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Expression of Democracy: Local Elections
in Petorca, Chile

by

Peter S. Cleaves and Eugene V. Matta

The municipal elections of Chile were held on April 2, 1967. On April 3, in Santiago, spokesmen from the national committees of the five major parties — the Christian Democrats, the Radicals, the Communists, the Nationalists, and the Socialists — all proclaimed that the results showed that their political aggregation had been victorious on the previous day. The debate concerning who had won the election raged for several weeks in the press, in Congress and in spirited social conversation. The Christian Democrats argued that although their percentage of the national vote dropped from forty-two per cent to thirty-five per cent, they had increased their strength in the municipal councils by over two hundred representatives to six hundred and forty-nine councilmen, a new record for any single political party in all of Chile's history. The leftist coalition of FRAP (Communist-Socialist) boasted that they reflected the coming wave in Chilean politics by gathering nearly twenty-eight per cent of the total vote, an increase of six per cent from 1965. The Radicals announced with relief that they had retained second place in party percentages (sixteen per cent), and that their vote represented a vehement renunciation of the whole Christian Democratic movement. The National Party, perhaps the most surprised by its strong showing (fourteen per cent), predicted that the "Right" was not a dead letter in Chile, and that a new awakening was imminent.

On election day, over two million three hundred thousand people voted throughout Chile. Less than one tenth of one per cent of these votes were cast in the small town of Petorca*, several hours by road from Santiago and hidden in a rich agricultural district between the Andean foothills and the Pacific. Although Petorca has several unique features, its dominating characteristics -- slow pace of life, dirt streets, roving packs of dogs, one train a day, clean white Hispanic architecture -- are shared by innumerable small towns throughout Chile. For many Chileans, especially the campesinos (rural dwellers) orinquilinos (peasants) who work the large latifundios (haciendas), towns like Petorca are a whole world; and compared with the drudgery of the fundos (rural properties),

*All of the relevant proper names in this article have been changed.

they are an extremely exciting world. For the men and women living in and around Petorca, the local elections with all their fanfare provide one of the few excellent excuses to gather and socialize with old acquaintances.

On election day in Petorca, after having waged energetic campaigns, five candidates won seats on the municipal body -- two Christian Democrats, two Radicals and one National. Perhaps it is misleading to name their parties, since the winners were selected strictly for personal reasons, regardless of their party's ideology. Indeed, one successful Christian Democrat candidate privately admitted he knew little about his party's programs and even less about its philosophy. Another winning candidate with no qualms whatsoever, had recently switched allegiance from one party to its archrival. The five winners were:

-- Fernando Andreu, Radical Party, aged forty-six, four children, social security administrator, extremely personable and popular, winner of three municipal elections and loser of one election for deputy, native of the town, married to the daughter of the town pharmacist, tired of municipal work but influenced to run because of his eligibility for a pension in two years;

-- Mario Cueto, aged twenty-eight, Christian Democratic Party, unmarried, owner and driver of his own truck, sixth grade education, for two years subdelegate (an administrative position under the authority of President Frei), a title which he received through the influence of his uncle in Santiago and which helped him create a firm political base for his campaign;

-- Rosa Valencia, Christian Democratic Party, aged sixty-seven, widow, grand old lady of the poblaciones (slum towns), recent convert from the Conservative Party, fulfilling a Christian mission in the municipality, grandmother image, probably her last campaign;

-- Pablo Vergara, National Party, aged fifty-two, former mayor of the town, highly respected latifundista, leader of the movement against subdelegate Cueto and a Christian Democratic landowner who tried to have the town's new paved road detoured two kilometers past his front gate (to the detriment of the people), the self-proclaimed defender of the people's interests;

-- Raul Nino de Zepeda, Radical Party, aged thirty-three, handsome and successful Santiago dentist, forced to move to his wife's home town eight months previously because his heart was too weak to withstand the bustling activity of the capital, since that time had seen his house burn to the ground and his first child born, drove a Model T Ford, not too well known in community.

