

## **Political Apathy and Alienation in a Stalemate Society:**

### **The Limits of the New Chilean Democracy**

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The notion of a “stalemate society” used here to describe contemporary Chilean democracy is meant to suggest a particular political system where the likelihood of significant change resulting through elections and bargaining has been reduced to a minimum. Given restrictive political provisions imposed by the Pinochet military regime upon the new democracy such as the constitutionally-sanctioned appointed Institutional Senators and the “binomial” election law which dramatically over-represents the largest minority group, (Valenzuela 1991: 50-53; Scully 1995: 125), one can argue that political power was meant to be almost equally divided between those center and center-left forces grouped in the Concertación coalition and those opposing them on the political right, in seeming disregard of what the voters wanted.<sup>1</sup> Efforts to eliminate what Garretón has called “authoritarian enclaves” (1994: 224) in that constitution and make the system more representative were repeatedly rebuffed in congress during the 1990s (Garretón 1994: 226; Oppenheim 1999: 205). What is raised as the central question for examination in this essay relates to the likely effects such entrenched political immobilism may have had on Chileans as they became aware that the political forces representing a popular majority had only a limited ability to achieve the changes sought.

The type of effect suggested here focuses on existing political apathy and alienation. Such responses are thought worthy of study in terms of what they may contribute toward the understanding of the more qualitative aspects of democratization and democratic consolidation in Chile. At the conceptual level, varying degrees of apathy and alienation can be seen as markers on a continuum measuring regime support and legitimacy for the present democracy. From the vantage of participatory democratic theory, significant levels of apathy and negative affect are thought injurious to regime sustainability since they indicate weakened citizen support (Pateman 1970). Moments of economic crisis, such as that which unexpectedly reemerged in Chile in 1999 immediately prior to the recent presidential elections there, ought to be quite revealing about how its democracy functions (Haggard and Kaufman 1995).

What follows in the body of this paper falls into four broad areas plus a conclusion. In a first section, election statistics on voter registration, abstention, and blank or spoiled votes are presented and discussed for the ten years of the current Chilean democracy. A second section comments on public opinion data over time on general democratic support, on specific institutions within the democratic state, and on particular issues. A third part analyzes the matter of the growing disinterest in politics expressed by many younger Chileans of voter age who have never bothered to register. Finally, the last substantive part seeks to explain the notable decline in popular support for political parties, with special attention to the weakening situation of the most

important party, the Christian Democrats. What these various trends indicate as to the suggested notion of growing political apathy and alienation as linked to the limitations of the present political regime provides the material of the conclusion. The surprisingly close results of the recent 1999/2000 presidential elections form part of the context for those findings.

#### Elections in the New Chilean Democracy.

Electoral participation in Chile as elsewhere reflects the institutional circumstances that govern such acts. One such pertinent fact is that while the present Chilean election law makes voting obligatory for all registered voters,<sup>2</sup> it leaves initial registration voluntary (González 1994 (ed.): Art. 15; Aravena 1997: 6). The very high voter registration and turnout figures that marked the 1988 plebiscite (where the electorate rejected another lengthy presidential term for Pinochet)<sup>3</sup> and the subsequent 1989 competitive elections for the presidency and for both houses of congress are suggestive of the notable initial enthusiasm of large numbers of Chileans for the emergence of their country from the military dictatorship. Nevertheless, in time, the participation figures eroded from such record highs as elections became more normal events where less appeared to be at stake (Lehmann 1998: 42). Table 1 below breaks down such electoral participation in the 1989-2000 period into the percent not registered to vote, the percent abstaining, the percent casting blank votes and that casting spoiled votes.

Table 1  
Electoral Participation in Chile, 1989-2000

|                    |   | 1989 | 1992 | 1993 | 1996 | 1997 | 1999* | 2000** |
|--------------------|---|------|------|------|------|------|-------|--------|
| % Not Registered   |   | 7.9  | 8.9  | 10.2 | 15.0 | 15.9 | ---   | ---    |
| % Abstaining       | P | 2.7  |      | 8.8  |      |      | 10.1  | 9.5    |
|                    | D | 5.3  |      | 8.7  |      | 12.8 |       |        |
|                    | M | 10.2 |      | 12.3 |      |      |       |        |
| % Blank Votes      | P | 1.1  |      | 1.9  |      |      | 0.8   | 0.6    |
|                    | D | 2.4  |      | 3.5  |      | 4.2  |       |        |
|                    | M |      | 3.0  |      | 3.4  |      |       |        |
| % Spoiled<br>Votes | P | 1.5  |      | 3.7  |      |      | 2.2   | 1.4    |
|                    | D | 2.7  |      | 5.3  |      | 13.5 |       |        |
|                    | M |      | 6.0  |      | 7.9  |      |       |        |

Notes: P = Presidential Election; D = Deputies Election; M = Municipal Election  
\* = First Round; \*\* = Second Round; --- = No Information.

