

**Nonpartisanship as a Political Strategy:
Women Left, Right and Center in Chile**

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Abstract

The ideology of antipolitics is most closely associated with the military in Latin America; military rulers seized power from civilian politicians throughout the region on the grounds that partisan politicking inevitably leads to chaos and economic crisis. In this paper I demonstrate how the politics of antipolitics in Latin America extends far beyond the domain of the military. Women, as an organized political constituency, are foremost among the other groups that have framed their mobilization in terms of opposition to partisan divisions. When women mobilize as nonpartisans, or political outsiders, they forward their own gendered version of antipolitics. This paper examines why women frame their activity in nonpartisan terms with regard to two radically different and ideologically opposed women's groups in Chile. The first organization, *Poder Femenino*, organized to oust President Salvador Allende from power in the early 1970s. The second organization, Women for Life, formed in 1983 to oppose the military government of General Pinochet. I argue that female party leaders in both instances embraced nonpartisanship for two reasons: first, in response to a genuinely felt moral crisis and second, to tap into conventional norms of women's roles for strategic purposes.

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Introduction

Military governments throughout Latin America have been uniformly motivated by the ideology of antipolitics.¹ Military rulers seized power from civilian politicians throughout the region on the grounds that politics was largely responsible for the poverty, instability, and economic backwardness of their nations.² According to this view, the demagoguery and factionalism associated with partisan politics (*politiquería*) threatened national unity, impeded national development and necessitated the intervention of the military as neutral administrators of order and growth.

The military is not the only constituency that has placed the blame for gridlock and underdevelopment at the feet of party leaders. In this paper I demonstrate how the politics of antipolitics in Latin America extends far beyond the domain of the military and does not necessarily entail authoritarian solutions. Women, as an organized political constituency, are foremost among the other groups that have framed their mobilization in terms of opposition to the party system. When women mobilize as nonpartisans, they forward their own version of antipolitics. Although women are not the only constituency to mobilize as nonpartisans, their arguments for doing so have a uniquely gendered slant. This chapter examines the conditions under which women mobilize on the basis of their identity as political outsiders and the consequences of this strategy for political outcomes, both for women and for policy overall.

To demonstrate these claims, this paper compares two very different kinds of women's organizations. I focus on two significant cases in which women mobilized as nonpartisans against the regime in power in Chile. In the first case, a center-right coalition of women mobilized to oust the democratically-elected government of Salvador Allende in the early 1970s. *Poder Femenino* (Feminine Power, PF), one of the more prominent anti-Allende women's organizations,

helped to consolidate the military regime that would rule Chile for seventeen years (1973-1989). The second case is *Mujeres Por la Vida* (Women For Life), a coalition of sixteen female leaders from center-left political parties that formed in 1983 in the context of Chile's transition to democracy. This group was one of many women's organizations that mobilized to put an end to the military government and forward women's gender-specific concerns.

These two cases differ fundamentally. Most importantly, *Poder Femenino* mobilized to bring the military into power, while *Mujeres Por la Vida* mobilized to get the military out of power. The idea that these two organizations are at all comparable makes many people uncomfortable, from both sides of the coin. In interviews, activists in both movements insisted that these two groups had nothing in common. Those who *opposed* the military government viewed PF not as a women's organization at all, but rather a group of conservative upper-class women defending their economic interests. Women who *supported* the dictatorship viewed groups such as *Mujeres por la Vida* in similar terms; women who mobilized against the dictatorship used their feminine identities to mask support for communism and the revolutionary left. They viewed feminism as a foreign ideology that would destroy the family and erode the fundamental principles on which Chilean society rested. Although women on both sides mobilized on the basis of their identity as women, they viewed each other with contempt and suspicion.

To be fair, many of the women who participated in PF, as well as many other Chileans, believed that the military's tenure in power would be brief. They expected that the military would restore order quickly and would act within the bounds of the law before it returned power to civilians. Most people did not anticipate the violence and terror that the military would administer once in power, and did not foresee the extent of the military's project to restructure Chilean society. However, many activists in *Poder Femenino* had sought a military solution from the very

day that Allende was elected. After the coup, these women actively supported the military's efforts to rid society of subversives and communists, supporting the view that Chile was in the midst of a civil war that justified extreme measures. These women continued to express support for the Pinochet regime even as information about the extent of human rights abuses has become widely known.

These tensions have not abated with the passage of time. The recent arrest of General Pinochet on British soil has only stoked the fury of both sides. However, the intensity of the political conflicts that surround these groups only makes the similarities between them more compelling. Why do two organizations with diametrically-opposed ideological goals both mobilize on the basis of women's identity as women? How is it that female identity can be called up in defense of two such antithetical political projects?

Despite the stark contrasts between them, these two organizations shared important characteristics in common. First, both groups were comprised primarily of women who served in leadership roles within their respective political parties. Second, both groups claimed to represent the concerns of women in the context of more general demands for regime change. These organizations also differed in terms of their view of women's roles. The women of *Poder Femenino* pointedly eschewed a feminist agenda and did little to forward change in the status of women per se. The leaders of *Mujeres Por la Vida* supported the expansion of women's rights and actively pressed for the incorporation of women's demands on the political agenda. Third, both groups emphasized women's ability to transcend and overcome conflict among political parties. Both *Poder Femenino* and *Mujeres Por La Vida* framed their opposition to the existing government in terms of women's status above the fray of party politics and articulated their demands in terms of the need for crosspartisan unity.

Along these lines, these groups made two kinds of claims. First, they maintained that a climate of crisis rendered real unity among political parties a moral imperative. Mobilizing as nonpartisans reflected women's sincere beliefs that the political parties had failed to handle a crisis situation and that alternative measures had to be pursued. Second, these organizations portrayed women as uniquely able to transcend partisan conflict, in comparison with male politicians whom they viewed as inevitably mired in factionalist fights that prevented them from dealing with important substantive issues.

Why did these two radically different women's movements frame their opposition in such remarkably similar ways? I argue that the decision to mobilize as nonpartisans in both instances reflected the way in which women had been incorporated into the party system.