The Election Campaign

In Chile, candidates for municipal posts are permitted to begin campaigning thirty days before the election. Each party may submit a number of candidates equal to the seats open--e.g., in Petorca, five. Winners are selected by 1) dividing the total party vote by one through five; taking the five highest figures among all of the parties; and 3) granting the winning parties their number of seats. The election also serves as a party primary, and candidates must compete not only against the other parties but also, in a much more subtle manner, against members of their own party.

The week before the election in Petorca, both the National and the Christian Democratic parties held evening rallies to arouse public interest in their candidates. The militants of the two groups planned the details of the gatherings together so that they could share sound and light equipment, motor vehicles to bring people from outlying districts, and the facilities for serving wine. They also cooperated one afternoon in the task of making posters to publicize their respective manifestations. During the rallies, they mutually condemned each other.

Vergara, the National local party leader, struck out at great length against the land reform, inflation and inauusterity in the national treasury. He emphasized the point that the Christian Democrats were selling out to the Communists, and that if the people did not repudiate this trend, a Marxist state would be the inevitable result. The following night the Christian Democrats held their rally. It was well known that there had been a heated argument earlier concerning who would speak first. Cueto, unsure about his chances in the election, had fought with all the power of his office of subdelegate to take the podium as main speaker. He felt he desperately needed to give the impression that he had the full strength of the whole Christian Democratic movement behind his candidacy. However, his introductory speech was rather dry and lifeless. He described the petty and unpatriotic obstructionism of both the Right and the Left in the National Senate, and cited some of the programs the central party headquarters advocated: land reform, Chilianization of the copper mines, and the Promocion Popular cooperatives. The four other Christian Democrat candidates followed Cueto. The landowner who had tried to get the new paved road detoured past his front gate offered a brief thank-you and sat down to virtually no applause. On election day he polled thirteen votes. Lucho Ramirez, a campesino with demagogic pretentions, who had been hand-picked by the Christian Democrats to bolster the party vote among the inquilinos, bombasted the crowd with eulogies of the party's concern for the occupants of the lowest rung of the social ladder. He was loudly hailed by a group of

well-wishers in the audience, and on April 2 received seventeen votes. Rosa Valenica, the ex-Conservative Party councilwoman, painfully read from her prepared notes: "With your help, I will continue to struggle for the people," then sat down. She received a thunderous acclaim and subsequently polled three hundred and sixty-five votes.

For the participants, the political rallies held more of a social than a political attraction. The people milled around in groups before the first speech, talked with friends and drank wine at the expense of the local party leaders. Some political activity did prevail, however. One of the three town butchers, a hulking man with a happy, mustached face, dominated one group with an enthusiastic pro-Christian Democratic oration, which degraded the personalities of the secondary candidates of the other parties. He failed to mention that his political preference was influenced by the fact that the official price of meat had consistently stayed ahead of inflation for the past several months.

In another group, located near the wine table, a ruddy-complexioned campesino criticized the Radical Party to Jorge Pacheco, the nephew of Radical candidate Fernando Andreu and a Radical student leader in Santiago. The campesino maintained that the only doctor in town, who was a Radical, had not traveled ten miles by horseback in the middle of the night to deliver the baby of a young inquilino mother who subsequently died. Pacheco retorted angrily that the good doctor, who was sixty-five years old, worked sixteen hours a day, seldom asked payment, and that a lot more children would have died if he had never come to Petorca. The campesino was unmoved from his anti-Radical stance, so Pacheco gave up and walked away. Immediately thereafter, a diminutive campesino, who had been listening to the previous conversation, approached Pacheco to explain that he had great respect for the doctor, and that he and seven others had come into town the previous Sunday to place their block of votes at the doctor's disposal. The old man had told them for whom he would prefer they voted, and they were anxious to fulfill his wish. Pacheco, apparently touched, put his hand on the man's shoulder, and thanked him. Then they both went to get some wine.