Sources: "% Not Registered" calculated from data in *Temas Públicos* cited in Lehmann 1998: 43, and Ministerio del Interior 2000, except for that for 1997 which comes from Servicio Electoral 1998: 9; "% Abstaining," "% Blank Votes,"

and “% Spoiled Votes” all from Ministerio del Interior 2000, except for “% Abstaining” for 1989 which comes from Servicio Electoral 1998: 20.

The total of those failing to register to vote combined with those registered but abstaining is seen here as individuals demonstrating political apathy. A national sample survey taken just after the 1997 elections indicates that those not voting are disproportionately young and somewhat better educated than the average voter (Lehmann 1998: 45).<sup>4</sup> Given their rising numbers, this category of younger non-voters is important enough to be discussed separately below.

How should those voting blank and those spoiling their ballot each be characterized? Although one might logically presume a strong difference between each of these groups, with the first seen as motivated by apathy while the second indicating alienation from politics, such a distinction might be somewhat overstated. Using data reconfigured from the same end-1997/early-1998 survey,<sup>5</sup> Table 2 suggests a somewhat more complex view:

[Table 2 about here]

Here the responses given to the question of why someone voted blank or spoiled his/her vote are ordered from the most alienated choice to that merely indicating no information, a clear sign of apathy. While those who spoiled their vote are significantly more likely to choose answer “a”, where their act is directly identified as a “protest against the system,” both groups were almost as likely to support answer “b”, indicating a lack of confidence in politicians, here seen as suggesting a considerable degree of alienation too, if less than that in “a”. In a similar sense, both groups were about as likely to choose answer “e”, that they were not attracted to any candidate, or answer “g”, expressing no interest in politics, the two most important options indicating apathy. Perhaps, the original assumption about blank vs. spoiled votes should be modified to suggest that those casting either blank or spoiled votes are both likely to indicate a range of apathetic to alienated feelings, even if the latter group of voters is plausibly somewhat more alienated.

The overall trend toward slowly increasing apathy and alienation indicated from the election statistics, however, may be at least partially called into question by the results of the recent 1999-2000 presidential elections, carried out as they were in two rounds.

Table 2

Reasons for Blank vs. Spoiled Votes,  
1997 Legislative Election  
(in % of column total)

| Reasons:   | Blank<br>Votes | Spoiled<br>Votes |
|--|----------------|------------------|
| a. I wanted to protest against the system.                                     | 5.1            | 20.5             |
| b. In general politicians do not concern themselves for the people's problems. | 32.2           | 27.0             |
| c. I am disenchanted with the present government.                              | 0.0            | 1.6              |
| d. I am opposed to obligatory voting.  | 8.5            | 1.6              |
| e. No candidate interested me .  | 37.3           | 31.1             |
| f. This election was unimportant.  | 1.7            | 0.0              |
| g. Politics does not interest me.  | 15.3           | 12.3             |
| h. I don't know for whom to vote.  | 0.0            | 2.5              |

Source: Reconfigured from Lehmann 1998.

If abstention (and probably non-registration as well, as suggested generally in *El Mercurio*, international ed., March 11-17, 1999: 3; June 10-16: 5) continued rising, the figures for blanks and spoiled votes fell to the lowest on record. The virtual collapse of the considerable number of spoiled votes which had aroused such concern with the 1997 legislative elections (*El Mercurio*, international ed., December 11-17, 1997: 1; Aravena 1997: 6; Lagos 1998) seems likely to be attributable to the closeness of the results for the presidential race and the increased expectation that change might result from its outcome. There the first round ended in what the media called a “statistical tie” between the candidate of the Concertación, Ricardo Lagos, and that of the opposition, Joaquín Lavín, itself finally resolved in a second round between the two top finishers. Such a runoff had not been needed in either of the two earlier presidential elections of 1989 and 1993 which were considerably more decisive in selecting first Patricio Aylwin and then Eduardo Frei, both Christian Democrats, as the first two Concertación presidents. The possibility of significant change with Lagos, the first successful Socialist candidate since Salvador Allende, will be returned to in the conclusion.