Women mobilize as nonpartisans precisely at moments of intense partisan conflict, when parties are in disagreement about strategy. In these two cases, women who are primarily recognized female leaders within political parties organized as women, across party lines, in order to change agenda and reorient it toward pressing concerns that transcend partisan squabbling. In forming coalitions, they pursue a strategy commonly followed by their male counterparts in the parties, but women's rationale and rewards for so doing differ significantly from men's. On one hand, mobilizing across party lines is not at all surprising, given ways in which electoral system favors formation of coalitions in order to win elections and form congressional majorities, as I shall discuss below. However, women party activists form separate coalitions, with the express purpose of demonstrating possibilities of cooperation to male counterparts. Women mobilize separately, form parallel organizations in order to redirect agenda toward substantive moral/everday concerns--perhaps because they lack a stake in the success or dominance of the party that motivates men's behavior and more short-sighted strategic concerns. Women's

participation in separate divisions within the parties, *departamentos femeninos*, provided women with a means of participation in the parties that precluded their regular, institutionalized impact on decision-making. To influence the political agenda, women had little choice but to mobilize outside the party system. The structure of political institutions thus shaped the strategies that were available to women. Women were inside the parties, but outside the centers of power.

What consequences did this strategy have for practical politics? A nonpartisan strategy allowed both *Poder Femenino* and *Mujeres Por la Vida* to build alliances and mobilize the support of thousands of women precisely at points at which the parties were deadlocked and unable to reach accord. Women mobilized as political outsiders to maximize their leverage over political decisions. This capacity to mobilize women sent an important signal to male party leaders eager to predict women's electoral behavior. Second, women's appeals to nonpartisanship shaped the nature of popular support for regime change, albeit in different ways. *Poder Femenino's* version of nonpartisanship masked deep divisions between moderates and extremists within the anti-Allende opposition, and contributed to the acute polarization that characterized the Popular Unity years. This strategy played easily into the military's *antipolitics* agenda and reaffirmed the belief that women are essentially conservative. *Mujeres Por la Vida*, on the other hand, used nonpartisan appeals to defuse partisan conflicts and to demonstrate that women could be counted on to support the democratic process. Although conflicts between moderates and extremists eventually cut through this organization as well.

Poder Femenino

The phrase *A peaceful road to socialism* encapsulates the central aim of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government. Allende, a career politician who had run for president three times prior to his election in 1970, aimed to implement a socialist regime within the confines of

Chile's well-established democratic process. To do so, Allende promoted participation on a mass scale; he nationalized industries and accelerated the process of agrarian reform begun in the 1960s. He vowed to abide by the Chilean constitution, to hold free elections and to respect civil liberties. C a commitment he made in 1970 to secure the support of the centrist Christian Democratic Party. Over the course of his tenure in office, however, institutional mechanisms proved increasingly ineffective at resolving the conflicts that emerged between the government and the opposition, as well as within the governing coalition itself. Myriad factors stymied his efforts to accomplish this goal, including conflicts between reformers and radicals within his own governing coalition, covert action by the U.S. government and intense opposition from conservatives threatened by the prospect of a Marxist-Leninist revolution in democratic disguise.

Women played a prominent role in mobilizing domestic opposition to the Popular Unity government. The anti-Allende women's movement is most famous for the March of the Empty Pots (*Marcha de las Cacerolas Vacías*), in which women marched through the streets of Santiago banging on pots and pans to protest against food shortages and a growing climate of violence. The March of the Empty Pots, in which women from across the opposition spectrum had participated, helped to cement the formation of a coalition between the conservative National Party and the more centrist Christian Democrats. Women's ability to unite across party lines, demonstrated by the March of the Empty Pots, indirectly prompted men to do the same. Women organized this demonstration for numerous reasons C to express their opposition to Allende, to protest against the violence that had broken out weeks earlier in protests at the University of Chile and to embarrass Allende in front of Cuban President Fidel Castro, who had been in Chile on a widely-publicized month-long visit. The publicity that the march attracted demonstrated to male party leaders a high level of domestic opposition to Allende.² The March ended in chaos and

rioting among the youth factions of the various political parties, in which scores of women were injured. This aroused public indignation at the government's mistreatment of women. The violence that erupted lasted several days and prompted Allende to declare a state of siege. In an eerie but unwitting foreshadowing of the future, Allende placed none other than General Augusto Pinochet, who was then commander of the Santiago army garrison, to oversee the emergency zone.

In response to this crisis situation, the two main opposition parties, the National Party and the Christian Democrats, united around a motion to censure Allende's Minister of the Interior, Jose Tohá, for his inept handling of the March of the Empty Pots. The National Party had previously introduced several such constitutional accusations (*acusaciones constitucionales*) against the government, but this effort constituted the first time that the opposition parties had acted in concert. Shortly afterwards, the two parties joined in a formal coalition, the *Confederación Democrática*, or CODE. Women's nonpartisan efforts thus indirectly led to a coalition among the male party leaders.

Women's groups organized scores of events aimed at defending their families and mobilizing popular opposition to Allende's efforts to build a socialist regime in Chile. They defended grocery stores from being taken over by the government and they took over radio stations sympathetic to the Popular Unity. They organized protests aimed at provoking the military and shaming them into taking power; women taunted the military, throwing chicken feed at soldiers and sending them chicken feathers in the mail. In a famous incident, one woman, Alejandra Cox, stuck her tongue out at General Carlos Prats while stopped next to him at a traffic light.

Poder Femenino served as an umbrella organization for numerous groups of women who

opposed the Allende government. The group formed in early 1972, a few months after the March of the Empty Pots, when women from the women's divisions of the opposition political parties joined forces with the independent women who had organized the march. The leadership of this group consisted of a coordinating council (*consejo coordinador*) of between 16 and 33 women, each of whom represented a particular organization.³ While the leadership was comprised almost exclusively of women from the upper classes, it formed alliances with working-class and poor women, particularly those already organized by the Christian Democratic Party.