While the Nationals and Christian Democrats were holding rallies to communicate with the uncommitted voters, the Radical candidates were maneuvering earnestly behind the scenes by visiting with potential supporters in their homes. Andreu, Nino de Zepeda, and Segundo Camalleun, who along with Andreu, had been an incumbent Radical councilman, were the most active candidates. Andreu knew that he would be elected even if he did no campaigning whatsoever, because his unfailing memory had kept close track of the ample number of political debts which he had accumulated over the years, and which were always

paid at election time. His main interest was in soliciting votes for the party, so that at least one other Radical would accompany him to the municipal meetings those cold winter nights. It was no secret that he favored Nino de Zepeda over Segundo Camalleun, who had been his Radical associate in the previous council. Andreu and his nephew Jorge Pacheco visited two or three houses every night starting immediately after work. The ritual would begin by entering a particular home and asking if the family head if he had time to visit awhile. Accepting the role of host, the man would dismiss the women and pour healthy servings of aguardiente to the two gentlemen and to himself. For forty-five minutes, they would drink most of the aguardiente, and talk of family, jobs -- of anything except the coming election. Finally, Andreu would put down his glass, look the man straight in the eye, and say: "Well, are you for me or against me?" The man would put his glass down, look Andreu in the eye, and say: "Fernando, I'm with you." Then there would be handshaking and laughing, the women would return with empanadas or meatcakes, and everyone would eat and laugh and drink for another forty-five minutes. Then Andreu and Pacheco would move on to another house. When the voter would say that he supported the Radical party but did not know for whom to vote, Andreu and his nephew would beseege him with the virtues of Raul Nino de Zepeda, the first name on the Radical ticket, the intelligent young dentist whose house tragically burned down with all his possessions inside, who would serve the community well until his dying day, and who was going to set up a dental clinic to begin the momentous task of filling Petorca's cavities.

Segundo Camalleun knew that his former staunch ally, Fernando Andreu, no longer supported him, and that his seat on the municipal council was in serious jeopardy through no fault of his own. Therefore, his campaign consisted of a desperate attempt to point out that Zepeda had just arrived in the community, had not yet proved himself and would be a good choice for a vote in the municipal election of 1971. Why not return a trusted servant to the council this time? In contrast, Zepeda conducted his quiet but confident campaign from the driver's seat of his Model T, his pretty wife at his side, holding up his index finger to everyone in view to signify his number on the ballot, and spending two hours at noon in the Radical Club bar playing cacho (a dice game) winning beers from everyone.

The Election Day

The polls opened at eight A.M. at the town school, and for about an hour only the polling captains and the Army were in evidence.

Then the town residents slowly arrived, walking briskly in the cool air, saluting their friends and nodding respectfully to the uniformed Army major at the door of the school. By law, the school classrooms had been divided into two sections, one for men, the other for women. A well-equipped, well-scrubbed soldier authoritatively motioned the voters to the left or to the right according to their sex. The citizens picked up their numbered ballots from the voting officials, went into a curtained booth, marked their performance, sealed the ballot and placed it in a glass box where it could be easily seen.

About ten o'clock, the candidates arrived in force and began to mingle in and out of the lines of Petorquenos who were fulfilling their democratic obligation. They all seemed confident and in good spirits, and warmly greeted everyone they recognized. On different occasions, Mario Cueto successfully intercepted men before they got in line, and reminded them of a favor he had performed, or had promised to perform once he was elected. Fernando Andreu remained stationary in the men's section, talking with friends and friendly adversaries on the merits of the Radical over the Christian Democratic Party. Zepeda stayed in the women's section, greeting toothless voters who assured him that they would vote for him. Rosa Valencia made a short appearance in the women's section. Supported by her son, she laboriously moved down every line of female voters and, speaking softly, and with tears in her eyes, fragily shook hands with each woman. The voters' response was equally emotive.