#### Democracy, Political Institutions, and Key Issues.

While the voting statistics presented allow a general view of the pattern of slowly developing apathy and alienation in Chile, they are less useful for connecting such citizen responses to possible political causes. In the present section, the discussion of the new Chilean democracy is probed further through the use of a series of public opinion questions over time, ranging from general views on the democratic regime, to the evaluation of various political institutions that influence its operation, to specific political issue areas of the 1990s. Such opinion data make up Table 3 found below where trends can be noted and compared for each of the three categories mentioned.

[Table 3 about here]

As can be seen from those expressing satisfaction with the current Chilean democracy declined rapidly after 1991, with the total of those

Table 3

## Chilean Public Opinion, 1990-1998 (in %)\*

| Years:  | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 |         |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|---------|
| Areas:  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |         |
| a. Satisfaction with Chilean Democracy (total of "some" & "much") | 75   | 60   | 37   | 44   | 35   | 39   | 44   | 36   |         |
| b. Confidence in Institutions (total of "some" & "much")          |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |         |
| Catholic Church   | 76   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 60   | 66   | 63   | Central |
| Bank  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 50   | 44   | 41   |      |      |         |
| Carabineros   | 59   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 40   | 40   | 39   |         |
| Navy  | **   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 39   | 41   | 34   |         |
| Air Force   | **   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 39   | 42   | 34   |         |
| Government  | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 35   | 27   | 30   |         |
| Trade Unions  | 48   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 37   | 31   | 30   |         |
| Investigative Police  | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 29   | 28   | 29   |      |         |
| Army  | 41   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 36   | 34   | 29   |         |
| Public Administration   | 49   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 31   | 24   | ---  |         |
| Judiciary   | 44   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 25   | 16   | 22   |         |
| Chamber of Deputies   | ***  | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 26   | 20   | 21   |         |
| Senate  | 63   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 27   | 20   | 20   |         |
| Political Parties   | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | ---  | 14   | 14   | 14   |         |

Notes: \*\* = included with Army as "Armed Forces".

\*\*\* = included with Senate as "Parliament."

Table 3 (cont.)

Years: 1990 1991 1992 1993 1995 1996 1997 1998

c. Evaluation (in %)  
of Government  
Performance  
for Selected  
Issue Areas

("improved" conditions [+]  
minus "worsened" conditions [-])

|                       |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |           |
|-----------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------|
| Job Stability         | +7  | --- | --- | --- | -21 | -2  | -8  | -18 | State of  |
| Hospitals             | +8  | --- | --- | --- | -17 | -8  | -17 | -24 |           |
| Citizen Security      | -23 | --- | --- | --- | -4  | -18 | -58 | -43 |           |
| Environment           | +29 | --- | --- | --- | +11 | -11 | -23 | -40 | Access to |
| Housing               | +19 | --- | --- | --- | +12 | +25 | +20 | +11 |           |
| Opportunity for Youth | --- | --- | --- | --- | -19 | -10 | -6  | -28 |           |
| Quality of Education  | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | +22 | +11 |           |
| The Poor              | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | -24 | -32       |
| Social Inequality     | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | -24 | -32       |

Note: \* = The CERC polls used here are quota samples carried out quarterly in all cities of 40,000 people or more, representative of some 67% of the Chilean population; --- = missing data.

Sources: "Satisfaction with Chilean Democracy" from Centro de la Realidad Contemporanea [CERC] 1998c: 108; "Confidence in Institutions" from CERC 1998b: 104; "Evaluation of Government Performance" calculated from CERC 1998a: 107.

expressing either “some” or “a lot” of satisfaction never again reaching a majority of the total. What is also apparent is that the satisfaction level appears to rise in years of national elections, only to fall back thereafter. The notion that voters feel better about democracy during a national-level campaign is one that will be alluded to in the conclusions.

Interestingly, the three main reasons --in order of importance-- given for dissatisfaction with Chilean democracy in 1998 were “solutions wanted by the people are not provided”, “what was promised does not get done”, and “social inequalities/only the rich benefit.” These three accounted for 41 percent of such negative responses (CERC 1998c: 110). They suggest a lack of confidence by respondents in those running the democratic system.

