




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Political culture and attitudes of economic elites: explaining the Chilean business community's rejection to constitutional change

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Abstract

In contexts of institutional crisis, conflicts arise in which different pressure groups try to maximize their influence, seeking to adjust a political reality in line with their own interest. This article analyzes the changes in the attitudes of economic elites regarding the process of drafting of a new Constitution in Chile. Based on the literature on the political culture of entrepreneurs, the research hypothesis posed in this study suggests the existence of a widespread conservative attitude within this social group regarding a change in institutional rules. This mainly relates to the perception that a new Constitution in Chile could threaten its predominant place in the distribution of economic and political power. The results obtained after analyzing in-depth interviews with presidents or vice presidents of the main business organizations in the country show changing positions throughout the different stages of the constituent process. Even though some attitudinal changes towards an adaptation become visible, what ultimately prevails is an unmitigated rejection of the constituent process. These findings clearly suggest a return to the initial stances of most entrepreneurs, something that also happened in the elite examined as well as in the rest of Chilean society. Thus, one can speak about a sort of “boomerang effect”: the attitudes of rejection have once again dominated the space of discursive expression where the pressure exerted by public opinion seemed to pave the way for a certain reformism or a transforming reaction. This evidence confirms a disconnection found in the literature which reveals the dynamic nature of short-term attitudes linked to each specific situation, albeit with more stable values and positions specific to the political culture which exist on a more persistent basis.

Keywords: Economic elite; political crisis; constitution; political culture; Chile

Introduction

Until the expropriation reforms of Presidents Frei Montalva (1964–1970) and Allende (1970–1973), the big corporate associations had a decisive role in the construction of a political system in which they felt rather comfortable¹ and of an economic model which they consider themselves “guardians” ultimately seeking to ensure that their position of privilege will continue. But, particularly during the Allende government, their political behavior went from a logic of pressure group² to a policy of direct action in alliance with small businesses and transport,³ seeking to destabilize the Popular government, with the culminating moment of the corporate strike of October 1972.⁴

Once the coup d'état of 1973 was consummated, the big corporate associations supported the Pinochet regime and its structural transformations. In fact, several business leaders publicly supported,

¹Rojas (2000).

²Campero (1984); Arriagada (2004).

³Casals (2021).

⁴Campero and Cortázar (1988).

in media such as *El Mercurio*, the approval of the 1980 Constitution.⁵ This text represents a fundamental basis in the building of a political regime that limits popular sovereignty through counter-majoritarian devices, while economically, it enshrines a type of subsidiary state that offers great weight to the private sector in economic and business activity.⁶ Thus, the business community saw in the 1980 Constitution the birth of an institutionality that would guarantee its existence as a propertied class, previously called into question during the Popular Unity. Support for the Pinochet regime was also expressed in its approval of authoritarian repression⁷; support that even to this day is justified⁸; and, in the 1988 referendum, they publicly advocated Pinochet's continued power in power.⁹

During the 1990s, big business maintained confrontational relations with democratic governments when they timidly tried to reconsider their privileges. In this struggle, it is necessary to highlight President Bachelet's attempt to develop a participatory constituent process (2015–2018), which aimed to culminate in a new Constitution more favorable to the social majority, and which had the corporate bosses against it.¹⁰ The coming to power of conservative President Piñera frustrated this possibility and calmed the spirits of the business community constituted as a pressure group.

However, on October 18th 2019, a large-scale social outburst took place in Chile during which different segments of society protested to expose social issues that had resulted in a strong uneasiness amongst citizens. The event largely resulted from a series of unresolved tensions due to structural factors while other circumstantial ones had to do with the management style imposed during Sebastián Piñera's second term of office (2018–2022). In turn, within structural factors, a distinction should be drawn between socioeconomic ones and those of a political and institutional nature.¹¹

Starting with structural factors, the first of which is the disarticulating effects brought about by neoliberal modernization, such as the increase in labor precarization, the prevalence of social insecurity, the new poverty and the worsening of inequality. In relation to the latter, it is worth highlighting the enormous difficulties of access to university education and housing, or the different treatment before the judicial system depending on socioeconomic background. In part because of the remarkable inequality, growth did not translate into generalized prosperity and this was a culture broth for progressive discomfort. This resulted in different protests as of 2006 (with its peak in 2011) in demand for improvements in the educational system, in public transport, in investments in peripheral regions, due to the drop in energy prices, for environmental reasons, against corruption, etc. On the other hand, the institutional factors can be summarized in a discrediting of the political system and its actors, which was followed by a political disaffection that could be observed through a drop in participation in elections. Finally, the conjunctural aspects have to do above all with Piñera's style of government in his second term, described by many as authoritarian and which was recognizable in the repression of the different popular protests after the increase in public transport prices.¹²

The protests were held all over the country and rapidly spread to every region, leading President Piñera's government to call out the Armed Forces and the police to restrain the social revolt, which resulted in violations of the protesters' human rights.¹³

The institutional response to the protests materialized in the *Acuerdo por la Paz Social y la Nueva Constitución* (Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution) of November 15th, 2019. This entailed holding a plebiscite to decide on the convenience of having a new Constitution. In the October 2020 referendum, almost 80% of citizens voted for replacing the previous constitution which was enacted in 1980. A Constitutional Convention was chosen for its drafting, without the presence of any congressmen and congresswomen.

⁵Campero (1984).

⁶García García (2014).

⁷Torres (2008).

⁸Osorio-Rauld and Godoy (2023).

⁹Arriagada (2004).

¹⁰Escudero (2021).

¹¹UNDP (2019).

¹²Avendaño and Osorio (2021: 8–12).

¹³Amnesty Internacional (2020).

As could be expected, the staggering majority in the plebiscite does not mean that the distribution of support for a new Constitution was socially homogeneous. In the first instance, it was drafted by a progressive majority in favor of change and articulated from the social outbreak. In the first instance, its drafting was carried out by a majority of progress in favor of change and articulated from the outbreak. Meanwhile, amongst the sectors favoring the “Reject” option, interesting research subjects stand out for analysis, especially the large Chilean business community, which has all the characteristics of an economic elite, that sought from the first moment to mitigate the intensity of the change. It comprises a small number of individuals with common values, beliefs, lifestyles, and interests who form a homogeneous group that, within the framework of differentiated societies, assumes leadership and management functions in the highest echelons of the institutional power structure.¹⁴ Moreover, they own a wealth of material and symbolic resources which allows them to amass enough power to influence not only different spheres of social life¹⁵ but also public affairs.¹⁶ In this way, the economic elite act as a “pressure group.” Ever since the military dictatorship, this elite has been closely linked to right-wing politics, defending General Pinochet’s economic and institutional legacy¹⁷—which includes the constitutional framework—. This support has been done both on an individual basis¹⁸ and in numerous public statements made by the group’s most important leaders.

