

Reform Without Power: Chile’s Parliamentary Left from Allende to Boric

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The victory of José Antonio Kast in Chile’s 2025 presidential election ends a political cycle that began, improbably, with a subway fare hike six years earlier. In October 2019, a mass revolt shattered the image of stability that had long distinguished Chile from its neighbours. In October 2020, an overwhelming plebiscitary majority voted to scrap the Pinochet-era constitution. In December 2021, a former radical left student leader entered the presidential palace, promising to bury neoliberalism and inaugurate a new social pact. Less than four years later, an openly reactionary right has returned to the threshold of state power; this time, tanks were not necessary—ballots sufficed.

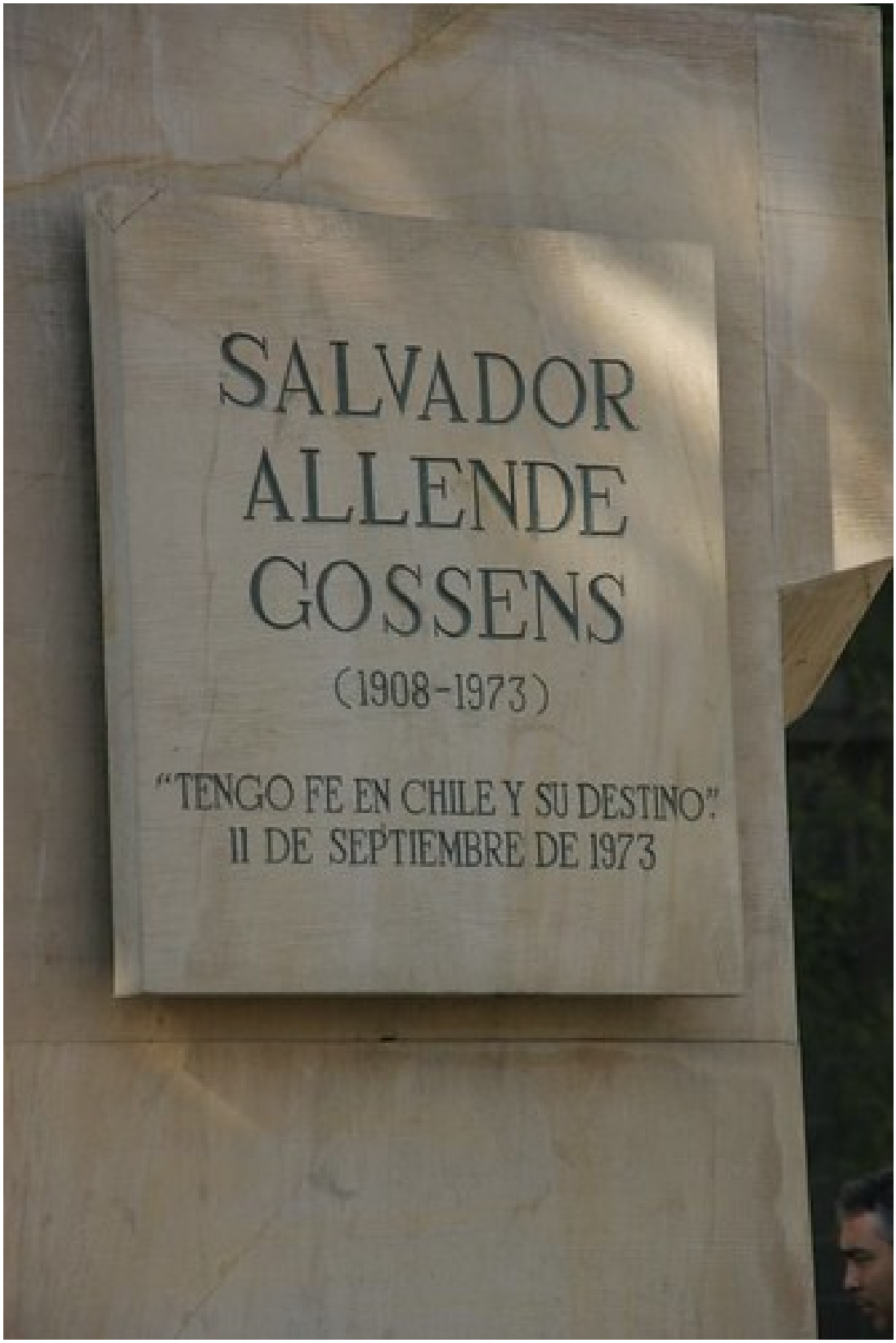
This reversal has already generated a familiar repertoire of explanations. For some, it reflects a global rightward drift, encompassing authoritarian consolidation in Europe, Trumpism in the United States, and the rise of Bolsonaro and Milei in Latin America.[i] Others emphasise contingent failures: inflation, insecurity, migration, crime.[ii] A third line of argument points to cultural backlash, suggesting that progressive overreach—on gender, plurinationality, environmentalism—alienated socially conservative voters.[iii] Each captures something real but none, on its own, is sufficient. Taken together, they obscure the longer historical conditions shaping Chile's democratic experiments—past and present—and deflect attention from a more fundamental problem: the limits of democratic politics within capitalist societies once reformist challenges approach the boundaries of property, accumulation and class power. These limits are not merely institutional; they emerge from democracy's uneven capacity to reorganise class relations without provoking counter-mobilisation.