In a similar fashion, popular confidence with major institutions declines noticeably between the figures for 1990 and more recent years. If several like the Catholic Church, the Carabineros (or national police), and congress all had majority support initially, only the Church remained by 1998 as a body trusted by the typical citizen. Of special importance is the extremely low standing most recently of the judiciary, both chambers of congress, and the political parties. In particular, parties had the weakest public trust, with only 14 percent of those polled expressing “some” or “much” confidence in them. The role of parties in the Chilean democracy is addressed in more detail below.

The same somewhat negative picture reappears when people were asked to evaluate government policy areas. The measure cited in Table 3 is an attempt to weigh positive against negative responses, by subtracting the second from the first. The resulting total is then presented either positively (indicated by a “+”) or negatively (by a “-“). If government performance was uniformly rated positively in 1991 on all those measures for which data was available then except “citizen security”--that is to say, crime against individuals--satisfaction levels have declined significantly in recent years. As of 1998, only “access to housing” and the “quality of education” received an overall positive rating. If “citizen security” was still seen as the least satisfactory area where it became an issue in the 1999-2000 presidential elections, it was now joined by the “environment,” the “situation of the poor,” and “social inequalities” as a quite negatively viewed issue area. One should note here that poverty had been a focus of considerable official attention in both the Aylwin and Frei administrations and equity had been coupled with economic growth as a Concertación campaign slogan in 1989 (Ruiz-Tagle, 1997; MIDEPLAN 1999; Epstein 1997: 3-6). Equity would return as an issue in the Lagos campaign of 1999 (*El Mercurio*, international ed., January 6-12, 2000: 4). While part of the popular dissatisfaction with most government policies seen here might reflect a natural exhaustion with a governing coalition after two terms in office (Agüero 1999: 2), there appears to have been a perception that many such policies were not especially effective.

The public opinion data reported here on Chilean democracy, particular institutions in that democracy, and issue performance suggest an overall pattern of citizens feeling themselves quite distant from a political system sometimes noted for its

elitist/technocratic approach to political decision-making (Garretón 1994: 228; 1999: 11-12; Baño 1997a: 20-21). These are the same citizens who when asked to choose between “whether in general the country is being managed by a few interests seeking their own benefit” or “for the benefit of all the people,” produced an 82 percent response for the more cynical alternative in 1998. In 1990 on the other hand, a plurality had chosen the more idealistic response, by a 48 to 39 percent margin (CERC 1998b: 65). Many of those running Chile do not appear to be viewed now by the typical citizen with as much trust as they were near the beginning of the present democracy.

CERC polls during the life of the current democracy in Chile show public interest in politics as having begun at quite modest levels and then declined sharply from 1995. More specifically, those claiming to be either “very or somewhat interested” in politics saw their share of the total fall from only 46 percent two months prior to the 1989 elections to between 23 and 26 percent in the 1995-1998 period. Correspondingly, those expressing “no interest in politics” saw their share rise from 27 percent in 1989 to between 40 and 47 percent of the total in the same interval during the Frei presidency (CERC 1998c: 96).<sup>6</sup> Such figures for these recent years indicate a degree of political apathy roughly analogous to adding to all those not registered to vote in 1997 all those then abstaining, all those casting a blank ballot, and many of those spoiling their vote. As will be shown next, high levels of political apathy are especially characteristic of many younger Chileans who demonstrate increasing disinterest in conventional politics.

#### Democratic Politics and the Young.

The low political participation of younger Chileans is facilitated by the voluntary nature of voter registration. Typically, increasing numbers of those coming of age do not bother to register then. Table 4 breaks down the percentage of those voting by age cohort for the elections of 1989, 1993, and 1997:<sup>7</sup>

[Table 4 about here]

As is readily apparent, the continuing decline over time of those in the 18-29 age group as a percentage of the whole population produces the relative increase of all those in each of the remaining cohorts.