In Latin America, the study of economic elites has mainly focused on understanding their role in development,¹⁹ even though the authors of several comparative studies are striving to find out how these individuals perceive and assess chronic phenomena in the region, such as inequality, poverty and social exclusion, to quote but a few.²⁰ Chile has also played a significant role in to the progress of empirical research in the region by studying its economic elites and their transformations as a social group²¹ and the mobilization of resources and networks.²² Nevertheless, limited consideration has been given to the historical shaping of political thought,²³ which is what this article intends to address as part of its theoretical contribution. In this sense, few studies revolve around understanding the attitudinal repertoire of business leaders²⁴ and even fewer have tried to examine their attitudinal positions when faced with a crisis situation.

As we have argued in other works,²⁵ the Chilean case is vital in the context of other emerging societies confronting social turbulence and untold citizen demands associated with development and democratization. These conjunctures enable us to determine the true character of an elite, its reflexive and consensual potential,²⁶ as well as its capacity to lead processes of social transformation or, rather, to oppose them seeking to preserve its privileges.²⁷ Whether they take one path or the other will depend precisely on their ability both to learn and to use self-observation to deal with an environment characterized by still unknown challenges, instead of sticking to automated and naturalized responses.

In an attempt to help fill this gap, this paper poses the following research question: how does the new political learning of the business elite take place before the outburst, after it, and throughout the constitutional debate?

Despite the consensus amongst social scientists regarding the business community’s initial stance, the evolution in the attitudinal itineraries and the modulations of positions deployed by the business community regarding contexts of profound political and institutional change have received little

¹⁴Milner (2015); Etzioni-Halevy (1997).

¹⁵David et al. (2009); Reis and Moore (2005).

¹⁶Bonica (2016).

¹⁷Araya (2019); Araya and Garcés (2021); Fischer (2017).

¹⁸Osorio-Rauld (2019)

¹⁹Cavieres (2023).

²⁰López, Moraes Silva, Teeger and Marques (2020); Kroser (2020); López (2013); Reis and Moore (2005).

²¹Ramos (2015); Ossandón (2012); Montero (1997).

²²Méndez and Gayo (2019); Cárdenas (2016); Undurraga (2011).

²³Alfaro, Atria, and Ortúzar (2022); Atria, Castillo, Maldonado, and Ramírez (2020).

²⁴Alfaro, Atria, and Ortúzar (2022); Araya and Garcés (2021); Atria, Castillo, Maldonado, and Ramírez (2020).

²⁵Pelfini (2014).

²⁶Field and Higley (1980).

²⁷Amsden et al. (2010).

attention. The research gap on this issue becomes obvious both before the outburst, which might make sense, and in subsequent stages. It is necessary to analyze in greater depth the extent to which the changes in the business community's attitude and opinions regarding the political framework relate to the substratum of political culture that characterized this group in the past. Expressed differently, while the forced "learning" provided by serious crises periods²⁸ solidifies new ideas and responses in the minds of social actors,²⁹ it does so on a previous background whose establishment equally dates back to previous periods of "ordinary and extraordinary political socialization." In general, the literature focused on emerging or developing societies emphasizes the role of elites as main characters in processes of structural change and new growth strategies.³⁰ Less attention is paid to the way in which these sectors perceive and react to the unrest of more demanding and empowered citizens or concerning aspects such as higher levels of participation and a fairer redistribution of the benefits supplied by development.³¹ In turbulent circumstances, the responses embedded in the habitus of political and economic elites are seemingly no longer expected to offer responses to a new context and these hitherto unknown demands. This can either lead to transformative responses characterized by a larger share of reflexivity³² or reinforce naturalized positions in a kind of counteroffensive or isolation from an inquisitive society.³³

Regarding the case of Chile, that initial moment of crystallization of attitudes and consolidation of stable political culture structures in the business community connects to the time of crisis period marked by the Popular Unity government and the subsequent institutionalization of Pinochet's dictatorship. Most of the convictions related to the political framework became consolidated as a reaction to those moments and remained stable during the democratic period.³⁴ It is still unclear, though, whether any political learning has taken place in this social group throughout the constitutional debate, allowing a break from fossilized reactive positions that could favor a more positive attitude towards social and political change.

Based on the literature devoted to the political culture of entrepreneurs,³⁵ the research hypothesis of this study puts forward the existence of a widespread conservative attitude amongst this social group with regard to a change in institutional rules, mainly due to the belief that a new Constitution in Chile could threaten their privileged place in the distribution of economic and political power.³⁶

The article is organized as follows: after the review of the literature on business elites and attitudinal positions offered in "Introduction," "The business elite and its attitudinal positions" describes the methods used. In turn, "Research strategy" shows the results of a longitudinal qualitative research aimed at analyzing the Chilean business community leaders' attitudinal positions towards the change of the Constitution in four different political moments, namely: 1) before the social outburst in October–November 2019; 2) after the referendum of October 20th 2020 for the new Constitution; 3) following the election of the Constitutional Convention in May 15th–16th 2021; and 4) once the draft of the new Constitution was completed (end of May 2022). An in-depth examination of the interviews carried out permitted to review the attitudinal positions of the presidents and vice-presidents of Chile's main business organizations in the different political contexts. Finally, "Results" provides a discussion along with the conclusions drawn from the study.

²⁸Dobry (1988).

²⁹Pye (1977).

³⁰Acemoglu and Robinson (2013); Amsden et al. (2010); Evers (1997).

³¹Pelfini (2022); Pelfini, Riveros and Aguilar (2020); Cimini et al. (2018).

³²Archer (2010); De Swaan (1988).

³³Hirschman (1991).

³⁴Arriagada (2004); Álvarez, 2015.