Chile offers an unusually clear vantage point from which to examine this problem. An overt dictatorship first imposed neoliberalism here. A negotiated democratic transition later produced one of the Global South's most stable electoral regimes while leaving capitalist social relations largely intact. Earlier still, the twentieth century's most ambitious attempt at a parliamentary road to socialism (*la vía chilena al socialismo*) was violently suppressed—an experience that left not only profound trauma but a lasting strategic impasse for the left.

The present conjuncture compels a renewed analysis—not to commemorate Salvador Allende's defeat or rehearse binaries of reform versus revolution, but to examine the conditions under which democratic advances become

politically reversible. The comparison between the Popular Unity government of 1970–73 and the *Apruebo Dignidad* administration of 2022–25 is therefore neither nostalgic nor merely analogical. It serves as a probe into how class power is assembled, dispersed, and recomposed across distinct phases of capitalist development.

Beyond Inevitability


SALVADOR
ALLENDE
GOSSENS
(1908-1973)
"TENGO FE EN CHILE Y SU DESTINO".
11 DE SEPTIEMBRE DE 1973

Prevailing narratives of Allende's overthrow remain curiously static. Within the left, some accounts locate the coup primarily in US imperialism, emphasising CIA intervention, economic sabotage, and Cold War geopolitics.[iv] Others assign responsibility to Popular Unity itself, citing excessive legalism, reluctance to arm the working class or misplaced faith in bourgeois institutions. Despite their differences, these interpretations converge on a shared conclusion: the Chilean road to socialism was doomed from the outset.

This sense of inevitability has been politically disabling. If Allende's experiment was structurally impossible, its defeat offers little guidance beyond cautionary symbolism. Imperialist power or capitalist reaction appears destined to overwhelm any transitional path to socialism, leaving only two options: accommodation without transformation or confrontation without victory. Yet inevitability is a poor guide to historical explanation. Defeat does not prove impossibility; it indicates only that the balance of forces ultimately shifted. Analysis must therefore move beyond heroic counterfactuals to identify the mechanisms through which political openings expand or contract—and how such false dichotomies continue to shape left strategy well beyond Chile.

Viewed in this light, the coup appears less as the mechanical outcome of imperialist intervention or socialist error than as the result of a specific realignment of domestic class forces. External pressure mattered, but it became decisive only once Chilean elites succeeded in reuniting a previously fractured ruling bloc and securing the acquiescence—if not support—of key middle strata. Allende's constitutionalism did not neutralise popular power; on the contrary, the Popular Unity years witnessed one of the fastest expansions of working-class organisation and material gains in Chilean history. What

proved fatal was not reformism *per se*, but the failure to prevent elite reunification as economic crisis eroded the coalition's social base.

This distinction is not merely historical. It suggests that socialist projects are neither guaranteed success nor condemned to failure. Their viability depends on whether popular power can expand faster than ruling classes consolidate countervailing alliances. It is this dynamic—rather than abstract fidelity to institutions or insurrectionary virtue—that determines whether parliamentary democratic openings harden into durable transformations or collapse into authoritarian restoration.

Capitalism, Democracy and the Chilean Exception

Chile's post-1973 trajectory illustrates this dynamic with unusual clarity. The Pinochet regime did not merely repress the left; it dismantled working-class organisational capacities and restructured the economy to prevent their reconstitution. The restoration of democracy in 1990 preserved core institutional protections for capital: a subsidiary state, privatised social provision, fragmented labour relations, and constitutional constraints on redistribution. Electoral pluralism returned; class power did not.