The effect of non-registration on such a relative decline in voting by the young is suggested by the sharp fall in absolute numbers of those in the 18-19 year old bracket registered to vote for the same elections:

[Table 5 about here]

What is seen here is that the absolute numbers of those 18-19 years old so registered declined continuously from the election of 1989 through at least that of 1997, that is, from about 305,000 to only some 86,000 eight years later. If one can presume that the 18-19 year old group in the general population would not have shrunk at this time, this seems like a very large fall over such a short period. It is clear that a large part of that change has taken place in the four years corresponding to the first two-thirds of the Frei

presidency during which time the decline in those not registering was accelerating.<sup>8</sup> The figures of the same table reveal that those not registering include more females than males and where young women of this age group were passing up voting participation at a faster rate than men of the same age, as one moves from the earliest election data to later figures. Certainly, the young do not appear to have

Table 4

Voting by Age over Time  
(as % of column)

| Election:              | 1989   | 1993   | 1997   |
|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Age Cohort (in years): |        |        |        |
| 18-29                  | 35.99  | 28.58  | 19.89  |
| 30-39                  | 22.62  | 25.66  | 27.90  |
| 40-49                  | 16.15  | 17.70  | 20.26  |
| 50-59                  | 11.74  | 12.28  | 14.11  |
| 60-69                  | 8.08   | 9.10   | 9.86   |
| 70 & over              | 5.42   | 6.68   | 7.89   |
| Totals                 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 |

Source: Servicio Electoral Chile 1998: 7

Table 5

Voting Registration over Time for 18-19 Year-olds

| Elections: | 1989             | 1993             | 1997            |
|------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| All 18-19  | 304,599 (100.0%) | 243,985 (100.0%) | 85,586 (100.0%) |
| Males      | 163,588 (53.7%)  | 132,410 (54.3%)  | 51,623 (60.3%)  |
| Females    | 141,011 (46.3%)  | 111,569 (45.7%)  | 33,963 (39.7%)  |

Source: Servicio Electoral Chile 1998: 7

become very excited by electoral politics in the recent past; rather, apathy seems to be quite widespread and worsening among these, the newest potential citizens.

In studying particular political attitudes of Chileans where the data are disaggregated by age level, Garretón and Villanueva (1999: 42, 46) conclude that the views of the young are rarely all that much different than those of their elders. The young, however, have had the legal option of not bothering to register to vote and, thus, opting out of politics.

Where many younger Chileans in the years before the 1973 coup might have stood out as more ideological and prone to taking a confrontational attitude towards the political, such differences largely disappeared in the 1990s as they were absorbed into the popular consensus focusing on a more instrumental view of politics, itself characterized by quite modest expectations of what is now possible through the current democracy (Garretón and Villanueva 1999: 47, 67). The authors point to a portion of today's youth, those in the 25-29 bracket in the late 1990s, who were particularly affected by the mobilizational events surrounding the 1988 plebiscite ten years earlier when they were first coming of age. Although many are either apathetic or alienated from politics, those who remain more idealistic are more prone to express that attitude through activity sponsored by the Church, as opposed to that linked to the political parties (Garretón and Villanueva 1999: 68). Such a choice probably reflects the now quite discredited position of the parties referred to earlier.

#### The Reduced Role of Political Parties in Chile.

Given the importance assigned in a significant part of the academic literature on democratic transitions and consolidation to political parties in linking the state with society (see Haggard and Kaufman 1995: 14-15, 139, 153, 370), information on the current situation of Chilean parties seems quite relevant to this study of political apathy and alienation. As described in one source, parties now play a much more limited role than they once did even as recently as the popular mobilizations of the 1980s (Agüero, et al. 1998: 180-181). One would presume that it is during an actual political campaign of national proportions that politics achieves its greatest saliency for most citizens. In a study of the 1993 Chilean presidential election, some 69 percent of those citizens expressing a preference for a candidate claimed that they had never been contacted by any party during the campaign.<sup>9</sup> The same article contrasted party election campaigns prior to the coup with those today in terms of the replacement of the voluntary cooperation of party activists by the efforts of professional organizations hired to distribute leaflets and to make phone calls to potential voters (Agüero, et al. 1998: 174-175). The lessened effectiveness of such a commercialization of political campaigns may be a cause why many citizens report a notable sense of distance from the political. Similar comments are suggested elsewhere with reference to "a certain autonomy of the political which is becoming a specialized business of the politicians" (Baño 1999: 13).

As seen in Table 6, individual support for specific political parties shows some considerable changes in the 1989-1998 period.