³⁵Fernández and Kuo (2018: 178–179); Milner (2015); Useem (1984); Bunzel (1955).

³⁶Avendaño and Escudero (2016).

The business elite and its attitudinal positions

The concept “political attitudes” used in this research belongs to a tradition originating from the field of political culture developed by Almond and Verba,³⁷ which emerged as a response to Marxist economism and the theory of rational choice as a means to explain political behavior. This is not the place to systematically outline the main postulates of the aforesaid authors or the criticism that they rapidly generated.

Nonetheless, it deserves to be highlighted that their work allowed for the incorporation of the cultural dimension through attitudes, thus making it possible to study the link between the subjective dimension of citizens and their perceptions of the institutions, actors, and processes framed within the political system.³⁸

The most recent literature on political attitudes identifies them as a complex concept that integrates cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions in the form of favorable or unfavorable stances adopted by individuals as far as the political system and its various components are concerned.³⁹ Factors with different influences interact in these political attitudes, including social standing,⁴⁰ the weight of history,⁴¹ ideological beliefs⁴² and/or the political learning from new democratization contexts.⁴³ For decades, the impact of memory on political attitudes has been considered relevant,⁴⁴ from which can be inferred that the first-hand personal experience of certain historical events is bound to cause effects on the collective life of groups or generations,⁴⁵ constituting a shared and dynamic cultural heritage—understood as “collective memory”⁴⁶—that conditions learning in such a way that it largely determines the shaping of political attitudes amongst citizens and/or power groups.⁴⁷

Assessing the political attitudes of elites requires a complex interpretive strategy, both owing to the difficulties in approaching their members⁴⁸ and because of the hermeneutical challenge involved in making sense of their thoughts.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the analysis of attitudes and the study of elites have had an intellectual tradition with little dialog between these two areas⁵⁰ due to the differential weight attributed to what we could call “agency and structure.” Whereas the tradition of political culture observes long-term processes, socialization effects and traumatic experiences in terms of political position, the perception towards elites, above all regarding their political dimension of leadership and decision-making ability, assigns higher degree of contingency and agency capacity, particularly in turbulent situations.⁵¹ In other words, elites arguably have a greater level of reflective capacity than the majorities they intend to lead. This allows them, on the one hand, to intentionally define a leadership project and align their own interests with the general one, and, on the other hand, to effectively react when faced with unprecedented and challenging situations and demands, not only considering past experiences but also based on anticipating and reviewing traditional responses.⁵²

In this sense, within a context of change or high complexity where the very domination of traditional social groups is losing legitimacy, it would be expected that elites mechanically respond according to the predominant attitudes. These attitudes are consolidated in their early political socialization but it also implies the development of some transformative reaction that allows them to go beyond what they have

³⁷Almond and Verba (1963).

³⁸Welch (2013); Whitefield and Evan (1999).

³⁹Jost (2006); Eagly and Chaiken (1993).

⁴⁰Lipset (1970); Díez (2011).

⁴¹Pye (1977).

⁴²Jost (2006); Reis and Moore (2005); Putnam (1973).

⁴³Mishler and Rose (2007); Tormos (2012).

⁴⁴Trafimow and Wyer (1993).

⁴⁵Mannheim (1958); Schuman and Corning (2012).

⁴⁶Halbwachs (2005).

⁴⁷Putnam (1973); Pye (1977).

⁴⁸Thomas (1995).

⁴⁹Almond (1988: 80–81).

⁵⁰Morán (1997).

⁵¹Scott (2008); Mosca (1984); Dreizel (1962).

⁵²Davis and Williams (2017); Savage and Nichols (2017).

inherited by their class habitus. Agency and structure combine variably and differently. Precisely this is part of the character of a true elite, thanks to which it can either transcend its structural position as a class or remain defensive in the consolidation of its privileges as a dominant class.⁵³

Concerning the economic elite, around which this research revolves, literature⁵⁴ distinguishes various groups, such as managers, employers, economic groups, etc. and even specific figures or actors (advisors, stockbrokers) who, without necessarily standing at the top of companies and organizations, can decisively influence economic decisions,⁵⁵ simultaneously broadening this influence to public affairs.⁵⁶ The prevailing tradition when studying elites sees them as small homogeneous groups with common beliefs, lifestyles, and interests⁵⁷ that, due to their position in the power structure and to their wide access to resources, can influence the course of events in social life as well as in politics.⁵⁸

The current characteristics of the Chilean economic elite do not differ so much from those exposed by the elitist tradition, insofar as it is a culturally homogenous group⁵⁹—i.e. “socially closed”⁶⁰—that accumulates a far-reaching power by displaying a wide variety of resources.⁶¹

From the description offered in this introductory section, this research makes a twofold contribution. Firstly, it allows for the empirical analysis of the statements of the business community in relation to the constituent process, alongside the impact of this process on the different discursive positions. Secondly, the examination of the Chilean case serves as an empirical substratum to illustrate theoretical debates on the reactions of economic powers to events entailing crises or political transformations in contemporary societies.

Research strategy

With the aim of analyzing political attitudes within the business elite, a qualitative strategy was implemented using an interpretive approach, with an exploratory, descriptive scope, focused on analyzing 40 semi-structured interviews. The selection criteria were mainly organizational and political through structural sampling—a type of qualitative sampling which relies on selecting cases due to their specific position in the structures or networks related to the problem.⁶² In this research, the sample inclusion criteria are given by the hierarchical position of the selected subjects within Chilean economic organizations. According to the sampling strategy, a decision was made to interview presidents and vice-presidents of SNA (*Sociedad Nacional de Agricultura*, National Agricultural Society) and SOFOFA (*Sociedad de Fomento Fabril*, Manufacturing Development Society), as representatives of the business community that had democratically elected them, which endowed them with legitimacy before their peers. In terms of political affinities, the SNA has been historically more closely linked to the right wing, while SOFOFA has had a more central stance. However, both business organizations have defended the economic legacy of the dictatorship⁶³ and supported right-wing political parties in the times of democracy.⁶⁴ Importantly, some business leaders have held minister positions and been elected by right-wing organizations.⁶⁵

After the result of the referendum held on October 25th 2020 in favor of the “approve” option (*Apruebo*, in Spanish), and with the aim of making headway in a qualitative longitudinal study,

⁵³Pelfini (2022); Milner (2015).