For roughly two decades, this arrangement appeared stable. Growth was steady, poverty declined,[v] and alternation in office—first among centre-left governments, later including the moderate right—seemed to normalise democracy after authoritarian rupture. Beneath the surface, however, the contradiction between political equality and market dependence intensified. Social rights were increasingly commodified; insecurity generalised; labour remained atomised. The regime's legitimacy eroded long before its crisis

became visible.



The 2019 rebellion did not reflect sudden radicalisation but the exhaustion of a model that demanded discipline, flexibility, and individualised risk while failing to promise collective improvement. What followed—the plebiscite, the constituent process, and the election of Gabriel Boric—appeared to reopen a question, apparently, settled since 1973: whether Chilean democracy could be re-founded on social rights rather than market dependence.

Its failure, and the rapid resurgence of an authoritarian right, posed a problem symmetrical to that of the Allende years—though inverted. In the early 1970s, elites abandoned democracy once it no longer guaranteed their dominance. In

the 2020s, segments of the electorate have turned to the right because democracy, as recently practised, failed to improve material conditions. Understanding this reversal requires moving beyond culturalist explanations and electoral arithmetic toward an analysis of how the contemporary left governed—its relation with the working class, its engagement with capital, and its navigation of institutional constraints.

The argument advanced here is straightforward but demanding: the Chilean left's recent defeat was not the product of excessive ambition but of a strategic misalignment between its reform agenda and the sources of popular power capable of sustaining it. The contrast with Popular Unity is instructive—not because Allende "had the answers", but because his government faced a similar dilemma under far harsher conditions and, for a time, managed it more effectively. The analysis that follows reconstructs Chile's neo-liberal consolidation and the recomposition of class relations culminating in 2019, revisits the Allende experience to extract its strategic logic, and then examines the Boric government through that lens.

The aim is neither prophecy nor prescription. It is to clarify the conditions under which parliamentary democratic openings close—and to insist that their closure is a political outcome, not a historical law.

Remaking Society Under Neo-liberal Rule



Chile’s post-1973 order did not arise solely from repression. While the dictatorship’s brutality was fundamental in dismantling organised resistance, the endurance of neoliberalism was grounded in a more systematic reconfiguration of social relations—transforming how Chileans worked, consumed and lived their lives. Under the guidance of the Chicago Boys, the military regime dismantled the developmental state, privatised public enterprises, liberalised trade and finance, and substituted social provisions with market-driven mechanisms. The Labour Law was amended to fragment collective bargaining, prohibit sectoral coordination, and criminalise solidarity actions. Pensions, education, healthcare and housing were restructured to prioritise individual responsibility and private wealth accumulation.[vi]

Consequently, the outcome was not merely a smaller state but a fundamentally different society in which access to essential goods was mediated by debt and competition rather than collective rights.

When democracy was restored in 1990, this architecture remained largely intact. The negotiated transition overseen by the *Concertación*[vii] was explicitly designed to prevent a return to the polarisation of the early 1970s, embedding constitutional constraints and electoral mechanisms that ensured continuity. More decisively, the centre-left embraced the core premises of the neo-liberal model, promising to humanise them rather than dismantle them. For a time, this strategy appeared successful. Growth resumed, poverty rates fell, and Chile became a model student of international financial institutions. The new order generated a form of compensatory legitimacy: while inequality remained extreme, rising consumption and access to credit allowed large segments of the population to experience modest upward mobility. Democracy functioned primarily as a mechanism of elite rotation rather than social transformation, but it delivered sufficient material improvement to forestall mass opposition.

Yet this equilibrium rested on fragile foundations. The decline in poverty masked a deeper recomposition of class relations. Stable industrial employment gave way to subcontracting, informality, and service work; union density collapsed, along with the organisational capacities that once anchored the Left. A growing middle class found itself asset-poor, indebted and excluded from social programs targeting the very poor. By the early 2000s, signs of strain were already visible: trust in political parties plummeted, electoral participation declined once voting became voluntary, and dissatisfaction with pensions, education and health care was widespread. But

without strong collective organisations or a credible political alternative, discontent remained fragmented, absorbed into individualised strategies for survival.

