

TELEVISION IN THE CHILEAN PLEBISCITE OF 1988

PETER A. QUILTER

With the recent departure of Paraguay's General Alfredo Stroessner, Chile's Augusto Pinochet is the only remaining political strongman in South America. Even in Chile today, political forces are negotiating a transition to a more pluralist society. Perhaps the event most responsible for this movement is the Chilean plebiscite of October 1988. Peter Quilter takes us back to the month preceding the vote, and focuses on the role of television in a curiously restrained political environment. The story of those twenty-eight days gives us much insight into the nature of Chilean society under military rule, and importantly, what awaits it in the future. This is the story of the brief appearance of opposition advertisements on television, and the impact it had on the Chilean plebiscite.

INTRODUCTION

On October 5, 1988, the people of Chile voted to stand behind the uncertainty of a new beginning and rejected the candidacy of fifteen year strongman, Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. The logo of the victorious opposition, large black letters spelling "no" with a brightly colored rainbow in the background, embodied many of the paradoxes of the election. Though everyone realizes this is only the first small step in the long road back to Chile's democratic tradition, clearly the military regime of General Pinochet was handed its most significant defeat since coming to power in a violent *coup* in 1973.

At stake was a step in the "protected democracy" track that Pinochet had laid out years before. Chileans were voting to ratify the military *junta's* choice of a transition candidate to preside over the very gradual demilitarization of the highest echelons of Chile's government. Logic suggested the candidate would be a conservative civilian or, more likely, a military man who would resign his post to serve as Chile's first civilian president since Salvador Allende. Pinochet chose himself.

This is the third plebiscite called by the Pinochet regime since he came to power; the two others determined the constitutional path by which this plebiscite took place. Procedurally, the three had one thing in common: all were a "yes" or "no" vote on an issue stipulated by the *junta*. The October plebiscite differed because Pinochet billed it as the first, clear step in the return to democracy. This was also the first time since 1973 that the opposition

Peter Quilter lived in Chile for eight years and is a candidate for the M.A.L.D. degree at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

had access to the media, though limited, to "advertise" its position. "The parties are in luck,"¹ quipped the pro-government weekly *Qué Pasa*, as Pinochet opened up television air time for the first time in fifteen years to the sixteen recently legalized opposition parties. It was September 5, 1988, a month before the plebiscite.

This first time access to television, a medium which since 1973 has been under complete *junta* domination, took most Chileans by surprise. The opposition parties scrambled to figure out what to make of the new opportunity. The government, with fifteen years of experience in political TV ads, looked on, amused at the initial pandemonium. Yet as the dust cleared and the opposition claimed victory, this small concession to the opposition may have become the most significant decision of the plebiscite.

CHILE, TELEVISION, AND POLITICS

Nobody believes much of what's on television in Chile. Still, everyone watches. To a great extent, television in Chile has grown alongside Pinochet's regime, as the government's propaganda machine tells us tirelessly. In truth, that growth has been impressive; four-fifths of all Chilean households today have a television set. One study indicates there are far more televisions than households, 4 million sets to 2.6 million homes.²

In addition, television operation has been almost completely privatized since the 1970s. At that time, even the independent Catholic University station (channel 13) was 60 percent government financed. The other channels were almost completely funded by the state. Channel 7, visibly the best funded station, is still owned and operated by the government. But by the mid-1970s, all channels were forced to join the commercial world to survive as money dried up in economic hard times. A small boost came from the World Cup soccer championships of 1978, which also launched color television for Chile. Even so, as television privatized, the regime's editorial control did not diminish, giving rise to Chilean television's "Achille's heel."

The history of television has also been a fight for credibility. A 1987 "Which do you believe?" poll sponsored by the well-reputed FLACSO (Facultad Latino-Americana de Ciencias Sociales) comparing the three sources of news — television, radio, and newspapers — put television in last place at a mere 14 percent. Newspapers were more likely to be believed at 18 percent, and, predictably, radio ran away with 41 percent.³ When they want the real story, Chileans clamber for their radio.