Women's groups within the opposition insisted on their nonpartisanship. *Poder Femenino* repeatedly invoked the spirit of unity among women who represented various parties: the "only salvation of Chile lies in the union of all the democratic sectors . . . Neither political affiliation nor membership in different parties or movements matters [to us]."⁴ A leader of Solidarity, Liberty and Order (*Solidaridad, Libertad y Orden*, SOL) stressed that although all the opposition parties were represented within the group, SOL itself "did not pertain to a particular party."⁵ Literature disseminated by the Housewives' Front (FRIENDUC) stressed nonpartisanship as well. One ad for this group, published in an opposition newspaper, read, "There is not one political party behind our organization, we repeat, not one political party. The housewives who belong to FRIENDUC can support whatever party or sympathize with whatever democratic organization they want."⁶ Another article on FRIENDUC published in *Eva*, an opposition women's magazine, stated: "No one asks what political party the other [members] belong to. In reality, no one is interested in this. But one thing is clear: they aren't Marxists."⁷

Women in *Poder Femenino*, SOL and FRIENDUC claimed that moral imperatives necessitated unifying along nonpartisan lines. As with other events organized by women in the opposition, the question of whether or not the March of the Empty Pots was a political act was at

the center of public discussion. In an advertisements announcing the march, the organizers underscored the nonpartisan and nonviolent nature of the march:

In this demonstration, although female party militants will participate, political considerations are not fundamental. We women are going to protest because there is no meat to make soup for our babies and as a result, they get sick from diarrhea; we are going to denounce the fact that our husbands are obligated to attend political meetings in order to keep their jobs We want our children to be educated in liberty and democracy and we protest against the brainwashing that occurs in the schools. We will march to tell the Ramona Parra Brigade⁸ that before brandishing chains, acid and sticks and assaulting the students, let them remember that they are young and have other tasks at hand besides sowing violence and hate. We women are disposed to unite to prevent our society from being formed in hate.⁹

Women insisted that an impending crisis required people to put aside partisan differences and work together to stop Allende's reforms. The nonpartisan nature of the march was reflected in one of the unorthodox ways women in which were recruited to participate: the organizers posted flyers in beauty salons. "We're not going to go around picking up people or hiring buses to take people to the march like the political movements do," one of the organizers stated at the time.¹⁰

Although other groups opposed to Allende portrayed themselves in nonpartisan terms, women's logic for embracing this strategy differed from men's. Women portrayed themselves as uniquely capable of transcending party conflict, while men could not see beyond party affiliation, which impeded the progress of the opposition as a whole. *Poder Femenino* sought to encourage male party leaders to "imitate their example of unity." At one point the group suggested locking up all the male leaders of the various political parties in a room together until they reached an accord.¹¹ Women perceived their role as being able to cut through the political rhetoric of empty promises and the partisan loyalties that prevented men from accomplishing any concrete goals. The women who participated in the March of the Empty Pots sought in part to alert their own

husbands, "who are always wrapped up in the quarrels of criollo politics or bound by political loyalties that create real walls between brothers."¹² One sympathetic journalist claimed that, as a result of the March of the Empty Pots, "the opposition, at the level of masculine leadership, would have to draw the conclusion that the Chilean woman is not averse to uniting without respect for political differences, when there are more profound interests at stake, affecting the home, her husband, her children and Chile as a whole."¹³

Poder Femenino portrayed itself as being outside the fray of party politics, but most of the group's leaders were themselves leaders in political parties. They claimed a nonpartisan status in order to forge unity among the parties of the opposition, but at the same time remained deeply involved in conventional partisan activities. PF leaders had ample experience as party activists; they had worked for years in getting-out-the-vote activities and staffing the polls on election day. Many came from prominent families and knew many of the opposition political leaders personally. In *Guerra de las mujeres (War of the Women)*, PF leader Maria Correa's account of the movement, women met frequently with members of Congress and usually greeted them on a first-name basis.¹⁴

At election time, women's appeal to crosspartisan unity conflicted with the need to "go to the trenches" to support one's own party. This was particularly true during the 1973 congressional elections, which both the government and the opposition viewed as a kind of plebiscite on the Allende government. *Poder Femenino* temporarily disbanded prior to the campaign so that its members could work full-time in support of their respective parties:

When the hour arrived for an electoral battle in the recent parliamentary elections, *Poder Femenino* did not make its voice felt, nor it pots and pans. Months before, its members began to disband, for a completely human and understandable reason: because of their personal preferences for a particular candidate. They didn't go to

the urns [electoral booth] as *Poder Femenino*, but separately as members of a particular political party or as independents.¹⁵

PF leaders saw no contradiction between their organization's claim to nonpartisanship and the partisan activities of its members; these were simply two strategies they pursued in their efforts to unseat Allende. The ability of women to cross the boundaries between conventional partisan activity and mobilization on behalf of nonpartisan issues is particularly remarkable given that party affiliation has always functioned as a powerful source of collective identity in Chile.

Although *Poder Femenino* was a small organization, with fewer than 50 full-time members, it claimed to speak on behalf of all women and was apparently aware of women's electoral clout. María Correa's account of her participation recalls a meeting with leaders from the two main opposition parties: "We women will not permit that the party leaders abandon the country this way. It's also our land and the land of our children, and we women outnumber the men. Either you achieve the unity that can save us from Marxism, or we will never vote for you again," she insisted.¹⁶ The fact that men and women voted in separate polling places (and still do) meant that politicians tended to be responsive to women's concerns, if only while campaigning.¹⁷

On the one hand, women's appeal to nonpartisanship tended to reinforce the predominant view that women did not belong in politics. During a congressional hearing in which the March of the Empty Pots was discussed, a member of the House of Deputies read from a list of the women injured during the March. In so doing, he sought to demonstrate the extent of the injuries the women received and to show that not all the women who participated were women from the upper-class neighborhoods. As the congressman read the women's names, another deputy interrupted him to ask what party the women were from. "What does it matter?" he responded, "They are only women!"¹⁸

On the other hand, several leaders of the anti-Allende movement were able to translate their participation in the movement into electoral capital for female candidates. Several activists in the movement ran for congressional seats in the 1973 election and emphasized their movement affiliation in their campaigns. Silvia Pinto, a well-known journalist who ran for Congress as a National Party candidate, printed campaign literature that featured pictures of empty pots and identified herself as a representative of *la valiente mujer chilena*, a phrase frequently used to refer to the female opposition to Allende. Several of female candidates, including Christian Democrats Wilna Saavedra and Carmen Frei, won their elections with the large majorities (*primeras mayorías*) that indicated a broad popular mandate of support. Women's representation in Congress reached an historical high that election, with women holding 14 of 150 seats, or 9.3%. Concerted efforts to increase women's representation since the transition to democracy have not been as successful. Women have held an average of 6.5% of congressional seats since 1990.¹⁹