The Return of Collective Action

What changed in the 2010s was not the extent of inequality but rather the reawakening of collective capacities. The student movement of 2011 was an important turning point. By challenging the commodification of education, it revealed the underlying logic of Chile's social model, re-legitimized mass protests as a political tool, and fostered a new generation of actors who were openly critical of the *Concertación's* alignment with neo-liberalism.

This resurgence did not remain confined to students. Over the following decade, diverse sectors mobilised against extractivism, environmental destruction, privatised pensions, and gender violence. The working class, long assumed to be irreversibly weakened, began to reassert itself. Subcontracted copper workers, dockworkers, teachers, and later health workers engaged in strikes that tested bosses' power in strategic sectors. While union density remained low by historical standards, these struggles demonstrated a renewed capacity to disrupt accumulation at key nodes of the economy.

This mobilisation was uneven and rarely coordinated. They did not coalesce into a unified movement capable of articulating a comprehensive alternative. Yet they mattered in two decisive respects. They rebuilt practical knowledge of collective action after decades of defeat, and they steadily eroded the legitimacy of the post-authoritarian settlement by exposing the widening gap between democratic form and social content.

The *estallido social* of October 2019 marked a pivotal moment when various currents converged. A fare increase initially sparked the rebellion, but a build-up of grievances drove it, manifesting as a generalised refusal rather than a coherent uprising. Millions took to the streets, normal routines broke down, and repression proved ineffective in restoring order without concessions. The subsequent plebiscite in October 2020—where nearly 80 percent voted in favour of a new constitution with particularly high turnout in working-class districts—formalized this rupture. It represented a plebiscitary withdrawal of consent from the institutional framework inherited from the dictatorship and managed under democratic neoliberalism.

At this point, a different trajectory was possible. The rebellion had not overthrown the state, but it had decisively weakened elite authority. The constitutional process offered a mechanism to translate diffuse anger into institutional change, and the election of a constituent assembly dominated by left and independent forces appeared to confirm the opening. Yet from the outset, tensions were evident. The movements that had caused the plebiscite were heterogeneous, loosely organised, and often wary of formal politics. The New Left, grouped around the *Frente Amplio* and later allied with the Communist Party, moved quickly to occupy the institutional space that emerged—understandably, since without representation constitutional reform would stall or be co-opted. But this shift also meant that the energy of the streets was rapidly rechannelled into a highly formalised process governed by legal procedures and media spectacle.

The constituent assembly became the symbolic centre of transformation. Its ambitions were expansive and, in many respects, laudable: social rights, plurinational recognition, gender parity and environmental protection. Yet its

mode of operation—fragmented, moralised, and often disconnected from the everyday insecurities of working people—left it exposed. The draft constitution spoke powerfully about recognition and participation but less clearly about wages, employment and material security. For many Chileans, it came to appear as an elite project of a different kind.

Gabriel Boric's election in December 2021 took place against this backdrop. His victory was real but fragile: he entered office with a narrow first-round base, dependent on a second-round coalition mobilised primarily to block the far right, and without a congressional majority. Unlike Allende in 1970, Boric did not lead a growing wave of organised working-class power that could exert pressure on elites from below. Constraints were therefore severe from the outset. What distinguishes this moment, however, is not the existence of such constraints—which are endemic to politics—but how they were navigated. The government's strategy rested on two assumptions: that constitutional reform would supply the legitimacy needed to overcome institutional vetoes, and that moderation and technocratic competence would reassure markets while preserving space for gradual reform.

Both assumptions proved misplaced. The rejection of the draft constitution in 2022 deprived the government of its central legitimating project, while concessions to business failed to secure elite cooperation and simultaneously alienated sections of its popular base. Authority eroded without compensatory gains in organisation, material security or elite fracture. By the time the second constitutional process delivered a right-dominated council, political initiative had shifted decisively. The rebellion's promise was neutralised, not through repression alone, but through exhaustion, fragmentation, and strategic drift. The space thus opened was filled not by a revitalised centre-

left, but by a hard right capable of translating diffuse insecurity into an authoritarian programme.

The Popular Unity Experiment



The experience of the Popular Unity government merits reconsideration as a strategic case to clarify the issue of transformation. The Allende administration stands as the most sustained effort to pursue significant social changes via the parliamentary route within a capitalist society. Its defeat is indisputable. However, defeat alone does not signify a strategic error or render historical possibility unattainable. The pertinent question is not why the UP failed in a general sense, but rather how and when the balance of

forces shifted decisively against it.

