunday, the many were heard. Only five of the country's 346 municipalities returned a majority in favour of keeping the Pinochet-era constitution. The difference in voting patterns across class and income levels, in a nation with one of the world's highest levels of inequality, was stark: in La Pintana, the borough of the Santiago Metropolitan Region with the highest levels of poverty, 88% of voters supported a new constitution, while in Vitacura, the wealthiest, only 33% did.

This disparity is a vivid reminder of the roots of the social uprising that began on 18 October last year: namely, the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of a tiny elite entirely disconnected from their fellow citizens. Just days before the uprising, President Sebastián Piñera ([a billionaire said to be Chile's second wealthiest person](#)) observed blithely, "Our country is a true oasis". After the street protests spread and the police brutality began, one of his closest ministers commented: "We didn't see this level of discomfort coming."

The referendum's outcome shows how little substance there was to the dramatic warnings spread in recent months by media and other elite-controlled voices that the referendum would cause deadly "polarisation". But there is, in fact, no such thing as the Chile of two warring halves painted in these pictures, as the nearly six million people who peacefully voted for a new constitutional beginning show. The overwhelming victory for "apruebo" proves that those who want democratic and constitutional changes to the country's political, social, and economic model are in the great majority.

Significantly, Sunday's results showed a sharp rise in democratic participation among the traditionally economically and politically excluded. In La Pintana, 52% of voters cast ballots in the referendum, against just 37% in the 2017 presidential election; in contrast, voting in Vitacura dropped from 73% to 68%. These are not isolated examples: throughout the country, voting rates increased in most working-class areas, and participation had a positive correlation with poverty in Santiago. Additionally, the percentage of those choosing "apruebo" was significantly higher than the national mean in "[sacrifice zones](#)", [where towns and cities sit surrounded by dangerously polluting industries](#) that have caused widespread environmental damage and poisoned children and adults.

What the people of Chile – the overwhelming majority – overturned on 25 October was a legacy even more toxic than the air in the sacrifice zones. The current constitution, written 40 years ago during the Pinochet dictatorship, was bloodily imposed at a time when there was no possibility of resisting its neoliberal intent. The dictatorship would last for 17 years, with Pinochet ending his days in total impunity despite the horrors he oversaw, including more than 3,000 people dead or missing, over 28,000 cases of torture, and more than 200,000 political exiles. Even when the dictatorship ended, its malevolent influence lived on, imbedded in a political constitution that blocked any possibility of changes to our social and political systems.



“The popular uprising that would ultimately lead to the referendum brought daily reminders of the state’s capacity for repression” (© 2020, Leticia Benforarado/[@petite.photographie](#))

Countless times, when subsequent governments or parliament attempted to pass progressive reforms, they were declared unconstitutional by a constitutional court that in effect served as a non-elected parliament. Along with the curse of the extreme neoliberal policies imposed after the Pinochet coup, one of the deadliest effects of Pinochet’s constitution was that it served to destroy trust in politics and its institutions.

As if that toll were not great enough, the social uprising that began a year ago and would ultimately lead to the referendum brought painful reminders of the state’s capacity for repression, as the army took to the streets and police brutality occurred daily. More than 450 people were shot in the eyes, and two people, Fabiola Campillai and Gustavo Gatica, were permanently blinded. Countless protesters were injured, some were murdered, and many are still behind bars. It was a reminder that the violent repression instilled in the Pinochet era lived on.

At the same time, however, the widespread protests would become sites of solidarity and unity, of Chileans’ trust in each other and the feeling that change was possible. The massive demonstrations demanding dignity were only possible through collective action that, born of equal parts rage and hope, would overcome obstacles and pave the way to the referendum. Chileans saw that only mobilisation and collective action would force the political class to concede to calls for a new constitution. In the end, that is exactly what happened – and the vast majority of Chileans seized the chance to unite to rewrite the future.

The challenges Chile faces remain immense; we are still a deeply unequal country, facing severe problems of political representation. Before the new constitution is written, there are grave matters of human rights reparation; impunity can no longer be acceptable. Thousands of cases of police brutality must be addressed, and police reform is necessary and urgent. And the disproportionate use of pre-trial detention as a means of political persecution and punishment for protesters means there are still hundreds of prisoners whose cases have not come to trial.

Last Sunday, we buried Pinochet’s constitution once and for all – an achievement that has taken us 40 years. It was a long, patient, determined fight, carried out generation by generation. For us to reframe our priorities and values as a nation, it will take our participation in the broadest and most diverse ways, drawing on social movements, civil society and collective action, and continuing to place pressure on entrenched political power and on the assembly that will write our new constitution beginning in May 2021. But we do not need to start from scratch: over the past decade, social movements and civil society organisations have shown that there are achievable alternatives to the noxious economic, social, and political structures in place today.

This referendum result is only the first step along the road to achieving a fairer society for all. Chileans, perhaps more than most, know how hard it is to realise dreams of ending inequalities and challenging power structures. But there are some days that dreams become tangible. In Chile, Sunday 25 October 2020 was that day.

Notes:

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