Despite women's success as candidates for the opposition, the 1973 elections failed to demonstrate a clear popular mandate for either the ruling coalition or the opposition. The Popular Unity candidates won 44% of the vote, a greater share than they expected and with important increases among the poor and working class, especially women. The opposition won 55% of the vote, a majority but well short of the 2/3 needed to impeach Allende. For many in the opposition, these disappointing results meant the exhaustion of the possibilities for ending the crisis within institutional bounds. Tensions between the government and its opponents mounted and popular support for military intervention to end the crisis grew. Women's efforts intensified after this, culminating in a demonstration of tens of thousands of women in front of *La Moneda*, the presidential palace, on September 5, 1973. They demanded Allende's resignation, on the grounds that he had putatively promised to step down if the people asked him to do so. Six days

later, military seized power, sending a shower of bombs on *La Moneda* with Allende and some of his most loyal supporters inside. In the weeks following the coup, the armed forces credited *la mujer chilena* (the women of Chile) with having played a central role in liberating Chile from Marxism.²⁰

Poder Femenino relied on three kinds of arguments to justify its participation in the anti-Allende opposition. First, women in the group maintained that economic crisis and political chaos necessitated that opposition political parties forget their differences and work together. Second, women blamed male politicians for contributing to the climate of crisis rather than alleviating it, on the grounds that men's allegiances to their parties prevented them from addressing pressing political issues. Finally, *Poder Femenino* engaged in partisan activities in the name of nonpartisanship.

Poder Femenino's reliance on the discourse of nonpartisanship directly affected political outcomes. The rhetoric of female unity masked deep and bitter partisan divisions and contributed to the climate of polarization. The unity touted by *Poder Femenino* really entailed conformity with the more conservative, more ardently anti-Allende line espoused by the rightist National Party. The National Party women resented the Christian Democratic Party for continuing to advocate reaching a compromise with Allende. As María Correa recalled in her book:

Poder Femenino continued its struggle to obtain total unity within the opposition, but the Christian Democrats insisted in maintaining a 'dialogue' with the government, under pressure from Cardinal Silva Henríquez and some of [the PDC's] more leftist leaders. . . . It was inexplicable that [the Christian Democrats] just didn't see . . . We gave them solid and well-founded arguments, we made them see the responsibility that was before them, we showed them how public indignation was rising against them . . . but it was all useless. After hours of discussion, they remained steadfast in their meek tactics . . . thus permitting the inexorable advance of the Marxist pawns.²¹

The Christian Democrats criticized the Nationals for contributing to an already polarized situation. Carmen Frei, a senator from the Christian Democratic Party who was involved in women's activities against Allende, criticized *Poder Femenino* for polarizing the political situation and eliminating room for compromise between the government and the opposition.

Poder Femenino became fanatical, so that in the end it was a blind fight against communists. Things polarized to such an extent that in the end there were only the communists and the anticommunists. I believe that this was the greatest damage that we all did to democracy in our country. . . . This brutal polarization was what permitted that there be a military coup.²²

Despite these conflicts within the movement, PF's nonpartisanship meshed easily with the military's political agenda after the coup. The military recast women's participation in terms that aimed at legitimating the military's "apolitical" solution and at taking extreme measures to restore order. In response to the anti-Allende women's movement, Pinochet incorporated women into his regime as the "natural allies" of the military government. He viewed women's participation as complementary to the military's role in extirpating politics and *politiquería* from the Chilean scene. In so doing, however, Pinochet took women's claims to nonpartisanship far more seriously than did most of the women who had framed their actions in those terms. Pinochet enlisted only those women's organizations that had no formal ties to any of the opposition parties and, together with his wife, Lucía Hiriart, created new organizations, particularly the *voluntariado*, an all-female voluntary service corps, to carry out the *Poder Femenino* legacy.

Pinochet appointed several of the leaders of the anti-Allende women's movement to positions of authority within his government. María Eugenia Oyarzún, a prominent journalist and spokeswoman for the female opposition, was appointed mayor of Santiago; Carmen Grez, a

leader of the Las Condes neighborhood council (*junta de vecinos*) served as director of the National Women's Secretariat; Sara Navas, who headed a national parent-teacher organization, served as Chile's representative to the Women's Council of the Organization of American States; and Alicia Romo, a leader of *Poder Femenino*, advised Pinochet on women's issues. Importantly, none of these had been members of political parties. Female leaders within the opposition parties were surprised to find themselves frozen out from participating on the grounds of their party affiliations, even though many of them supported the military regime and wanted to help out.²³

In the long-term, women contributed to the process of democratic breakdown by legitimating the resolution of conflicts outside the arena of conventional democratic political institutions, particularly outside the jurisdiction of political parties. By mobilizing as political outsiders and as nonpartisans, women helped to consolidate public support for a military solution. The military regime built upon the nonpartisan discourse espoused by the anti-Allende women's movement and reinterpreted that discourse to fit its own purposes. It was in this context, in which the state incorporated women on the basis of their putatively traditional roles as apolitical mothers and housewives, that different constituencies of women began to mobilize against the regime and offer yet another reinterpretation of women's proper roles. I examine the anti-Pinochet women's movement in the following section.