Radio has always been the source of Chileans' news. There are 30 million radios in Chile, covering 99 percent of all households. Feeding them are 316 stations, 56 in Santiago alone. Buenos Aires, by comparison, with twice the population, has only 22. The functional lines between radio and television are

1. M.E. Fernandez, "Los Partidos Están Con Suerte," *Qué Pasa*, 28 July 1988, 12 [all quotes translated by the author].

2. M. Carvallo, "La Política 'Clip'," *HOY*, 15 August 1988, 26.

3. E. Fernandez, "Con Viento a Favor," *Qué Pasa*, 25 August 1988, 2.

clearly drawn; radio is the credible medium for news; television's much larger audiences accept it more as entertainment. Strangely, as more people have turned to television for entertainment, so have they for news. Today, 80 percent of Chileans get their news from television.⁴ Yet, few believe what they see.

We need not search very far to explain television's credibility problem: it is unquestionably the government's medium. Opposition magazine *Apsi* put it more strongly, describing television as:

the most important resonance-box of the government, which it uses no holds-barred to disseminate its ideology, disqualify the opposition, and project an image of Chile that perhaps only exists in the minds of their promoters.⁵

Besides jealously guarding access to it, the military administration is well aware of the power of the visual media. Just two months before the plebiscite, Ricardo Lagos, prominent spokesman of the moderate left, appeared in a TV news program and accused Pinochet of "excessive political ambition." Lagos had for years called Pinochet every name in the book, on radio shows, in live appearances, and in the press. But never on television. The response from the government was sensational. The interior minister accused Lagos of sedition, the defense minister denounced these as false and insolent rantings, the labor minister accused Lagos of spreading a "socialism of hate."⁶ Perhaps the government was worried that someone, somewhere might believe.

Censorship of TV programs is also well known. Bringing to light another paradox of Chilean society, squabbles about censorship are regularly reported in papers and on radio, yet television seldom airs its own "dirty laundry." Images or coverage of a big news story — a raid in a *poblacion*, or coverage of an anti-government demonstration, for instance — is conspicuously absent from television. Further illustrating the *junta's* preoccupation with images, in 1984 four weekly magazines were prohibited only from publishing photographs to accompany stories. Not even in thirty-nine years of censorship in Franco's Spain was this peculiar device attempted.⁷ The content of news programs is heavily controlled by the military regime, even on channel 13, the most independent station. *Apsi* quotes an understandably anonymous source at that channel explaining the unprecedented control of the government on its news programs: tours and events where Pinochet is a participant are obligatory subjects for coverage, but are shown more descriptively to disguise their political campaign characteristics. He goes on:

4. Carvallo, 26.

5. V. Parrini, "El Fraude de la Televisión," *Apsi*, 22 February 1988, 6.

6. M. Vodanovic, "La Planificada Histeria del Regimen," *Apsi*, 2 May 1988, 8.

7. In good humor, the four publishers chose to print black squares in place of the photographs. One caption read: "General view of the IMF plenary. In the foreground speaking, Argentine Minister Bernardo Grinspun. In the back, to the right — way in the back and way off to the right — the Chilean delegation." Hernan Millas, *Las Señoras Censoras*, Ediciones Caperucita Rojas de Feroz, 1985, 28.

In these past months — it's not clear who gave the order — there has been an attempt [by Channel 13 news] to improve the image of the *carabineros*, showing otherwise non-newsworthy material, like the forces' new car radios, and various cases of missing old ladies, later found by using the forces' new computers. In any case, the political opening is noticeable to us: these days we're receiving less vituperation (*garabatos*) from the National Communications Directorate since the plebiscite is coming and they have to watch their image.⁸

As the October vote approached, a source at channel 11 explained how censorship became more "flexible", principally with an eye to improve the "quality of the [TV] product."⁹ As if this were not enough, the government is known to keep black-lists controlling who appears on television, regardless of the channel.¹⁰

So too, since 1973, programming on every channel is riddled with political commercials touting every accomplishment of the government. Predictably, approaching the three plebiscites, the ads became much more frequent and took on a fearsome quality, depicting an imaginary, violent future if "Chile loses." For October 5, it was more of the same. The "Command for the no" coordinating group calculated that in July alone 1,214 pro-government ads aired on television — nearly 39 each day. Underscoring its emphasis on television, the government placed only 300 ads in the print media.¹¹

THE LAW

With this rather stark legacy, Chileans were surprised in mid-July to learn of the *junta's* plan to pass a law stating that from September 5, 1988, the "yes" and "no" sides would each be allowed free TV time for their own political commercials.