⁵⁴Tirado (2015).

⁵⁵Froud et al. (2006).

⁵⁶Schmitter (1991).

⁵⁷Best and Higley (2010).

⁵⁸Reis and Moore (2005); Bourdieu (2001).

⁵⁹Pelfini, Ilabaca and Otaegui (2022); Thumala (2007).

⁶⁰Aguilar (2012).

⁶¹Méndez and Gayo (2019); Solimano (2012).

⁶²Penalva et al. (2015).

⁶³Álvarez (2015); Huneus (2001).

⁶⁴Correa (2005).

⁶⁵Avendaño and Escudero (2016).

a sub-sample of 10 leaders was selected from the 40 interviewees carried out during the first phase of this study. The interviews with these selected leaders took place in the aftermath of the social outburst.

The material and empirical background to analyze the respective attitudinal positions were the verbal statements made by the members of the business elite interviewed, since they permitted to distinguish the argumentative itineraries that justified each person's position on the subject at hand.

Three techniques were used to coordinate the interviews: 1) formal channels, inviting the leaders to participate in the study through a letter⁶⁶; 2) "snowballing," in which the interviewee was asked to link up with another participant; and 3) support from contacts close to the elite, where a personal contact was requested to act as a connector with a member of the large business community or someone close to this group.

The two main themes addressed during the first wave of interviews performed between August 2018 and June 2019 were: i) evaluations of the constitutional reforms implemented in democracy; and ii) the assessment of fictitious scenarios involving constitutional changes or a New Constitution. The subsequent second wave of interviews (November to December 2020) includes themes such as: iii) attitudes towards social unrest and evaluations thereof; iv) positions and motivations regarding the plebiscite and the constitutional change; v) attitudes and elements that the interviewees would like to be considered in a new Constitution; and vi) perceptions about the threat of a left-wing majority in the composition of the Constitutional Convention. Following the constituents' election, the third wave of interviews carried out from June to August 2021 sought to find out: vii) the assessment concerning the election and composition of a left-wing majority in the Constitutional Convention. Finally, in the fourth round of interviews held during the period comprised between May and July 2022, the items dealt with revolved around viii) the evaluation of the Convention's work; and ix) their views about the content of the new drafted Constitution and their final assessment about the document eventually delivered.

The interviews were analyzed according to the principles of the Grounded Theory. Thus, following Charmaz⁶⁷ and Glaser,⁶⁸ the coding of the data produced within the framework of the interviews made it possible to formulate emerging theoretical categories to analyze the relationships existing between them. This allowed for an empirically grounded conceptual elaboration which pursued an in-depth understanding of business people's attitudinal positions towards constitutional change at different times. Despite our adherence to a general conceptual framework of political culture, learning and "extraordinary political socialization,"⁶⁹ the intermediate-scope categories are not imposed by this framework; they emerge contingently from the analysis of the interviewees' words instead.

The transcription of the interviews constitutes a corpus of analysis that was established using the ATLAS.ti Software Version 8.4.13, to facilitate the derivation of a sufficiently representative number of theoretical categories, in accordance with the principles of the Grounded Theory.⁷⁰

Results

As previously mentioned, in order to sum up the main stages along the constitutional process in recent years in Chile, we must start with the mass mobilizations in October 2019 that started in Santiago (after an increase in the subway fares) which took place in different cities in the country till March 2020 (coinciding with the restrictions to circulation because of the COVID-19 pandemic). A relevant outcome of the initial protests would lead to the agreement signed by the Congress on November 15th 2019 to hold a national referendum that rewrote the constitution which was approved by more than 75% of the population. This resulted in the election of 155 delegates on May 16th 2021 to elaborate the new Constitution. After a controversial process, the proposed constitution was rejected by 62% of the voters under a compulsory voting system on September 4th 2022. This should be categorized as the end

⁶⁶Martin-Crespo and Salamanca (2007).

⁶⁷Charmaz (2014).

⁶⁸Glaser (1992).

⁶⁹Reig (1999: 141, 230, 233); Justel (1992); Ihl (2002).

⁷⁰Charmaz (2014).

of the spirit of the so-called *octubrismo* (“octoberism”), the ideological current that legitimizes the social outbreak and the need for social transformation derived from it.

The period covered by our data collection through longitudinal interviews at four different points in time (2018, 2020, 2021 and 2022), enabled us to distinguish four types of predominant attitudinal positions within the Chilean business elite in regards to a constitutional change.

Constitutional rejection before the social outburst

The analysis of the interviews conducted with business leaders prior to the social outburst reveals a set of political preferences aligned with rejecting a potential change in the Constitution. Although they could have stemmed from the fear of destabilizing a privileged situation, such positions actually evolved from the discursive reinforcement perceived from long-standing positive macroeconomic data throughout the democracy restoration period. This discursive reinforcement was repeatedly highlighted by our study’s interviewees, which despite their explicit recognition of certain social problems, such as inequality and social segregation,⁷¹ which in some cases made it necessary to undertake corrective reforms, but not fundamental changes that would affect the entirety of the development model identity.

The reasons for this position of rejection should be understood as resulting from a combination of cultural, political, and economic factors. Some of them more structural and long-standing, while others relate to attitudinal aspects linked to recent experiences.⁷² Furthermore, these individuals resist any change in the rules enshrining an economic model and political order of which they consider themselves “guardians” ultimately seeking to ensure that their position of privilege will continue. Resistance is shown by praising the following principles at any cost such as individual freedom, private initiative, entrepreneurship and property rights, as well as the categorical rejection of any review of the regulatory frameworks likely to cause unease in the current regime over the business climate and especially the highly appreciated legal certainty for investors. On the other hand, a wide range of emotions and attitudes associated with a long collective memory of threats, violence, and intimidation that the previous generations had experienced in the times of Unidad Popular (Popular Unity) (from 1970 to 1973 –all very present in our interviews. This multidimensional understanding of political culture factors introduces nuances in economism or determinism which usually help interpret the behavior of entrepreneurs,⁷³ insofar as their position often comes down to defending private interests or those of a social class.

Without denying the central importance of the economic side, it becomes increasingly necessary to consider those nuances of a psychosocial nature as well.