Two dominant interpretations have long structured the debate over the UP. According to one position, its downfall is primarily due to external intervention, particularly by the United States; the other place accuses Allende and his allies of excessive moderation or legalism. Both capture partial truths, yet neither fully explains the UP's survival or its collapse.

There is no doubt that US intervention was hostile, sustained, and damaging. Washington funded opposition parties, encouraged economic sabotage, pressured international lenders and welcomed the coup. Yet American power alone was not sufficient to determine outcomes. The United States failed repeatedly to prevent Allende's election, inauguration, and early reforms, and even covert operations—most notably the attempted kidnapping of General René Schneider—backfired, strengthening constitutionalist sentiment within the military. More importantly, external pressure became decisive only once domestic class alignments allowed it to operate effectively. Economic strangulation weakened the UP not mechanically, but politically—by amplifying shortages, inflation, and uncertainty that eroded support among wavering social groups. One can conclude with a degree of certainty that imperialist pressure succeeded because internal contradictions permitted it.

The more contentious debate concerns Allende's strategy. Critics from the revolutionary left have long argued that the UP doomed itself by clinging to bourgeois legality—by refusing to arm the working class, dismantle state institutions or accelerate expropriation beyond constitutional limits.[viii] This critique rests on a misleading counterfactual. It assumes that an insurrectionary rupture was both feasible and desirable. But the UP did not

come to power at the head of a revolutionary army or a collective strength of workers' councils. It emerged from decades of electoral struggle in a society with strong legal traditions, a substantial middle class, and a professionally trained military initially committed to constitutional norms.

More importantly, the UP did not seek an immediate transition to socialism. Its programme aimed to dismantle elite domination—imperialist control, monopolies and landed oligarchy—while expanding workers' material well-being and organisational power. Socialism was conceived as a process, not an event. Measured against this objective, the UP's record was formidable. By 1973, the state controlled the commanding heights of the economy, including copper, banking, foreign trade, and most large-scale industry. The public sector generated over half of the national output. Land reform had effectively eliminated the landed elite. Real wages rose by more than 20 percent in 1971; unemployment fell below 4 percent, and labour's share of national income exceeded 50 percent.[ix]

The expansion of working-class power was equally significant. Union density reached historical highs in strategic sectors, and new forms of organisation—such as factory councils, neighbourhood committees, and supply networks—emerged. Workers did not merely receive benefits; they exercised influence, often pushing the government beyond its initial intentions. From this viewpoint, the accusation of excessive moderation seems unfounded. UP systematically dismantled the economic foundations of elite power through an unprecedented wave of popular mobilisation. What ultimately proved fatal was not timidity, but rather the rapidity with which these advances incited counter-mobilisation among the threatened classes.

The Popular Unity's fundamental challenge lay in managing a contradiction inherent to socialist projects, i.e., expanding working-class power destabilizes existing social hierarchies, but doing so faster than new political majorities can be consolidated invited authoritarian backlash. For its first two years, the UP navigated this tension with notable success. Electoral support grew, surpassing 50 percent in the 1971 municipal elections; the opposition remained divided between conservatives and Christian Democrats; middle sectors were uneasy but not yet unified against the government; and the military remained formally loyal to constitutional order.

This equilibrium began to unravel in 1972. External pressure intensified, but domestic shifts proved more decisive. Economic disruptions—exacerbated by employer sabotage and global conditions—eroded real wages, while shortages and inflation strained everyday life. Workers largely continued to defend the government, but segments of the middle class and small proprietors increasingly aligned with opposition forces. The UP now confronted a narrowing strategic field. Accelerating confrontation risked civil war under unfavourable conditions; retreating from reforms threatened to demoralise its base. Allende pursued a third course: attempting to broaden the coalition for transformation by engaging progressive sectors within the Christian Democratic Party.

This strategy is often dismissed as naive, yet it rested on a concrete assessment of class alignments. A substantial minority of Christian Democratic voters—particularly among workers and peasants—supported structural reforms, including the socialization of key industries, while a left wing within the party, led by figures such as Radomiro Tomic, favoured collaboration with the UP to prevent reaction. Consolidating such an alliance

was never guaranteed to succeed, but it represented a plausible attempt to preserve elite divisions and expand a pro-socialist majority under parliamentary conditions.