Negative reactions came from all directions. Pro-government quarters cried wolf at the prospect of a "US style" voting environment; the TV channels complained that no one could make them broadcast anything free of charge; the opposition decried the government's unfair advantage — its financial muscle and fifteen years of experience. This was, they claimed, no concession at all.

Nevertheless, the constitutionality of the law was approved by the Supreme Court, pro forma, and the ground rules were set:

1. Each side would have fifteen minutes, back-to-back, beginning at 10:45 at night, alternating each night who goes first.

8. Parrini, 8.

9. Parrini, p.8.

10. V. Parrini, "Entretelones de una Apertura Congelada," *Apsi*, 24 October 1988, 22.

11. Carvallo, 27.

2. TV time is free of charge, but is the only time political ads may appear each day, paid or unpaid.

3. The ads are to be screened for "technical specifications" twenty-four hours before air time by the government's National Council of Television (CNTV).

The time slot came at the tail end of prime-time. Confirming an understandable apprehension of the TV channels, the roughly 270 million pesos per channel that this month-long campaign would incur was to be absorbed by each TV station. Censorship fears, arising from the technical pre-screening requirement, were quickly allayed by Denis Lustig, executive secretary of CNTV: "Any abuses, such as libel, will be determined by law. Therefore, there will be no *control previo* (read: censorship) of the programs."¹² Finally, claiming they were not specifically mentioning the plebiscite, the government had no qualms continuing its other political TV ads up until September 5, 1988, clearly violating the "no other ads" portion of its own law.

THE "NO" CAMPAIGN

The problems for the "no" campaign were two-fold: first, it had to find a way to pin a happy face on a stark "no!", not an easy task in a medium that communicates primarily visually.¹³ Second, as spelled out by a Chilean sociologist, "not only must they concentrate on the plebiscite, they must also fight fifteen years of adverse propaganda, in which a lot of things were put in Chileans' heads."¹⁴ Sports commentator Patricio Banados, anchorman of the "no" campaign, called it "fifteen minutes in fifteen years . . . it's not much."¹⁵

Disadvantages notwithstanding, it was easy to assemble the labor force necessary to prepare the campaign. Volunteers poured in from all quarters, including high-profile television and sports personalities. Juan Gabriel Valdez, in charge of the TV campaign, identified its principal goals as:

. . . to show the people a country they have not seen in these years. An optimistic country, that looks to the future and is not fixated on 1973. From here the idea that happiness is possible in Chile. The second task is to show the social problems of the majority of Chileans."¹⁶

12. M. Carvallo, "El Turno del Consejo," *Hoy*, 15 August 1988, 29.

13. In a special November 10, 1988, edition of ABC's *Nightline*, CBS commentator Leslie Stahl recounts an example of the scope of this problem. One of her campaign coverage segments rebuked Reagan's somewhat vacuous TV ad imagery — smiles, appearances with children, families, workers, minorities — which she showed with a voice-over contrasting the images and his policies. The segment finished, phone calls poured in from Reagan's campaign thanking Stahl for showing all the wonderful pictures of their candidate. "Nobody listened to anything you said".

14. Carvallo, 31.

15. R. Brodsky, "La Alegría del No," *Hoy*, 12 September 1988, 16.

16. R. Moulian, "Entre el Terror y la Alegría," *Apri*, 12 September 1988, 21.

Eleven directors filmed for twenty-five days on everything from accomplishments of the Pinochet government, to torture, to exile, to the *desaparecidos* (Chile's missing). The first "spot" introduced what became the campaign's leitmotif, a happy collage of grinning Chileans, young people bearing T-shirts of the "no" with a rainbow background, all to the catchy tune "Chile, la alegría ya viene" — happiness is coming. The "no's" television campaign was underway.