Adapt or die: Interviewees attitudinal modulations regarding the process of drafting of the new Constitution

Shortly after the referendum for the new Constitution held in October 2020, all 13 leaders of SOFOFA, SNA and CPC were interviewed again for the purpose of verifying whether the “extraordinary political socialization” or “democratic resocialization,”⁷⁴ such as: the social outburst and the protests; the Agreement of November 15th; and the 2020 plebiscite. All of which had altered the foundations of the elite business political culture which triggered modulation or variability in their assessments about the political process leading to draft a new Constitution.

Examining the second set of interviews after the plebiscite, allowed us to confirm “discursive cracks” in the business elite’s attitudinal positions. This change of position became publicly obvious when a number of outspoken leaders openly adhered to constitutional change, amongst them, Alfonso Swett, former president of CPC, who pointed out that “It is important for us to have a Constitution which reflects the country that we want.”⁷⁵ Another one, Bernardo Larraín Matte, president of SOFOFA, who

⁷¹Pelfini, Riveros and Aguilar (2020).

⁷²Osorio-Rauld and Reig (2022).

⁷³Whitefield and Evans (1999).

⁷⁴Mishler and Rose (2007); Tormos (2012).

⁷⁵*La Tercera* (09/11/2019).

stressed the need to draft a Constitution based on citizen participation, but always respecting “institutionality, and that institutionality currently lies in the Congress.”⁷⁶ The statements of business organizations supporting constitutional change aligned themselves with stances expressed by the main right-wing party, Unión Demócrata Independiente—Independent Democratic Union—, as reflected in the words of its president, Javier Macaya, who said “I am convinced that Chile needs a reconciliation with its Constitution, which can perfectly be achieved by rejecting (the Constitution) and proposing modifications for the future,” which was not the case for Renovación Nacional [National Renovation]—except for its president, Mario Desbordes—that mostly supported the Rejection option.

We believe our research has succeeded in distinguishing four positions concerning the change that the Constitution entailed. The first three emerged after the plebiscite constituted an unexpected finding for us, which we attribute to the divergence of the attitudinal positions identified above from the first set of interviews (2018–2019). The first position has a strong affective adherence to rejection. The second one is an adaptative rejection which primarily accepts the drafting process of a new Constitution in progress. Subsequently, a third position in favor of approval was identified with the impetus of non-refoundational reforms of the economic and political model. The latter represents nothing but a moderate approval, since no position strongly in favor could be identified.

The affective position of rejection towards a new constitution

Even though the rejection to changing the Constitution prevailed within the business community interviewed for this research before the social outburst, the scenario changed after the October 2020 plebiscite. The interviewees who had exhibited a rejectional attitude became a minority.

The position to reject the new Constitution characteristically reflects a continuity in the previously summarized conservative attitudinal positions existing prior to the social outburst. This position is held beyond the decisive events related to civic experience that occurred in the country over the past three years. Thus, neither the protests on October 18th nor the Acuerdo por la Paz Social y la Nueva Constitución of November 15th, nor the overwhelming result of the October 2020 referendum supporting the “approve” option shook the mindset or the attitudinal positions of those who opposed the constituency process. Such lack of flexibility confirms the hypothesis posed by the theoretical currents that give prominence to an early formation of the political culture through processes of political socialization which are able to determine, by their very nature, the long-lasting essence of the former, without significant variations affecting the above-mentioned substratum.⁷⁷ This segment of the elite mostly identified which with the right-wing precisely epitomizes the phenomenon under study.

In fact, the interview analysis reveals the prevalence of negative emotions underlying this attitude, amongst them the perception of threats, and a resistance to change, as well as a strong political disaffection.

The coding of the constituent process follows along the same lines; rather than an effective popular demand, was considered a widespread “manipulation” strategy undertaken by left-wing actors obsessed with “destroying” the country and moving towards a political regime like the one by which Venezuela or Argentina are supposedly ruled (conservatives throughout the region consider any policy with some leftist accent practically equal to the most significantly leftist regimes). This reminded them of the events occurred in Chile under the government of Unidad Popular when Salvador Allende gained power in 1970. The constituent process is seen at all times as the “demolition” of a “work” (that of the dictatorship democratically improved by the center-left Coalition in Spanish Concertación)—never as the “construction” of a new, more democratic order. These types of attitudes appear much more clearly amongst SNA leaders. As we detailed before, SNA has always been affiliated to right-wing conservative parties and likewise ideologically identified with values established by the Constitution, e.g. private property.⁷⁸

⁷⁶La Tercera (10/11/2019).

⁷⁷Sears (1990); Lane (1959).

⁷⁸Correa (2005).

“If you look at all the surveys conducted before October 18th, the new Constitution was one of the last priorities and, somehow, a political sector managed to impose its agenda within the country’s priorities by means of violence, fear, and threats. And now we have a constituent process that, frankly speaking, we don’t know what monstrosity is going to come out of it” (SNA leader).

“In Chile, as well as in every country, there is a device managed by the left wing. We must be blind not to see all the machinations behind it. How can we not see Chávez, Maduro and all the others who have already suffered what we are starting to go through!” (An SNA leader).

Rejection with resignation towards the new institutionality

One of the nuances that differentiates this attitudinal position from the previous one has to do with the fact that, despite the continuity of a position of rejection, a certain resignation now becomes discernible concerning the direction that the constituent process is taking. The interviews show a more realistic assessment of the “constituent moment,” less marked by nostalgic emotions and conspiracy theories referring back to Popular Unity’s socialist experience.

It can be inferred from the interviews conducted that the position to reject with resignation during this period directly stems from the assessment of the constituent process as a failed or incorrect institutional response to the changes that the country was demanding in the protests. Judging by the interviewees’ words, the social demands manifested through the protests had nothing to do with the response provided with the agreement of November 15th. After all, according to these leaders, many of those demands could have been met via political reforms of the current Constitution which allowed for the “oxygenation” of an “exhausted” political system, a feature that all the interviewed elite members admit and deem necessary to address, which therefore accounts for the positive evaluation that this segment of the elite makes of the Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution, despite not sharing the spirit of this consensus.