Mujeres Por la Vida

When General Pinochet took power in 1973, his efforts to reconstruct the country extended far beyond temporarily replacing civilian leaders with military officials. Pinochet attributed Chile's problems to democratic politics itself. He began by eliminating politicians themselves, arresting and disappearing thousands of people and committing tens of thousands more to exile. Pinochet sought to completely demobilize society: he banned political parties and

restricted civil liberties, shut down Congress and replaced university professors with military personnel. To modernize the economy, the military government privatized hundreds of state-owned enterprises and adopted free-market, neoliberal economic reforms. By the time he stepped down in 1990, Pinochet had left a lasting mark on every political institution, from electoral laws to the budget process.²⁴

A vibrant and diverse women's movement, opposed to the dictatorship, emerged as an unintended consequence of the regime's policies. Amid a climate of fierce repression, women organized to protest the disappearance of their loved ones, the economic crisis that forced them into poverty, and the climate of fear that made it impossible to conduct the business of everyday life. Women whose relatives were disappeared by the military regime organized human rights organizations, such as the *Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos*. Poor and working-class women who were forced into poverty by the regime's economic crisis formed *organizaciones populares económicas* (popular economic organizations) soup kitchens, shopping collectives and other groups to help women feed their families. Feminists formed organizations to challenge the regime's policies toward women and to forward a concrete agenda of women's rights.²⁵

In retrospect it is easy to identify these diverse groups as belonging to a common groundswell of female opposition to the military regime. Prior to 1983, however, women's efforts to join together were very small, locally-based and, in most cases, isolated from one another. Many women's groups were unaware of each other's existence. The climate of fear and repression under the military regime required women active in such organizations to remain extremely cautious about acknowledging their participation to any but a few trusted friends, and thus limited the possibilities for building networks with other groups.

Things changed in 1983. A devastating economic recession in 1981-82 challenged the regime's legitimacy and prompted some sectors to publicly criticize the government. On May 11, 1983, the Confederation of Copper Workers, Chile's largest union, called for a national protest against the regime. At 8 p.m. that evening, thousands of people began banging on pots and pans and honking on horns throughout the city of Santiago. Amazingly, with this protest people reversed the meaning of the *cacerola*, the empty pot, turning it from a symbol of support for the coup to a symbol of condemnation of the regime's economic failure. The success of this demonstration launched a cycle of monthly protests, known as *las protestas*, that would last for three years.

The opposition faced the daunting problem of agreeing upon an alternative political program. Although united in their opposition to the military government, deep and longstanding divisions separated the parties of the left and center. The leftist parties distrusted the Christian Democrats for having opposed Allende and supported the coup in 1973. Within the left itself, relations among the parties were fraught with conflicts over strategy that had originated long before Allende took office but intensified in the three years of the Popular Unity government. Ultimately, the Christian Democrats agreed to cooperate with the moderate left on two conditions: acceptance of democratic institutions and support for a capitalist economic system.

The political parties, which had been underground for ten years, moved quickly assume leadership of the protests. In August 1983, the Christian Democratic party formed the Democratic Alliance (*Alianza Democrática*, AD), a coalition that also included moderate factions of the Socialist Party and other leftist parties committed to social democracy. In September of that year, three radical left parties formed the Popular Democratic Movement (*Movimiento Democrático Popular*, MDP). These three parties, the Communist Party, a militant wing of the

Socialist Party and the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) favored armed confrontation with the regime over a negotiated return to democratic rule²⁶

Another point of contention between the two coalitions was whether or not to participate in the plebiscite scheduled for 1988, which would determine whether an election would be held the following year. Debate centered around whether the regime would hold a fair, nonfraudulent election. The MDP maintained that the election would be inevitably fraudulent and that participating in it would legitimize the regime and eliminate another chance for peaceful transition until 1997. The AD insisted that adhering to the regime's schedule for elections was the only chance the opposition had of winning.²⁷

The climate of antipolitics that Pinochet had created exacerbated the divisions within the party coalitions. In the ten years since the coup, Pinochet had continuously harangued "*los señores políticos*" as being responsible for the election of Allende and the chaos that ensued. Censorship and repression of the media prevented any competing messages from being publicly expressed. The extent to which the military government vilified political parties and politicians made it difficult for the parties to reestablish credibility. For many Chileans, the conflicts that emerged between the AD and the MDP in 1983 proved Pinochet's point that political parties inevitably violated the national interest in pursuit of their own partisan goals.

It was in this context that *Mujeres Por la Vida* (Women for Life) formed. Part of this organization sought to demonstrate that the opposition parties were not inevitably corrupt, but in fact could articulate a leadership role against the wrongdoings of the dictatorship. Like *Poder Femenino*, the women in MPLV sought to establish unity between the opposition political parties and claimed that women possessed a superior ability to transcend partisan divisions. MPLV sought to provide an example for men to follow; indeed the group claimed that men **must** follow

their example if the opposition was to succeed in ousting the military. To this extent, women opposed to Pinochet relied on some of the same rhetorical strategies as women opposed to Allende. However, while the nonpartisan mobilization of women against Allende led to the breakdown of democratic institutions, here the mobilization of women across party lines helped to rebuild those institutions.

Mujeres Por La Vida was a coalition of 16 women representing each of the various parties within the center-left opposition, formed in November 1983. These women were sufficiently well-known within their respective parties to serve as representatives of those parties although they did not serve as official delegates of their parties. As María de la Luz Silva, one of the founding members and a member of the *Movimiento de Acción Popular Unitaria* (a political party known as MAPU), recalled:

When I joined MPLV, people from MAPU knew that we approved of this [organization], we were a point of reference for our people. Because we couldn't sign as members of a party, the [founding members of the group] became political referents . . . So if I were involved with something, MAPU was involved, if Fanny Pollarolo was there, the Communist Party was there, if Graciela Borquez was there, the Christian Democrats were there.²⁸

Women couldn't publicly speak as representatives of a party, because parties were illegal at the time, but their affiliations were clear.

The group's founding members had known each other previously by virtue of their participation in human rights organizations throughout the course of the dictatorship. Their decision to come together was precipitated by an atrocious event: the suicide of Sebastián Acevedo, who had lit himself on fire to protest the disappearance of his two sons. As Silva remembered:

This event struck us all as something extremely painful that could not go on. It was at this point that we women said, "Women support life, against the culture of death that is the dictatorship."²⁹

In response to Acevedo's death, *Mujeres Por la Vida* sought to promote unity among the center-left parties, maintaining that unity that was a "necessary prerequisite for taking decisive action against the dictatorship." As Silva claimed, MPLV sought

to demonstrate that we, the women, were [in favor of] life, and that life mattered more than the party struggles, the positioning and the strategizing. We were going to demonstrate that when you introduce a higher interest, such as life itself, we can all go forward together.³⁰

The women in MPLV claimed they were able to orchestrate a united front by focusing on the issues they shared in common, rather than those specific to their respective parties:

The pain provoked by this system of death and injustice united us, a pain that we transformed into conscience and a fear that we transformed into active solidarity . . . we had the conviction that either the end of the dictatorship was imperative or we would all be victims of another collective tragedy. What united us was the conviction that we were all indispensable in the reconstruction of democracy.³¹

Mujeres Por La Vida perceived its agenda in gendered terms: its leaders saw the task of inspiring unity within the opposition as one that women were uniquely qualified to carry out.