BUSINESS AS USUAL FOR THE *CASA DEL SÍ*

It is not unfair to say the "yes" campaign had been in place for fifteen years. A casual viewing of Chilean television would make that abundantly clear. Indeed, many of the ads were already familiar to the Chilean viewing public. The new task was to contend with a specific format and structure. The *si* logo was dotted with a high-tech star and accompanied by another catchy tune. The familiar themes, told in a rather dry manner, remained: economic accomplishments of the government and housing improvements for Chileans. The new twist was a concerted effort to project two schizophrenically disparate images. First, a new, "civilianized," Pinochet, a smiling, warm man in a business suit — a comforting *caudillo*. The other was a dark admonition of images of the 1973 coup: street fighting, blood, death. "Is this the Chile you want?"

THE BATTLE PROFILED

On the screens, the waves were transformed into a political incident, in which for 30 minutes of propagandistic swirl, the "yes" and "no" camps of the plebiscite confronted each other for the first time.¹⁷

The nightly half-hour broadcasts of the "yes" and "no" political ads became the highest rated TV programming in the history of Chilean television. They averaged 65 points each night, that is, 4.5 million viewers at any one time.¹⁸ By the plebiscite's end, fully 93 percent of the registered voters had watched the spots. From every corner of the country, the people would set aside anything they were doing, or postpone their sleep, to watch the new show: the government against the ethereal opposition, on a level playing field, in a sparring match of commercials. Each day, bars, restaurants and dinner tables were abuzz with commentary on the previous night's showing. For the entire month, this nightly segment was the talk of the country.

In the best tradition of television politics, each camp scrambled to keep up production of new material, frequently in response to the other's jab. For instance, the *Casa del Sí* quickly countered the damage of the Caszely segment with a disclaimer ad (see sample "no" #1), in which several old ladies

17. Ibid.

18. A.M. Gibson, "Sumando y Restando," *Qué Pasa*, 13 October 1988, 10.

purporting to be neighbors of Mrs. Caszely, disputed her claims. The mission for the ensuing days quickly became to find out who these old ladies were, and what was their, as of yet uncorroborated, story. Unprecedented in fifteen years, politics was suddenly fun.

At mid-month, the government committed an unqualified blunder. On September 12, General Pinochet spoke at a ceremony for the conservative *El Mercurio* newspaper, extolling its virtues, remarking, "freedom of the press is the base for all other public liberties."¹⁹ That same night, Chileans gathered for another round of ads only to see the "no" space used to transmit a sign that accused the "no" forces of violating the CNTV norms for political broadcasts. Though the offending segment was two minutes long, and they were offered the chance to replace it with another ad, the "no" campaign refused to broadcast anything that night. Tactically, this proved to be brilliant.

The ad (see sample ad #2) had been pulled during the "technical merits" pre-screening by CNTV Executive Secretary Denis Lustig, who previously assured this could not happen. The principal offending passage brought up the issue of torture for the first time: respected Judge Rene Garcia Villegas appears stating he has over fifty cases of torture on his court dockets against members of the Central Nacional de Informaciones (CNI), Pinochet's secret police. With a haste reserved for those within the country's bureaucracy, the Supreme Court procured a restraining order, the ad was pulled, and Villegas was harshly sanctioned.

The reaction was predictable. Angry viewers banged pots and pans from balconies in protest; the press rushed to publish interviews with the judge and reports of the brazen censorship; the diplomatic community scrambled to lodge protests; even in the United States the networks carried the story.

Pinochet, embarrassed by the splash, quickly responded by forfeiting the "yes" time for the following evening. The sign on the television read, "His Excellency the President of the Republic has decided that tonight's *Sí* space not be used in order to maintain equality of conditions for the political debate."²⁰ If nothing else, this was a chance to show the new, kinder, gentler Pinochet.

The month wound down and, as stipulated in the enabling law, all political ads went off the air three days before the vote. On October 5, 7.4 million Chileans went to the polls, cast their ballots, and returned home quietly. No celebration was permitted until all votes were in. In unprecedented numbers, Chileans turned on their televisions to await results and, with few votes counted, the initial returns put the "yes" on top. As results came in increasingly partial to the "no" camp, TV coverage diminished commensurately. By about ten o'clock at night, when apparently the results were clear, and with reporters of each channel deployed at the government house, the *Comando del No*, and the *Casa del Sí*, TV viewers found themselves watching movies.