Nevertheless, such a position relies on accepting the new “constitutional reality” linked to the agreement, in accordance with which this is an inherent part of the ongoing democratic process. Thus, virtues of the process are even highlighted, such as the possibility to solve the problem concerning the legitimacy of the Constitution’s original force—spawned during the dictatorship—the constituent process also acquired relevance as a potential means to channel popular discontent, which in turn results in an explicit recognition of the moment of social crisis that was not evident at all in previous studies.⁷⁹ All the above could bring to light the construction of a kind of “political learning” which led to partially modify the initial positions of unwavering defense of the current Constitution. This can be easily interpreted from the interviewees’ statements, which never question the legitimate nature of this process.

“I am one of those who voted “Reject” because I think that the Constitution we have now has worked well and we should not change it and undergo this stress. But what I do see as positive is that, whatever happens, the people will have to realize that it is legitimate and the myth of it being a Constitution of the Armed Forces is going to end” (CPC leader).

“We have a political model that is exhausted and that does need some changes, which will be done by means of this drafting process of the new Constitution, which can somehow channel the social pressure a little bit” (SOFOFA leader).

Position in favor of “approve” in order to reform the economic and political model

The plebiscite result caused different reactions from the general public, the media, and the business community. Some of them made visible a kind of “crack” among the members of the latter through overlapping statements which presented the constituent process as an opportunity for the country.

⁷⁹Pelfini, Riveros and Aguilar, (2020); Osorio-Rauld and Reyes (2021); Moya, Pelfini and Aguilar (2018).

The interviews conducted after the 2020 plebiscite confirm this change of opinion observed at a public level; the transition from the predominant “Reject” position to a widely backed “Approve.” This attitudinal change takes place because of their trust in an eventual right-wing vote for the conventional elections of May 2021, given that a one-third minority would guarantee the drafting of a more “balanced” Constitution, free from radical political positions, despite prevailing fear of a left-wing majority being elected in the Convention. From our study’s interviewees, most of them said “no”:

“I believe that the people are also a bit tired (of social protests); so, I don’t think there will be a left-wing majority, I don’t think so and I am convinced it won’t happen” (SNA leader).

On the other hand, as explained above, the analysis of the business elite’s verbal expressions shows that the “reject” position was based on negative feelings, such as fear of change or apprehension towards it, as had been detected in the first set of interviews. Nonetheless, these feelings gradually began to fade as democratic experiences unfolded.

“If you ask me about changing the Constitution, for example, I was scared, in fact, I voted “Reject,” because I thought that the Constitution could be adjusted. However, when you leave the “page blank,” you realize that, in reality, the time has come to work, so much so that today I am convinced that we must help draft it well” (SOFOFA leader).

Insofar as these assessments by the business community were previously non-existent and perhaps even unthinkable, as they were always set in an inflexible position of rejecting change. However, now the new Constitution is discursively perceived more and more as an opportunity to improve the economic development model, without that implying a dismissal of the progress made during the last 30 years of democratic experience.

“Refounding everything is also at stake and with the danger that small and medium-sized enterprises may end up disappearing, therefore, we find ourselves in a play-off situation where we want this to go well, for this process to succeed, but we know that, if we start resorting to people who do not believe in correcting this model and virtues such as the freedom of entrepreneurship, the cure could end up being worse than the disease” (CPC senior executive).

This position in favor of “Approve” accordingly rests upon a combination that would consist in rescuing elements promoted by post-authoritarian governments, such as freedom of entrepreneurship, albeit with the introduction of changes that offer a response to citizens and social movements, through a gradual process of decommodification of rights that were previously left to the will of the market, as it happened, for example, in the use of water rights. This is a highly controversial issue where agricultural entrepreneurs have played an active role in defending the current constitutional model,⁸⁰ but whom, now, after the new reality imposed by the constituent process, has led them understand the need to yield in order to reach a consensus, in which they will not always win. Two top leaders of SNA express this change of attitudinal position as follows:

“To give you an example, as farmers, we by no means want to touch or compromise the rights to use water, but I think that what the country wants . . . what is happening is that we will have to reach an agreement on that issue, because things cannot continue as they used to be and we have to recognize that water must be a national good available to everyone” (SNA executive).

“[There are] People (entrepreneurs) who asked for water and then commodified it, and that, in reality, not only is bad, but also looks very bad. So, today people are going to have the water they need and it must be fair, because everyone will have it according to their real needs, and business no longer will be made with water” (SNA leader).

⁸⁰Avendaño, Osorio, Gonnet and Vidal (2022).

Summing up, the political and cultural context in favor of constitutional change arguably managed to temporarily shape the political preferences of several business community members, which could be corroborated by observing the transition from an inflexible and stagnant “Reject” position towards one that admits changes, though, as an interviewee pointed out, not “refoundational” ones—i.e. which ignore the progress achieved by democratic governments over the past last 30 years. Therefore, we would be witnessing an even more adaptive position than the mere “realistic” recognition that there will be a new Constitution, which suggests a noteworthy difference with previous positions pinned between “Reject” and “Reject with Resignation” (towards the new institutionality in progress).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that these discursive expressions which opened the door to a certain reformism mostly came from business associations such as CPC and SOFOFA, which represent dynamic sectors of the economy, including the sectors of services, industry and mining, among other fields characterized by their capacity to innovate and adapt to complex scenarios.⁸¹ This opening to change (or adaptive capacity) was far less distinguishable in agricultural organizations, as we observe from their resistance to substantial changes that questioned the free-market model established by the current Constitution, for example, through the free trade agreements which promote exportation, a key area for the growth of their sector.⁸²

The boomerang effect of attitudes from an optimist “Approve” perspective to an (ambiguous) “Reject” in the exit plebiscite

Once the drafting for the new Constitution was finished (May 2022), the last set of interviews conducted confirmed the influence or impact that the political and cultural context could have eventually had on attitudes, among them, the low level of confidence in the Constituent Convention (Chart 1), in addition to the attacks toward the new Constitution project from center-left groups (“Amarillos por Chile”) from the media, along with the criticism from right-wing politicians such as the president of RN, who stated “The call we are making . . . aims to tell them that this proposal is bad.”⁸³ Moreover, it was complemented by the rise of “Reject” in public opinion (Graph 2) which led to a “reflourishing” the conservative stance to reject a constitutional change and likewise diluting of the over-optimistic mood as was detected from our previous interviews. In short, all this corroborates what could possibly be named as the “boomerang effect” in interviewees’ attitudinal positions, which start from the “Reject” perspective, later moving towards a forced but optimistic “Approve” stance, and finally returning to the initial positions of aversion to change.