The strategy's failure was not due to its incoherence, but rather to the simultaneous undermining from both sides. The Christian Democratic leadership ultimately aligned with the Right, fearing loss of control; within the UP, sectors of the Socialist Party and the MIR rejected compromise, treating confrontation as inevitable. The result was paralysis: negotiations stalled, elite unity advanced, and the window for coalition expansion closed. By the time of the March 1973 parliamentary elections, the UP still commanded 44 percent of the vote—an extraordinary showing under siege conditions. Yet it was no longer enough. The coup that followed was not the consequence of socialist weakness but, as explained earlier, of a strength that outpaced the capacity to reconfigure the broader political field.

What, then, does the Popular Unity experience teach? Not that transitional advances are impossible, nor that it guarantees sure success. Rather, it reveals a strategic terrain marked by asymmetric risks. Advancing too slowly risks co-optation and demobilisation; advancing too rapidly risks elite reunification and repression. There is no formula to resolve this tension. It must be managed conjuncturally, through continuous assessment of class alignments and organisational capacities.

The tragedy of the UP lies not in choosing the wrong path between reform and revolution but in being overtaken by a convergence of crises—economic, political, and international—that narrowed its room for manoeuvre. Its defeat was contingent, not predetermined. This conclusion matters because it

reframes the comparison with the present. The question is not whether Boric failed to replicate Allende's heroism, but whether the New Left has confronted a structurally similar dilemma—and how it has responded.

The strategic thread running through Chile's successive left experiments also intersects with a wider Latin American effort to theorise socialist advance under adverse conditions. Few figures were more attentive to this problem than Marta Harnecker, whose reflections after 1973 and during the Pink Tide sought to reconcile democratic legitimacy, state action and the gradual accumulation of popular power. Harnecker's insistence that transformative projects could neither bypass existing institutions nor survive without an organised and mobilised social base captured a central lesson of the Chilean experience, even as her later writings tracked the ambiguities of governing lefts during the Pink Tide. The relevance of her work here lies less in its doctrinal specifics than in its shared premise: that the viability of any parliamentary road to socialism hinges on whether governing projects expand, rather than erode, the collective capacities of working people. It is precisely on this terrain—of class power, organisation, and strategic orientation—that Chile's contemporary impasse must be assessed.

The New Left in Power



When Gabriel Boric took office in March 2022, Chile appeared to be living through a second historic opening. A decade of escalating protest, culminating in the 2019 rebellion, had shattered the legitimacy of post-authoritarian neo-liberalism. The party system that had governed since 1990 lay discredited. A constituent assembly dominated by left and independent forces was drafting a new charter. The business elites found themselves fragmented and on the defensive. Although the working class remained weak by historical standards, it had recovered strategic leverage in mining, ports, and public services. Few moments since 1973 have offered such a favourable conjuncture for reform.

Within two years, the opportunity for reform had closed. The draft constitution was rejected by a decisive margin. Core reforms stalled or were diluted.

Electoral momentum shifted sharply toward a reconstituted right, including an authoritarian current that soon came to dominate the opposition. Unlike in 1973, no tanks were required: the New Left was overtaken through entirely constitutional means.

This reversal cannot be explained by adverse circumstances alone. It reflects a strategic choice that structured the Boric government's approach from the outset. Rather than synchronising institutional reform with renewed pressure from below, the administration adopted a strategy of sequencing: constitutional transformation first, substantive redistribution later. Mass mobilisation was viewed less as a lever to be activated than as a risk to be contained.

The consequences of this choice were cumulative. By deferring material reforms, the government forfeited the opportunity to deliver early gains capable of consolidating popular support. Business elites were granted time to regroup, while unions and social movements received clear signals that their role in shaping policy had become secondary. Protest declined—not only because of pandemic conditions, but because no effective channels existed through which collective pressure could meaningfully influence outcomes.