19. N.F. Mosciatti, "Ese Recurso que Tienta," *Apri*, 19 September 1988, 6.

20. Muller and Villaroel, "El Caos del Spot," *Hoy*, 19 September 1988, 17.

Sample "No" Spots

#1 An old woman appears on screen, and quietly tells of her treatment after the '73 coup; "I was kidnapped from my home, and taken to an unknown place, blindfolded. I was tortured. I have never told everything that happened, out of respect for my husband, my family, and out of self-respect." A young man enters, puts his arm around the woman, and says he will vote "no" to Pinochet, "because this beautiful woman is my mother." The man is Carlos Caszely, perhaps Chile's most famous soccer star. The ad ends with an upbeat call for a better tomorrow.

#2 The scene opens with a sit-in on the stairs of Santiago's main library. The voice-over explains, "this demonstration against torture in our country has never appeared on television. And yet, it is news." The demonstrators, among them nuns, then lift banners and cry out "Television is their accomplice!" Carabineros quickly and violently break up the action. A reporter asks a man on the street why he thinks television lies. "Because a form of lying is silence . . . the silence that masks torture. And television has done that for 15 years. The Catholic channel, too."

At this point, criminal Justice Rene Garcia Villegas appears on the screen and speaks of 50 cases in his docket of torture perpetrated by the CNI (secret police). He graphically describes the torture, and finishes, "then they throw him on a cot in his cell like a piece of garbage to let him rest a few hours so they can go at him again."

The ad ends displaying the date of the interview, November, 1987.

Sample "Yes" Spots

#1 Scenes of violence in front of the Presidential Moneda palace. Students throwing stones, overturning cars. Bright letters spell and a voice-over announces, "Yes, you decide. We continue forward or we return to the U.P." (government of deposed President Allende).

#2 Reacting to main theme song of the "no", "Happiness is coming," ad mimics the visuals with the song "Violence is coming."

#3 Using animation techniques, former minister in Allende's government Jaime Suarez appears dancing with Fidel Castro.

Later, a haggard Pinochet emerged to deliver his concession speech. The suit-clad man was gone and the General had returned. The Chilean people's month-long window on the world was once again closing.

STEPPING BACK

The final judgement on the TV campaigns put the "no" on top, largely because of the novelty of "political entertainment" from the opposition, but also for the well crafted, upbeat, sometimes piercing nature of the "no" ads. Polls from across the country called them a "breath of freedom."²¹

The "yes" effort suffered from what the pro-government weekly *Qué Pasa* called "product saturation;" the viewing public had seen it all before. In presentation, too, the "yes" campaign forgot to incorporate what it clearly knew about Chilean TV news: the viewing public does not really believe it. Tactically, to present ads in the dry newscast style which called to mind everything dishonest about this government-controlled medium, was nothing less than foolish. Worse still is the negativism of the "chaos" ads, depicting the violence of the Chilean past and, by implication, in the future. Even here, the *junta* piped into every Chilean's home a rather clear display of its propensity to recreate history: it was easy to see that the famous "chaos" ad had been staged recently in front of the Moneda palace. The last minute ditch effort to use charismatic Finance Minister Hernan Buchi as the *Sí* spokesman was not enough to rescue the effort.

Conservative analysts now claim the success of the TV campaign may have been the clincher for the "no." Most accounts stress the government's surprise in learning too late just how powerful this weapon could be in the hands of the opposition. This is somewhat implausible though, since their historical control over the medium was rooted in their knowledge of how many people it could reach. Perhaps the miscalculation lay in the fact that the bureaucracy was not acting monolithically.

Since it seized power, Pinochet's regime has followed a bureaucratic-authoritarian model. The old political institutions were destroyed, parties abolished, unions domesticated, censorship was rampant. Popular demands were methodically disconnected from politics and made into technical issues; a new rationalized economy was the solution, its players highly protected.²² The 1980 constitution was a decided attempt to consolidate (codify) and ultimately institutionalize that path, moving away from the purely transitional regime proposed in the early days of the coup. Pinochet's regime differs from ostensible comparisons (e.g. Brazil, Argentina) in that the General emerges with

21. Brodsky, 18.

22. See generally, Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1972).

a higher agenda than institutionalizing the bureaucracy: to personalize and legitimize his own leadership.