As a matter of fact, analyzing the interviews allowed us to verify the relevance that the left/right cleavage continues to have when it comes to defining the positions taken on certain “political objects,”⁸⁴ something which also holds true for “those who rule.” From the interviewees’ different political ideologies, it was possible to identify two groups which, albeit aligned by “Reject,” show important discursive nuances that clearly deserve to be highlighted.

The first group labeled as rejection to reform comprises a large group of leaders with a political affinity close to Pinochet’s right wing which is discursively opposed to a new constituent process aimed at changing the Constitution, even though they do not mind expressing a certain openness to modify some aspects of the text. In this position, strong feelings emerge once again that seem to prevail over a more adaptive assessment of the present and future scenarios, something already identified in the last two sets of interviews, where adaptation and optimism gained more strength.

“For me, it was always “Reject”; before they (the Constitutional Convention) started working on it, I supported “Reject.” The Constitution will have spelling mistakes. So, I reject it and I am not going to sit back and just vote, I plan to actively work for this, because my kids’ future is at stake.

⁸¹Scapini (2006).

⁸²Avendaño et al. (2022).

⁸³Radio Universidad de Chile (04/06/2022).

⁸⁴Colomer and Escatel (2005).

And honestly, I like the country, I don't want to emigrate anywhere else; however, if I am forced to, then there is no other choice" (Manager of SNA).

It is a kind of defense of the initial "Reject" position (no longer isolated, but supported by public opinion) which did not change in the light of the "democratic political resocialization" events occurred in the country, and instead attracted new supporters among center-right leaders, who polarized their speeches and positions towards a monolithic critical position about a new constituent process.

"This is President Lagos's Constitution, not one made by four generals, as President Boric insists on saying. And it was never four generals, there was a committee with the most qualified experts who worked on it for a long time and created it (. . .) I always told you; we don't need a Constitutional Convention to make the substantial changes that our society needs. The Congress (members) could perfectly do all of that" (SOFOFA leader).

"I have the worst opinion about the Constitutional Convention, especially because the country has been deceived, it was all a lie. They told the country that everyone would be heard and that never happened; they didn't even listen to one another. The other day the socialists were called traitors, so that means one is not allowed to think differently now? The level of authoritarianism is almost fascist" (Manager of SOFOFA).

The second identified group—named as supporting rejection and yet open to a new constituent process—included business leaders with more moderate center-right, center, and center-left political affinities. Several of these leaders admit to having experienced a kind of regression in their positions, thus making the boomerang effect of attitudinal positions explicit. This regression could also be traced within this context in public statements made by members of business organizations; by way of example, according to Juan Sutil, president of CPC, "A victory of "Reject" will prevent the implementation of a bad text, of a bad Constitution, as is already recognized by many people (. . .). It provides the opportunity to build a new text which can lay the foundations for Chile to head towards development."⁸⁵ Such speeches resembled those made within right-wing political sectors, likewise aligned with Rejection, though largely open to new constitutional changes, as reflected in the words of Javier Macaya, who insisted on the fact "a real willingness to change exists in the right," additionally pointing out that "today, our party has institutionally left behind the current Constitution."⁸⁶ As can be seen, these types of statements from right-wing political groups hardly differ from those found inside the business organizations more favorable to change at a public level, which in turn confirms a certain degree of political and cultural homogeneity within the Chilean elite that, in the specific case of Chile, became possible due to a historical intertwining of both groups,⁸⁷ a connection that grew even deeper during the military dictatorship.⁸⁸

"Despite having voted "Reject" in the plebiscite, I was optimistic that the country could come out of this process successfully, but now I feel utterly disappointed with the constituents, because, in my opinion, they have proved unable to listen to the people; they are still in a bubble God knows where" (CPC leader).

This is a group of leaders that goes beyond the rejection to reform, expressing an important nuance which distinguishes them from those members who refuse to accept a constitutional change. For this segment of the elite, the current Constitution lacks legitimacy, which is less related to the problem of origin than to its social discredit. Thus, it is possible to identify a disposition of being open to a new constituent process, though this time led by elites, such as the political and the academic ones.

⁸⁵*La Tercera* (16/08/2022).

⁸⁶*The Clinic* (22/05/2022).

⁸⁷Zeitlin and Radcliffe (1988).

⁸⁸Huneus and Undurraga (2021).

Furthermore, some went as far as to stress the possibility of recovering the document “Citizen Bases for the New Constitution,” resulting from the constituent process carried out by President Bachelet’s government, which, as explained above, they had fiercely opposed as a “pressure group” when that process took place.

Once asked about their final position regarding the plebiscite in September 2022, several interviewees pointed out that the conditions for a third way should be generated, so that they did not necessarily have to choose between “Approve” and “Reject.”

“I reject, but if “Reject” wins, I think there should be a third way, which is not on the table nowadays, in order to move forward. In short, because regardless of whether we like it or not, this Constitution, whether of Pinochet or of Lagos, is completely discredited (. . .). If it became clear that there was a third way, tell me where we can sign the proposal for a Constitution by Michelle Bachelet, where it is, to sign it. I would like that path to be opened” (SNA leader).

“A drafting work towards a new Constitution with a group of experts that really represents society needs to be proposed, but not like the one that was created, in which there were lots of people who, despite being highly qualified, have their own highly particular demands” (SOFOFA leader).

Discussion and conclusions

Attitudes and positions always have a reactive component in events or impulses framed within the socio-political environment. They are based on the group’s cultural heritage—i.e. their political culture, but this culture itself sometimes turns out to be less changeable and flexible. This kind of “decoupling” in the rhythms of change regarding political culture as well as attitudes and positions lies at the core of our initial hypothesis in this research and becomes confirmed by specialized literature and the seminal works of Almond and Verba.⁸⁹ Thus, different speeds can be distinguished in the evolution of social imaginaries about the political system, at least in the elites: the long waves of political culture versus the medium and short waves of attitudes, positions, or reactions to course of events.