[Table 6 about here]

The most important is the noticeable erosion of the position of the Christian Democrats. In the last half of the 1990s, their once dominant support fell to where it was now roughly balanced by the combined weight of the Socialists and the Party for Democracy, the two overlapping groups which make up the center-left of the Concertación coalition. The overwhelming triumph of their candidate, Ricardo Lagos, over the Christian Democrat Andrés Zaldívar in the coalition's May 1999 primary for the Concertación's nomination for president in the December 1999 elections (*El Mercurio*, international ed., May 27-June 2, 1999: 1-2) marked a continuation of this decade-long slide in support. After the disappointing first round of the most recent presidential election, important Lagos' supporters privately blamed their Christian Democratic allies for being unable to control the defection of more conservative party members to the right. Such a loss of Christian Democratic support which forced the presidential run-off in January 2000 seemed to have come particularly from individuals from lower middle to lower socio-economic backgrounds (*La Tercera*, December 13, 1999, internet edition). Perhaps equally significant is the strong increase in the percent of those Chileans claiming to be independent of any of the parties, doubling in size during the current democracy. Such a shift parallels the fall in popular

Table 6  
Individual Support for  
Particular Political Parties, 1989-1998  
(in %)

| Years:   | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996* | 1997 | 1998+ |    |
|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|------|-------|----|
| Parties: |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |    |
| PDC      | 38   | 34   | 29   | 32   | 33   | 35   | 28   | 23    | 25   | 22    |    |
| PPD      | 9    | 17   | 16   | 9    | 12   | 8    | 10   | 11    | 9    | 11    |    |
| PS       | 1    | 9    | 5    | 6    | 7    | 7    | 6    | 8     | 7    | 8     |    |
| RN       | 10   | 12   | 10   | 10   | 7    | 7    | 10   | 9     | 9    | 8     |    |
| UDI      | 4    | 6    | 8    | 5    | 4    | 4    | 4    | 6     | 6    | 7     |    |
| PR       | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 1    | 0    | --   | 0     | --   | --    |    |
| PC       | 1    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 3     | 2    | 3     |    |
| others   | 17   | 1    | 2    | 3    | 3    | 6    | 5    | 4     | 1    |       |    |
| none     |      | 12   | 9    | 10   | --   | 17   | --   | 22    | 21   | 12    | 22 |

Notes: PDC=Christian Democrats; PPD=Party for Democracy;  
PS=Socialists; RN=National Renovation; UDI=Independent  
Democratic Union; PR=Radicals; PC=Communists.

\* = average of 3 monthly figures; + = average of 2 monthly figures.  
-- = missing information.

Source: CERC 1998b: 132.

confidence in senators and deputies between 1988 and 1998 from 43 to 23 and 22 percent, respectively, and of all politicians from 30 to 18 percent in the same time period (CERC 1998b: 105). Especially indicative of the strongly negative recent image of parties is the increase from 56 to 65 percent between 1996 and 1998 of those Chileans agreeing with the view that “party interests have little to do with those of society” (CERC, 1998c: 115).

The weakness of political party links supposedly representing society may indicate a “crisis of social organizations” characterized by “increasing levels of disarticulation and even atomization” (Baño 1999: 12; 1997b). The widespread perception of distance felt by many citizens from the political and the resulting levels of apathy seem to be linked at least in part with the change in the nature and function of political parties. Here leaders of the Christian Democratic and Socialist Parties seem to have countenanced the loss their organizations’ character as socially-rooted mass parties and at least tacitly accepted the model of a demobilized society as that required for a successful market economy (Epstein 1997: 2-4; Roberts 1998: 120-121; Oxhorn and Ducatzenzeiler 1998: 10).

#### Conclusion.

The growing sense of distance between Chilean citizens and what is supposedly their government has been reflected in both public opinion and electoral behavior. Many people feel that they have little real influence over a government which seems prone to avoid public debate on controversial issues (Garretón 1999: 12). Not surprisingly, national elections have been times when citizen satisfaction with their democracy revives temporarily, if only to fall back as politics as usual resumes (here see Table 3a above). Obviously, it is during election campaigns that the politicians and their political parties must make a greater effort to establish contact with potential voters. But even here the recent changes noted for the political parties raise questions about the effectiveness of such contacts.

The lack of interest and the frustration felt about politics seem to have been influential in the decline in voter registration among those first coming of political age, the rising electoral abstention rates despite obligatory voting, and the increases in the number of blank and spoiled ballots cast--at least up until the presidential elections of 1999-2000. Such electoral behavior is seen here as indicating rising political apathy and even some political alienation.

While it is likely that some of the increasing abstention from voting and non-registration noted above may simply reflect a basic satisfaction with how Chile’s democracy managed the economy prior to the recession of 1999, the information provided here suggests that many Chileans have relatively little confidence in most of their basic institutions and question many areas of recent government policy.