Conflicts between Pinochet and his state machinery are always resolved in his favor. His creative manipulation of the military promotion system and retirement rules have had a similar goal, to ensure that he is always surrounded by underlings, politically as well as militarily.²³ A cursory glance at the constitutional stipulations for the post-military government reveals that Pinochet will be a senator for life in a Senate one-fourth of which he will largely appoint, and have a mandate to choose an all-powerful national security council that can even depose the president for jeopardizing the ubiquitous "national security."

Still, Pinochet surprised even his military *junta* when he declared himself the transitional candidate. The *apertura* (opening) that followed was easier to predict in light of his attempt to legitimize that leadership. The fairer the perception of the election, the stronger Pinochet's electoral mandate. A liberalization device had to be found that was public and visual, but controllable. Access to television fit perfectly. It was perhaps the grandest liberalization of all, but also one that would be difficult to "learn" in a few short weeks. Used ineffectively, even television is a small threat. So, what went wrong?

Pinochet's biggest mistake was not realizing how rapidly a political system, squelched for fifteen years, could regroup to oppose him. As he knows, for the long term, past political leaders find it very difficult to become once again a part of the political system, especially in a country like Chile where parties historically have been the political-civic link. The ousted parties must reestablish their role as political conduits to a constituency they have not represented for years. Obviously, this will take time.

The short term is quite different. Frequently, in authoritarian political systems where the old parties are legislated out of existence, recognition of the "old" leaders is effectively frozen in time, perhaps explaining the familiar faces that resurface in the political arenas of Latin American countries time and again.²⁴ In the Chilean pre-plebiscite *apertura*, the old political leadership reemerged with surprising speed and efficiency, armed with a clearly delineated and conceptually focused goal: defeating General Pinochet in an up or down vote. Their advantage — the element of surprise — was hidden in their enforced fifteen year absence.

Stepping back even further, between 1979 and 1981, renowned Latin American scholars such as Guillermo O'Donnell, Phillip Schmitter, Lawrence Whitehead, Fernando Cardoso, and Abe Lowenthal convened in the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., in a project they named "Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe." Their conclusions identified common threads recurring in decompressions from authoritarian rule, one of which was the dynamics of initial

23. For a complete analysis of this process of consolidation of Pinochet's leadership within the military, see Genaro Arriagada, *Pinochet, The Politics of Power*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, Inc, 1988).

24. J.S. and A. Valenzuela, *Military Rule in Chile* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 205.

aperturas. One political marker they pin-pointed is the initial realization by a society that it has

mutual discoveries of common ideals, which acquire enormous political significance just because they are articulated publicly after such a long period of prohibition, privation, and privatization. In the precarious public spaces of the first stages of the transition, these individual gestures are astonishingly successful in provoking or reviving collective identification and actions; they, in turn, help forge broad identifications which help embody the explosion of a highly politicized and angry society.²⁵

They added that the key to an opposition's ability to mobilize support was in its capacity to "generate symbols of partial political identity — around its name, platform, ideology, song," which would presumably "bring together voters and militants across any of the lines which otherwise divide them within society."²⁶

With uncanny relevance to that liberalization "blueprint," filmmaker Ignacio Aguero mused about public reactions to the first few days of the televised ad-wars:

[the campaign] has become a spectacle, where people come together to give their two-cents worth and celebrate. The program has managed to grasp the experience of the people, it has become the space of the TV viewer, who makes whatever he wants of it. It's not that the television is showing something new, but rather the fact that it is being shown on television, that produces a phenomenon of collective identity. Each person knows that what he is seeing is also showing in every *barrio*, in every city, at the same time. It has thus brought together very different people, of different ages and social conditions, motivating and exciting them.²⁷

Last October, Chileans had a focused agenda, a high-profile political leadership, TV blacklists from which to hire a highly skilled work force, and fifteen years of raging anti-Pinochetism with which to build a volunteer network. The only thing missing was what the general then handed them on a silver platter. Free access to television put them on a level playing field — even if only for twenty-eight days — against a tired government whose principal weapon is fear. Whether the general will recover remains to be seen. It seems that Chileans are no longer afraid.

25. O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 49.

26. O'Donnell, *Transitions*, 28.

27. Brodsky, 17.