Fanny Pollarolo, one group's founding members and a Communist Party leader, claimed that the group's task was "to inspire the spirit necessary to unify the opposition, to overcome the

ineffectiveness of the men."³² The organization drew upon specifically feminine qualities in its

efforts to mobilize others. Fabiola Letelier, a well-known human rights lawyer, described the specific contribution that MPLV sought to make to the opposition movement: "The active

participation of women is of paramount importance because women are the ones who are most affected by the horrors of these years and have been in the front lines of battle."³³ MPLV built

upon the participation of women in human rights groups and sought to push the opposition further along in the struggle for democracy and change.

On December 29, 1983, *Mujeres Por La Vida* held a massive rally that brought together women from all the warring factions within the opposition. The women organized the event in response to widespread and deep frustration over the inability of the opposition parties to reach accord regarding how to bring about the end of the regime. Patricia Verdugo, a journalist and one of the organizers, remarked:

The recent acts sponsored by the Opposition had been characterized by spending more energy in loudly proclaiming divisions and mutually insulting one another than in charging our batteries to put an end to the [military] regime. The challenge was to construct real unity.³⁴

MPLV sought to make active opposition to the regime a moral imperative. A pamphlet distributed prior to the event read: "We come together to express the decision to act and join our determination today and not tomorrow to put an end to the signs of death: torture, hunger and unemployment, *detenidos-desaparecidos*, exile, arbitrary detentions . . . repression and abuses of power."³⁵

This gendered appeal struck a nerve; nearly 10,000 women attended the event. This event, which took place in the Teatro Caupolicán in downtown Santiago, became known as the *caupolicanazo*.³⁶ It became the benchmark against which all future events would be measured. Before the *caupolicanazo*, "the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats had never gotten together, and were absolutely incompatible, like water and oil," said María de la Luz Silva.³⁷ The Caupolicán rally brought leaders from these two parties together: Graciela Borquez, a member of the political commission of the PDC, and Fanny Pollarolo, the Communist Party leader. The theme of unity was carried out to the most minute detail. Participants were not permitted to carry

party flags or banners. Instead, the coordinating council of the group designed a banner in which all the flags of the various parties were arranged in a circle around the national symbol, "so that none would be on top of the others. It was like a wheel that spun around."³⁸ Men were not permitted to attend the event, because "we were afraid that we would be infiltrated by violent extremists, but also to teach the men a lesson."³⁹

Between 1983 and 1988, MPLV organized and participated in more than 170 events, including protests, demonstrations, and hunger strikes, as well as roundtable discussions, meetings with officials and press conferences.⁴⁰ MPLV provided a safe forum for women's organizations to join together and articulate a common view of women's role in the movement against the military regime. The participation of notable female party leaders was particularly important in this regard; their presence signaled to various organizations that it was safe to attend and that attending might have some impact. In 1986, MPLV sent a representative to the *Asamblea de la Civilidad* (Civic Assembly), a forum to reconvene the disparate groups within the opposition and articulate a political agenda. The organization established a secure foothold for women's concerns in these early efforts to articulate the opposition platform. As María Elena Valenzuela notes, "Women for Life became the reference point for political organizations on women's issues as well as the most important arena for convening and discussing the social mobilization of women."⁴¹

MPLV was one of several umbrella organizations within the women's movement that formed in late 1983. Another group, MEMCH83, focused on changing the status of women and achieving gender equality. In 1984, MEMCH83 developed a feminist policy statement, the *Plataforma de la Mujer Chilena* (Chilean Women's Platform), that "closely follow[ed] the contents of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

Against Women (1979).⁴² The appearance of MPLV on the scene frustrated some feminists, who saw the group as exemplifying a more traditional way of participating in politics.⁴³ Some feminist groups viewed MPLV critically as a vehicle of the parties, rather than a representative of women's concerns per se.⁴⁴ These tensions were fueled by the fact that MPLV emerged precisely at the point at which feminists were beginning to articulate a new way of doing politics.⁴⁵

What differentiated MPLV from other coalitions among women's organizations was its breadth. No other entity had been able to sustain cooperation among women across the entire spectrum of positions represented by those who opposed the military government. However, even MPLV ultimately succumbed to partisan divisions. The decision to participate in the 1988 plebiscite, and the convening of the Committee for Free Elections, eventually split *Mujeres Por la Vida* as it had split other organizations. After 1987, MPLV continued to exist, but the groups it represented changed substantially. Women who supported the upcoming election joined the *Comando por el NO*, the center-left coalition convened to oppose the continuation of Pinochet's tenure in power. MPLV remained in control of a smaller group of women. This new incarnation ultimately supported the election and participated in the plebiscite, but adopted a critical stance toward the upcoming vote. The group organized a campaign that emphasized the regime's responsibility for human rights abuses, in counterpart to the more carefree tenor of the *ANo* campaign. As Teresa Valdés describes this campaign:

In the midst of the debate within the opposition, this campaign seemed to us a great support for the NO, inasmuch as it made present the feelings of many Chileans that they were not represented in the plebiscite strategy. We tried to suffuse the NO with the spirit of those who had suffered so severely during the dictatorship. We took out an ad that had a picture of a fingerprint on it, with the words "Where do they vote: the exiled, the political prisoners, the disappeared, the dead? They cannot vote. Do not forget them when you vote NO."⁴⁶

Up until the plebiscite, MPLV had successfully maintained a coalition that included women's organizations from all points within the opposition spectrum. Male party leaders, on the other hand, remained divided between the two poles represented by the AD and the MDP. The split between the AD and the MDP resulted not only from strategic differences about how to put an end to the dictatorship, but also from the AD's acceptance of the conditions set by the military government, which a majority viewed as a necessarily evil. It was clear that the military would not tolerate the participation of the Communist Party in the transition process. The isolation of the Communist Party from the transition, and their subsequent political marginalization following the transition, was one of the great costs that Pinochet imposed on the democratization process.