The information contained in Table 7 presents comparative data on three possibly related matters seen as relevant to this discussion of what could be deemed the “quality” of Chilean democracy—low citizen interest in politics, the perceived efficacy of voting, and the presumed importance of the military in politics:

[Table 7 about here]

The comparison of the Chilean responses with those of other regional democracies in the same year, 1996, indicates that the political situation under discussion in Chile may be somewhat worse than in many other cases. Of the eight democracies listed in the source used, Chile had the second highest amount of “low interest in politics,” was tied for second lowest in “efficacy of voting,” and had the third highest for “influence of the military.”

In terms of most general notions about what democracy is about (see Karl 1991: 164-165), one can argue that the present Chilean institutional arrangement has aspects which degrade its essence as a fully meaningful democracy. Put in language consonant with the survey data just presented, a continuing military influence over major political matters may produce the feeling that voting results are unlikely to change Chile for the better, itself plausibly reducing citizen interest in the overall political process found in the present democratic regime. As suggested at the beginning of this essay, what many Chileans experience today is a “stalemate society” where voting results are quite unlikely to produce

Table 7

## Chilean Democracy in Comparative Focus

| Democracy | Low Interest<br>in Politics (%) <sup>+</sup> | Efficacy<br>of Voting (%) <sup>++</sup> | Power of<br>Military (%) <sup>+++</sup> |
|-----------|--|---|---|
| Argentina | 77   | 63                                      | 5                                       |
| Bolivia   | 79   | 51                                      | 22                                      |
| Brazil    | 77   | 60                                      | 20                                      |
| Chile     | 81   | 49                                      | 40                                      |
| Colombia  | 75   | 43                                      | 28                                      |
| Ecuador   | 73   | 58                                      | 46                                      |
| Peru      | 75   | 52                                      | 36                                      |
| Venezuela | 83   | 49                                      | 49                                      |

- Notes:
- + “Low interest in politics” is measured by adding responses of “little interest” and “no interest.”
  - ++ “Efficacy of Voting” was based on those who thought voting could produce a better future.
  - +++ “Power of military” reflects the choice of that institution as being seen as among more powerful in country.

Sources: Apoyo Opinión y Mercados 1997: 20, 23, citing Latinobarómetro 1996.

major changes in the balance of power, a situation likely to be precisely what military advisors intended when they designed the present constitution and the peculiar election rules in place from 1989 to the present (Bosworth and Munck 1997: 9-10).

The two rounds of the 1999-2000 presidential elections introduce some variation in the pattern of political participation discussed here, given the strong fall in the number of blank and especially spoiled ballots occurring then. Ought Chileans interested in the state of their democracy still to be concerned by what were interpreted earlier as signs of rising political apathy and alienation or should the results of the 1997 legislative election be seen as just a passing phenomenon? The view expressed here is that our understanding of the most recent elections would benefit from additional discussion.

A superficial answer as to the health of the new democracy in Chile attributes the change in voting to the closeness of the outcome recently, and the greater interest so generated. In turn, many observers sought to explain much of the closeness of these elections in terms of the unexpected 1999 recession which produced a wish among some to punish the Concertación by voting for the opposition candidate (Cavallo 1999) or the fear more conservative Chileans may have felt of a Socialist candidate as

opposed to a safer Christian Democrat. While such analyses are not wrong in as they refer to real events, they may miss a good deal of the subtlety of what probably took place.

From a somewhat different perspective, the present account seeks to link important stylistic aspects of the recent campaign noted by some commentators to the mentioned collapse of the blank and spoiled votes this time, in offering a more in-depth explanation of what took place. From this vantage, Lavín quite shrewdly decided to not only distance himself from the unpopular political parties by campaigning as an independent, but also made a concerted effort to reach out to parts of the general population. Early on, he made use of a questionnaire handed out by campaign workers in public places or administered by random telephone calls asking Chileans about their perceived needs (*El Mercurio*, international ed., April 8-14: 4). When asked about this popular consultation of voters who felt isolated from and ignored by the traditional parties, Lagos seemed to have missed the point by replying that everyone knew what the major problems were. Later as Lagos occupied weeks after winning the Concertación nomination trying to sort out the conflicting organizational claims and responsibilities of the different party factions represented in his campaign, Lavín won over many voters with his well publicized “caminata” among small groups of citizens throughout Chile, discussing local problems person to person (*El Mercurio*, international ed., July 8-14: 4; Agüero 1999: 2). Only after Lagos had lost most of his lead in the surprisingly close first round of voting in December, did the candidate of the Concertación seek to “recapture the streets” from Lavín by emulating the latter’s personalist campaign tactics before the January runoff (*El Mercurio*, international ed., January 6-12, 2000: 4).