From this point onwards, the political dynamic shifted. Structural constraints—post-pandemic inflation, subdued investment, fiscal limits—did not simply impose themselves from outside; they were interpreted through a governing orientation that treated them as reasons for restraint rather than as terrain for contestation. In contrast to the Popular Unity government, which had sought to weaken capital's veto power by expanding public ownership and strengthening organised working class, the Boric administration

responded to resistance by scaling back its ambitions. Labour reform was diluted, pension transformation deferred, and fiscal restructuring postponed in the hope of securing elite acquiescence.[x]

The effect was not stability but erosion. As real wages stagnated[xi] and insecurity persisted, the gap between reformist discourse and everyday experience widened. The government's legitimacy weakened, not primarily because of ideological backlash, but because its project failed to translate electoral mandate into material improvement or expanded social power. In this context, the right was able to reconstitute itself around themes of order, authority and economic realism—presenting itself as the only force capable of decisive action.

Nowhere were the consequences of this strategic orientation clearer than in the constituent process. The new constitution became a symbolic centrepiece of reform, invested with expectations it could not meet. Its failure was not primarily procedural but substantive. While the draft articulated an ambitious catalogue of rights, it remained opaque on how core sources of insecurity—wages, employment stability, pensions, housing and debt—would be addressed. For many working people, the text appeared morally expansive yet economically indeterminate, weakening confidence in its capacity to deliver redistribution or security.

The plebiscite loss in September 2022 can't be interpreted as a social no-confidence against reform in general. Polling consistently showed strong support for public pensions, universal healthcare and stronger labour protections. What voters rejected was a project that appeared disconnected from material improvement and a political class unable to convert promise

into protection.[xii] The defeat shattered the government's momentum, legitimised elite narratives of "excessive radicalism", and opened space for a rapid right-wing resurgence. Within months, the far-right Republican Party emerged as the dominant opposition force.

The contrast with 1973 is instructive. Then, the elites abandoned democratic rule because it no longer sufficed to contain organised working-class power. Today, they have regained initiative precisely because such power was never consolidated. By prioritising institutional stability over social leverage, the New Left facilitated the rehabilitation of discredited actors and enabled an authoritarian reorganisation of the political field.

Two Comfortable Myths

Two consoling myths continue to shape interpretations of Chile's recent trajectory. The first is the myth of institutional sufficiency: the belief that progressive constitutions, enlightened leadership, and procedural democracy can, by themselves, carry a project of egalitarian transformation through entrenched capitalist resistance. Chile, after 2019, demonstrates the opposite. Institutional openings that are not underwritten by organised social power remain politically fragile and readily reversible.

The second is the myth of inevitable backlash: the claim that any serious reform effort must provoke authoritarian reaction and that defeats such as 1973—or the present rightward turn—are therefore unavoidable. Historical comparison suggests otherwise. Authoritarian closure is not an automatic response to reformist advances, but a contingent outcome shaped by shifts in class power and political organisation. Backlash occurs not simply because

reform goes “too far”, but because it alters—or fails to alter—the balance of forces in ways that invite elite reunification or popular disengagement.

Across Chile’s two decisive left experiments, one variable proves decisive: whether governments in power expand or contract the collective capacities of working people. Where those capacities grow, reform acquires social weight and political durability. Institutional projects lose their footing when they stagnate or erode, no matter what their official goals are.

We can read the divergent outcomes of Popular Unity and the Boric administration through this perspective. Under Popular Unity, material gains, rising union density, and new forms of worker participation altered class relations in tangible ways, provoking fierce resistance from threatened elites. Under the New Left, reform unfolded largely without a comparable expansion of organised working class or popular leverage. Collective bargaining remained fragmented; pensions and taxation retained their commodified structure; employment insecurity persisted. Often, the New Left managed mobilisation rather than cultivating it.

The predictable consequence was not immediate reaction but political drift. Elites regrouped in the absence of sustained pressure from below. Working-class voters, experiencing little material relief, disengaged or gravitated toward authoritarian alternatives promising order and protection. The right advanced less by defeating a strong left than by occupying the vacuum left by a stalled reform project.

The constituent process condensed these dynamics. The draft constitution failed not because it was “too radical”, but because it remained weakly

connected to material redistribution and everyday economic security. While rich in institutional innovation and symbolic recognition, it offered few clear guarantees regarding wages, pensions, housing, or debt. For many working people, it appeared morally ambitious yet economically indeterminate—an aspiration without a credible social foundation.

Such an issue was not merely a problem of messaging. It reflected a deeper misalignment between the social base of the New Left and the heterogeneous coalition that had animated the 2019 rebellion. Constitutions, however progressive, cannot substitute for ongoing struggles over material conditions. When detached from such struggles, they become vulnerable to elite counter-framing and popular scepticism alike.