As for political socialization, it is necessary to add to the primary sources of socialization (especially family and school education) and the secondary sources (i.e. generational and professional peer relationships), the so-called “extraordinary political socialization” or “democratic resocialization” periods.⁹⁰ This develops when the rapid pace of events demands a more active involvement from actors, who would thus have the opportunity to make an precipitous in situ learning about the system, its limits and its mechanisms. This would precisely be the moment of turbulence when new demands emerge and a certain dislocation between the habitus and reflexivity is to be expected. This tends to happen during periods of political transition or those during which the system or the regime undergoes a crisis.

An example of the above can be found in the Spain of the 1970s, when the acceleration of the crisis suffered by Franco’s regime mobilized or appeared to mobilize, what seemed to appeal to large layers of the population that had until then remained impassive to political events, leading them to quickly learn about the shortcomings of that dictatorial system in contrast to the promises of democracy.⁹¹ And this is probably what Ecuador’s big business experienced in the context of its constituent process in 2008, moving from resistance and reactivity to the need for rapid and obliged learning after its new Constitution was approved by 63.93% of voters. This likewise happened in Chile in extraordinary moments of systemic crisis from when Pinochet’s dictatorship entered its final phase, the large mobilizations involved vast segments of the population that had always behaved in an emotionless or prudently inhibited manner. A similar period of “extraordinary political socialization” derived once again from the crisis became evident at the time of the social outburst in 2019 and during the following months —characterized by extensive mobilization and public debate. The latter could have provided a

⁸⁹Almond and Verba (1963).

⁹⁰Mishler and Rose (2007); Jackman and Miller (1998).

⁹¹Reig (1999: 141, 230, 233).

learning opportunity not only for new layers of the younger population but also for older generations, who must have felt obliged to modify an established political culture and some of their basic beliefs about the system.

This process which we have linked to society as a whole and, therefore, to its prevalent political culture, can also refer more specifically to a certain sector of the population, e.g. the business elite. Therefore, the systematic interviews using: panels of main representatives; the compilation of information on opinions and attitudes; and the visible changes in them identified before during and after the crisis of the social outburst, allow us to believe in the possible existence of another democratic resocialization period which coincided in time with the protests and the extensive public debates on the need for a new Constitution.

We believe our research succeeded in accounting for certain discursive shifts of a large part of the business community, which evolved from a mostly conservative and rejection-oriented opinion about the possibility of a new Constitution to a more flexible position, open to the drafting of a new Magna Carta or, at some point, even ready to accept profound changes in its social character. The stance that we were able to reconstruct in 3.2.3. Position in favor of “Approve” in order to reform the economic and political model highlights arguments such as the importance of deprivatising water with the new Constitution. Thus, an interviewee points out the following: “today people are going to have the water they need and it must be fair, because everyone will have it according to their real needs, and business no longer will be made with water,” as well as when another leader from the agricultural sector states that “we have to recognize that water must be a national good available to the general public.” Signs of a more flexible position can also be pointed out by observing the ambiguous rejection of the constitutional plebiscite dealt with in “The boomerang effect of attitudes from an optimist “Approve” perspective to an (ambiguous) “Reject” in the exit plebiscite”, where some clichés appear: “I always told you; we don’t need a Constitutional Convention to make the substantial changes that our society needs. The Congress members could perfectly do all of that”; or when hope expressed later vanishes into thin air following certain behaviors of the Constitutional Convention such as “Despite having voted “Reject” in the plebiscite, I was optimistic that the country could come out of this process successfully.”

These shifts, which portray an introspective and reflective moment of the business elite, can be explained by an exogenous effect on this group’s internal dynamics derived from the mobilization and the widespread political demands of the population. The political context in such a moment of crisis forces the business elite to rationally assess the situation and seek accommodation or harmony with the social environment, partially modifying the basic assumptions that underpinned their beliefs about the context. The literature supports the possibility of this evaluative nature on the context and the actors, now divested of past experiences⁹² and capable of expressing dynamic political attitudes and subject to the assessment of the situation. Thus, a tension arises between the substratum of a conservative political culture and a set of attitudes and dispositions which reveal a willingness to move away from that original position, even if only temporarily.

However, these changes in part of the elites do not invalidate returning to the hegemony of subsequent opinions in the process, not only on a skeptical basis but also actively rejecting the proposal(s) for a new Constitution. This became evident in the initial position “Rejection before the social outburst” (see 4.1.) where all the interviewees were reluctant to accept constitutional change; and then in “The affective position of rejection towards a new Constitution” (see 4.2.1), although it equally becomes visible in “Rejection with resignation towards the new institutionalism” (see 4.2.2), with strong expressions such as: “we don’t know what monstrosity is going to come out of it,” pointing at a process manipulated by Venezuela, “How can we not see Chávez, Maduro and all the others who have already suffered what we are starting to go through!”

Within this framework, the discursive changes of an adaptive nature caused by the political environment recorded in previous waves did not affect the core of basic beliefs but remained superficial. They most likely related to a strategic calculation or were pervaded by the predominant climate in the context.

⁹²Whitefield and Evans (1999); Mishler and Rose (2007); Bartels (2001).

After all, we are witnessing the initial positions of most business community members, as it similarly happened in the analyzed elite and in the rest of Chilean society.

There has been a sort of boomerang effect: attitudes of rejection dominate the space of discursive expression where a certain reformism or transformative reaction seemed to be making its way, imposed or induced by the pressure of public opinion.

The empirical relationship between the discursive positions of the business community and the traditional left-right cleavage will require further analyses in the future, especially after the rejection of the Constitution of the Convention in the plebiscite of September 4th 2022 was confirmed. Moreover, and paradoxically, the Republican Party—situated in the far-right wing rejected of the drafting of a new Constitution—obtained 23 out of 51 councilors in the recent elections of councilors (*consejeros*, in Spanish) held on May 7th 2023. Nonetheless, our findings provide evidence that the political self-placement on the right and extreme right wing would consequently serve as a good predictor of an eventual return to rejection positions, while those possibly more prone to approving the resulting text of the Convention simultaneously emerge among the people situated in the center-right and center.

Similarly, it would be highly useful to contrast the main hypothesis of this research in comparable political contexts. Further research would be necessary to determine whether the environmental political pressure induces long-lasting changes in the economic elite's political culture, or instead, this pressure only causes a slight, temporary unsettling of their belief system, before subsequently relapsing to the previous belief system. For the time being, the Chilean case points to this last premise, namely, that changes have a superficial, transitory nature.

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