What is suggested here is that many of those who in past elections had cast blank or spoiled ballots may now have been persuaded to vote for Lavín, attracted at least in part by his populist campaign orientation, itself suggesting someone different from the traditional party politicians commonly held in such low regard by many Chileans. Such speculation is based upon the identity of many of those who previously had failed to support any election candidate when at the polls. In terms of gender, social class position, and amount of schooling, those choosing to cast a blank or null vote in 1997 in the legislative elections appear much closer demographically to the voters who then supported an opposition candidate as opposed to one from the Concertación (Lehmann 1998: 32). Such previous apathetic or alienated voters might well have been won over to the candidate of the opposition in the next election.

The important decline in those voting blank or spoiling their ballots recently still leaves observers of Chilean electoral politics to deal with the continued rise in 1999-2000 in the number of abstaining voters and the very considerable number of non-registered younger individuals. Those choosing not to participate in any form have not been attracted by Lavín or anyone else. They still remain an important segment of the population outside the political system whose political behavior is characterized here as influenced by apathy. What is suggested from the 1997 post-election poll used here is that these non-participants are demographically different from those who actually go to

the polls but fail to cast a valid vote. They will be much more difficult to attract as long as present-day Chilean politics continues to appear so distant from what they think matters.

If the 1997 legislative elections may have aroused somewhat excessive concern for the degree of political apathy and alienation in Chile's democracy given the more recent presidential election results, there are still many individuals with little interest in the political system operating today. The view expressed here is that a significant part of the problem probably relates to the conditions referred to here as a stalemate society where voting preferences regularly fail to translate into desired political changes. The current third Concertación administration headed by President Ricardo Lagos must still deal with the institutional bottlenecks faced unsuccessfully by Aylwin and Frei before him like the Institutional Senators/"binomial" voting and the power of the military. Many may, indeed, be skeptical about the possibilities of change here (Agüero 2000: 4). Should Lagos fails as well, the amount of political apathy and alienation can be predicted to increase in future elections undermining the quality of Chile's new democracy still further. The recent enthusiastic greeting given Gen. Pinochet by the military upon his return from detention in Britain probably does not augur too well for those who hope that Chile's democracy will become more meaningful to a greater proportion of its citizens (*La Tercera*, March 4, 2000, internet version).

#### **Notes:**

1. Despite a larger aggregate vote for the Concertación's candidates in all legislative elections from those of 1989, the combination of appointed Institutional Senators and use of the "binomial" election formula always has resulted in the opposition controlling a majority of the members of the Senate. Consequently, the opposition is in a position there to block any legislation its members dislike.
2. While fines possibly as high as \$US 50-200 may be imposed for those not officially excused from voting due to sickness or travel, these fines are often covered by a later amnesty. Some municipalities are particularly active in collecting fines while others are less so (García Rodríguez 1999).
3. Some 92 percent of eligible voters were registered for the 1988 plebiscite where only 2.4 percent of these abstained (Agüero, et al. 1998: 168).
4. Those voting blank or spoiling their ballots were older than those not registering or abstaining. Rather, they were similar in age to those voting for any candidate, were somewhat more feminine than those supporting the Concertación but similar to those voting for the opposition, and from a somewhat more middle class background than those voting for the Concertación although less so than those voting for the opposition (Lehmann 1998: 32).
5. The author wishes to acknowledge the kindness of Sra. Carla Lehmann and the Centro de Estudios Públicos in Santiago for providing a copy of the data set on the

1997 legislative elections and permission for secondary analysis of the information contained there.

6. One additional category included in the same CERC question was that of “little interest” in politics.

7. Although the figures cited for voting in these three years are not clearly identified in the source as to the type of election to which they relate, one might presume that these statistics are all for the legislative elections taking place then.

8. The Frei administration was seen by many observers as especially prone to a “technocratic” approach to decision-making, something likely to reinforce a perception by citizens of a government distant from the people (Baño 1997a: 20).

9. Interesting, the same study suggests that television may play a surprisingly small role in helping voters to decide for whom they wish to vote (Agüero, et al 1998: 176).

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