Seen in this light, the resurgence of Chile's far right should not be understood as a sudden ideological conversion to reaction. It is better read as a symptom of an unresolved crisis. When neo-liberalism loses legitimacy but reform fails to deliver security, fear and resentment develop authoritarian outlets. Chile's specificity lies not in the uniqueness of this pattern, but in the clarity with which it has unfolded.

Parliamentary Transformation and Its Limits

Chile's recent cycle does not offer a model to be emulated, nor a warning to retreat but something more demanding: a clarification of the conditions under which parliamentary transformation can be sustained in capitalist societies marked by high inequality, weak workers' organisation and mobile capital.

The central lesson is not that reform provokes backlash, nor that institutions

are irrelevant. It is that institutions cannot substitute for power. Electoral mandates, constitutional openings and progressive administrations acquire durability only insofar as they are anchored in organised social forces capable of reshaping material relations and disciplining elites. Where such forces are absent or eroded, democratic advances remain contingent, vulnerable to reversal and prone to exhaustion.

This places contemporary left projects before a strategic dilemma that cannot be resolved through moderation or acceleration alone. Governing within capitalist democracies entails navigating structural constraints that are real but politically mediated. Treating those constraints as immutable invites accommodation and drift; confronting them without a social base invites isolation. The problem is not to choose between reform and rupture in the abstract but to construct pathways through which reform expands the very capacities required to sustain it.

Chile demonstrates the costs of failing to do so with unusual clarity. A crisis of neo-liberal legitimacy created an opening, but the absence of sustained working-class empowerment allowed that opening to close without fundamental transformation. The result was not stabilisation but recomposition—of elites, of narratives, and of authoritarian alternatives able to mobilise insecurity where reform had promised protection.

None of this renders socialism impossible. But it does impose a hard constraint. No parliamentary strategy can remain relevant unless it continuously produces the social power needed to keep it valid. That power cannot be improvised at moments of crisis nor deferred to institutional design. It must be built deliberately, materially and in advance.

In this sense, Chile's experience returns us to a truth that remains unfashionable but unavoidable: socialism is not secured by winning elections or drafting constitutions alone. It is secured—if at all—by transforming the balance of forces that gives those victories meaning.

i Pablo Stefanoni, *¿La rebelión se volvió de derecha?* Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2021; and V-Dem Institute, Nord, Marina, Martin Lundstedt, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Cecilia Borella, Tiago.

ii Michael Roberts, "Chile: Another Turn to the Right," *The Next Recession*, November 16, 2025.

iii International Crisis Group, *Chile's Constitutional Reckoning*, Latin America Briefing No. 62, 29 August 2022; see also Kenneth M. Roberts, "Chile's Party System Collapse and the Challenge of Democratic Representation," *Latin American Politics and Society* 64, no. 3 (2022).

iv National Security Archive, *Chile and the United States: Declassified Documents*, George Washington University. Also see, Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File*, The New Press, 2003.

v Alfredo Joignant et al., work on post-authoritarian Chile; Carlos Ruiz Encina *De nuevo la sociedad; and* UNDP Chile reports.

vi Manuel Gárate Chateau, *La Revolución Capitalista de Chile* (Spanish, definitive).

vii The *Concertación*, the centre-left coalition that governed Chile from 1990

to 2010 while preserving the core neoliberal institutions of the dictatorship

viii For contemporaneous left critiques of Popular Unity's legalism, see Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 10.

ix For wage growth, employment, union density, and the expansion of worker control under Popular Unity, see Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), esp. chs. 4–6. And, on public-sector expansion, income redistribution, and employment trends under Popular Unity, see Ricardo Ffrench-Davis, *Economic Reforms in Chile* (London: Palgrave, 2002), ch. 2.

x Pablo Stefanoni, *La Rebeldía se Volvió de Derecha* (Siglo XXI, 2021).

xi Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE), *Índice de Remuneraciones Reales*, Chile, 2022–23.

xii See Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP), *Estudio Nacional de Opinión Pública*, various waves 2019–2022; also CADEM, *Encuesta Plaza Pública*, May–September 2022. Across surveys conducted before and after the constitutional plebiscite, support for a public pension system, universal healthcare, and stronger labour protections consistently exceeded 70 percent, including among voters who rejected the draft constitution.

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