MPLV's power derived from its ability to maintain alliances between women from all sectors of the opposition, AD and MDP adherents alike, as well as other groups that eschewed any party affiliation. MPLV used this convocatory power of press for the inclusion of women's concerns on the opposition agenda. The split that occurred as the plebiscite neared forced MPLV members to make difficult decisions about where their loyalties lay and seriously weakened the group's capacity to represent and push for the implementation of women's concerns.

It is difficult to discern the precise impact that MPLV had on electoral politics, largely because so many women's organizations were involved in the effort to incorporate women's demands on the agenda of the incoming government. In general terms, the women's movement had an undeniable impact on the outcome of the 1988 plebiscite and the 1989 presidential elections. The anti-military opposition won both elections, with a majority of women's votes.

Conclusion: Gendered Coalitions

Both *Poder Femenino* and *Mujeres Por la Vida* relied on similar discursive strategies to justify their participation in the political arena and to influence political outcomes. Despite

significant differences in the content of their political agendas, these two organizations framed their activism in terms of nonpartisanship and women's status outside the conventional political arena. Both groups maintained that women—even women who were party leaders and who could expect to pursue a career in their parties—could put aside their partisan divisions in response to situations characterized by extreme strife. Both of these organizations claimed that the nonpartisan nature of their activities provided an example for men to follow. *Poder Femenino* criticized men in the opposition political parties for continuing to rely on institutional means of protecting the status quo and for failing to collaborate with one another to combat the crisis at hand. The women in *Mujeres por la Vida* also viewed the conflicts between the two coalitions within the opposition as men's inability to see the forest for the trees.

From my interviews with some of the women who participated in these organizations, it is evident that their decision to mobilize reflected their sincere concerns and profound frustration at the inability of political parties to address the crises that were at hand. Women tended to talk about their participation in ways that did not reflect strategic considerations. They mobilized in response to a genuinely felt moral imperative to take action. The women of *Poder Femenino* viewed the political and economic instability that had emerged under the Allende government as a dire threat to their way of life. For the women of *Mujeres Por la Vida*, the military's practice of torture and disappearances evoked a visceral response that demanded unified action. The suicide of Sebastián Acevedo culminated years of standing by helplessly while the military tortured and disappeared people. The juxtaposition between this event and the return of party fighting enraged women and forced them to take action. In this sense, nonpartisanship was not a strategy at all, but a sincere reflection of the frustration they felt over the way political events had unfolded.

Considered strategically, however, nonpartisanship afforded female party activists several

advantages. Mobilizing as political outsiders allowed women to build broad constituencies that crossed party lines. As evidenced by the thousands of women who participated in both the March of the Empty Pots in 1971 and the *caupolicanazo* in 1983. PF used its convocatory power to demonstrate public support for the ouster of Allende, against the wishes of more moderate sectors in the opposition. MPLV used its ability to mobilize women across party lines to press the opposition to address women's gendered concerns.

Why did female party leaders respond to these crises by mobilizing outside their parties, while men remained loyal to the decisions made by party leadership? This is an important question, especially given Chile's notoriously strong party system. In Chile, especially prior to 1973, political parties not only enforced strict discipline on their members, but dictated almost every aspect of political culture. Party affiliation determined what people believed, where they went to school, where they worked, even how they dressed and where they vacationed. Given the profound extent to which political parties controlled Chilean society, the reluctance of female party leaders to side with their parties in moments of crisis is puzzling.

The formation of multiparty coalitions is a common feature of Chile's political system. Interaction between the electoral systems for parliamentary and presidential elections fostered the tendency to form coalitions. A modified D'Hondt electoral system, in which..., governed Chile's parliamentary system. This system encouraged the formation of strong multiparty system. Yet presidential elections were governed by a winner-take-all system, which required minority parties to form coalitions with each other in order to win (for an extended discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this system, see Shugart and Carey 1995, 183). As Valenzuela describes,

Since no party (or even tendency) commanded a majority, all candidates were minority candidates who sought preelectoral alliances with other parties to maximize their electoral chances. If no alliance obtained a majority, the two front-

runners sought to structure winning coalitions in the congress in the aftermath of the election.⁴⁷

Women organized coalitions across party lines, and their coalitions frequently but not always paralleled the coalitions formed by their male counterparts. Women's motivation for forming coalitions differed fundamentally from men's however.

At the same time, however, nonpartisanship is also a central part of Chilean political culture. The Chilean electoral system has always required parties to form coalitions in order to win elections and to pass legislation. The language of unity across ideologically distinct parties is an essential component of political maneuvering. The names of the governing coalitions suggest the importance of appeals to crosspartisan unity: the Popular Front; the Popular Unity; the Coalition of Parties for Democracy (*Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia*). In these two cases, however, women offered a feminine version of nonpartisanship.

I maintain that the decision of partisan women to mobilize on the basis of their status as nonpartisans, outside the party system, reflects the way in which women have been incorporated into the party system. Initially, the political parties incorporated women into separate divisions, or *departamentos femeninos*. These divisions provided the parties with an institutional mechanism to build support among women—but in such a way to prevent women from having regular, institutionalized participation in the parties' decision-making processes. Women were incorporated into the parties, but not integrated on an equal basis. Women did not have as strong a stake in toeing the party line as their male counterparts. Women stood less to gain by conforming to party discipline and less to lose by embracing an outsider strategy. In fact, given this institutional context, women's best chances of enhancing their status in the party may lie in their ability to mobilize people on the basis of non-party identities, particularly gender.

Endnotes

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1. Brian Loveman and Thomas M. Davies, Jr., eds., *The Politics of Antipolitics: The Military in Latin America* (Wilmington: SR Books, 1997), p. 5.
 2. Newspaper accounts of the march offer a wide range of attendance figures, from 10,000 to 100,00. Given the strong political alliances of all media during this period, it is difficult to establish the validity of these estimates. Some footage of the march appears in *The Battle of Chile*, an anti-Allende video produced by the Catholic University television station. This video should not be confused by another video by the same name, directed by Patricio Guzmán. Guzmán's video also provides excellent footage from the period and portrays a sympathetic view of the Popular Unity government.
 3. An ad placed by PF on October 20, 1972, lists the following organizations as members of the Coordinating Council: the women's departments of the National Party, the Christian Democratic Party, the Radical Democracy Party, PADENA and PIR; a group called *Javiera Carrera; Mujeres Comerciantes; Mujeres Independientes; Mujeres Profesionales; Patria y Libertad; Mujeres Gremialistas; SOL* (women's department); UNAFE; *Union Civica Democratica*; and *Union Mujeres Libres*. See *Tribuna*, October 20, 1972, p. 8.
 4. *Eva*, September 1972, p. 41.
 5. Interview with author, Santiago, 1993.
 6. Ad for FREN Duc, *Tribuna*, May 10, 1972, p. 6.
 7. *Eva*, June 9, 1972, p. 49.
 8. The Ramona Parra Brigade was the youth division of the Chilean Communist Party at the time.
 9. *La Tercera de la hora*, December 1, 1971, p. 5.
 10. *El Mercurio*, November 30, 1971, p. 19.
 11. *Eva*, September 1972, p. 41.
 12. *La Tercera de la Hora*, December 4, 1971, p. 3.
 13. *La Tercera de la Hora*, December 5, 1971, p. 5.
 14. Correa, *La guerra de las mujeres*.
 15. *El Rancagüino*, March 9, 1973, p. 6.
 16. Correa, *La guerra de las mujeres*, p. 81.

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17. Baldez, *Democratic Institutions*.
 18. República de Chile. Camara de Diputados. Legislatura Extraordinaria. Sesión 38a, January 6, 1972, p. 2816.
 19. Servicio Electoral, cited in María Elena Valenzuela, *Women and the Democratization Process in Chile*, in Jane S. Jaquette and Sharon L. Wolchik, eds., *Women and Democracy: Latin America and Eastern and Central Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1998), p. 67.
 20. On *Poder Femenino*, see María Correa Morande, *La guerra de las mujeres* (Santiago: Editorial Universidad Técnico del Estado, 1974); María de los Angeles Crummett, "El Poder Femenino: The Mobilization of Women Against Socialism in Chile," *Latin American Perspectives* 4 (Fall 1977):103-13; Teresa Donoso Loero, *La epopeya de las ollas vacías* (Santiago: Editorial Nacional Gabriela Mistral, 1974); Michelle Mattelart, *Women, Media and Crisis: Femininity and Disorder* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1986) and "Chile: The Feminine Side of the Coup, or When Bourgeois Women Take to the Streets," *NACLA's Latin America and Empire Report* IX (September 1975):14-25; Camilla Townsend, "Refusing to Travel *La Vía Chilena*: Working-Class Women in Allende's Chile," *Journal of Women's History* 4;3 (Winter 1993):43-63; Georgina Waylen, "Rethinking Women's Political Participation and Protest: Chile 1970-1990," *Political Studies* 40;2 (June 1992); Margaret Power, *Right-Wing Women and Chilean Politics: 1964-1973*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, Chicago, 1996; and Lisa Baldez, *In the Name of the Public and the Private: Conservative and Progressive Women's Organizations in Chile, 1970-1996*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1997.
 21. Correa, *La guerra de las mujeres*, pp. 77-78.
 22. Interview with the author, Santiago, Chile, 1994.
 23. Baldez, *In the Name of the Public and the Private*.
 24. Lisa Baldez and John M. Carey, *Executive Agenda Control: Lessons from General Pinochet's Constitution*, *American Journal of Political Science* (January 1999; forthcoming).
 25. On the Chilean women's movement, see Patricia Chuchryk, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: The Women's Movement in Chile*, in Jane S. Jaquette, ed., *The Women's Movement in Latin America (revised edition)* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Waylen, *Rethinking Women's Participation*; Alicia Frohmann and Teresa Valdés, *Democracy in the Country and in the Home: The Women's Movement in Chile*, in Amrita Basu, ed., *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); and Baldez, *In the Name of the Public and the Private*.
 26. See Jeffrey M. Puryear, *Thinking Politics: Intellectuals and Democracy in Chile, 1973-1988* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) and Paul W. Drake and Ivan Jaksic, eds., *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile (revised edition)* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

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27. Puryear, *Thinking Politics*.
 28. Interview with the author, Santiago, 1994.
 29. Interview with the author, Santiago, 1994.
 30. Ibid.
 31. *Análisis*, January 1984, p. 18.
 32. *La Época*, January 4, 1988, p. 10.
 33. *Análisis*, January 1984, p. 19.
 34. *Análisis*, January 1984, pp. 17-21.
 35. "Mujeres al Caupolicán," mimeograph.
 36. The "azo" suffix indicates a blow or explosion: puñetazo is a punch with the fist (puño), for example. In this case, the "azo" suffix signifies the force and impact of the event.
 37. Christian Democratic Party Senator Carmen Frei maintained that women from the PDC and the Communist Party had been meeting together since the early years of the dictatorship. Interview with the author, Santiago, 1994.
 38. Interview with the author.
 39. Chuchryk, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*.
 40. Teresa Valdés, one of the founding members of *Mujeres por la Vida*, documented these events. Teresa Valdés, *Mujeres Por la Vida: Itinerario de una lucha*. Mimeograph. Santiago, 1989.
 41. María Elena Valenzuela, *The Evolving Roles of Women under Military Rule* in Drake and Jaksic, p. 172.
 42. Valenzuela, *Women and the Democratization Process*, p. 54.
 43. Ibid.
 44. Sandra Lidid and Kira Maldonado, *Movimiento Feminista Autonomo* (Santiago: Ediciones Número Crítico, 1997).
 45. Julieta Kirkwood, *Ser política en Chile* (Santiago: FLACSO, 1986).
 46. Valdés, *Mujeres Por la Vida*, p. 29.

47. Arturo Valenzuela, "Party Politics and the Crisis of Presidentialism in Chile," in Juan J. Linz and Arturo Valenzuela, eds., *The Failure of Presidential Democracy: The Case of Latin America (Volume 2)* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 116.

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