Before noon trucks full of campesinos brightly dressed in their finest clothes rolled up to the school. The men descended from the trucks quietly and gracefully; some moved directly into the booths, others strolled out in small groups. Shortly after noon, the landowners arrived; Pablo Vergara among them. Before voting they went over to the canteen and talked about the changing state of local elections. They remembered that at one time they could control all of their inquilinos' votes by forfeiting the first ballot, and handing marked ballots to the rest. Now they had no way of manipulating the votes other than to threaten the inquilinos with vague retaliations if a certain candidate did not receive a prescribed number of votes. This was a poor substitute for the old fool-proof method. After speculating on how Vergara would fare in the election, they began the short walk to the school house. The campesinos who had been engaging in subdued conversation in the street ceased talking immediately and watched demurely as the social and economic power-holders of the community haughtily walked by.

Just as the landowners entered the school, the Sunday bus arrived from Santiago carrying the last candidate, Angel Alarcon, the representative of the Communist Party. Alarcon, a factory worker, had lived in Petorca as a youth, but had returned to the country only once every four

years to run for municipal councilman. He always said that he would be shocked and inconvenienced if he were to win, but wished simply to help bolster the national Communist Party vote by giving party sympathizers a chance to show their preference. He polled forty-three votes.

At four o'clock the voting tables officially closed. According to Chilean law, all vote tabulations are open to public scrutiny, which means the first count takes place before the sun sets on election day, and in full view of anybody who is interested. In Petorca, those primarily interested were the candidates, the party officials, and the contingents of town residents who had remained to learn of the outcome. In the men's section, the count proceeded quickly and efficiently, and was completed by five o'clock. In the women's section, however, party observers continually interrupted the count to protest judgments of the poll captains. The main question revolved around stray pencil marks on the ballots, and whether an X on the right side of the candidates name was equivalent to a + on the left side. Especially active in protecting his party's interests was Pacheco, the nephew of Andreu, who was disturbed to note that Zepeda's chances appeared dimmer as the Nationals and Christian Democrats seemed to pull ahead. On one questionable ballot, the name of a National was circled rather than crossed, and a violent argument flared over the validity of the vote. Pacheco and a National party landowner volleyed humiliating insults to the delight of the on-lookers, including a helmeted Army officer who was present to insure that the democratic will of the people was not violated. After the National called Pacheco a flunkie student and a proselytizing socialist, Pacheco responded that he would not be manipulated by an oligarch who starved his inquilinos in the name of Christianity and individual liberty. As a temporary compromise, the vote was placed in a separate pile to be discussed later. These disputed votes were ultimately credited to the candidate whom the poll captain determined was in the mind of the voter when he cast his ballot.

As the last tallies came in, it became clear that the Christian Democrats had won at least two seats, the National Party one, and the Radical Party one. The fifth seat was tightly disputed between a Radical, a National and another Christian Democrat. Since the manner of determining winners is highly complicated, all three parties had conflicting figures. Much depends on whether the debated votes would be annulled. After comparing computations, however, the party leaders came to the consensus that a Radical had won fifth place by three votes if all the disputed ballots were counted, and by seven if they were rejected. Among the Radicals, Nino de Zepeda had four times as many votes as Segundo Camalleun, the incumbent councilman, so Zepeda was a winner. The final vote totals

of the winners were: Pablo Vergara, 368 votes; Rosa Valencia, 365 votes; Fernando Andreu, 346 votes; Mario Cueto, 178 votes; and Raul Nino de Zepeda, 133 votes.

Post-Election Follies

By nine o'clock every one in Petorca knew the results and the celebration started. As the political competition of the previous weeks was forgotten, the various party sympathizers gravitated to different meeting points well-stocked with wine, beer and pisco. After several drinks the various candidates were called upon to make speeches. At the Christian Democrat's fiesta, Cueto credited his victory not only to the dedication of the eight party militants who had struggled until the end, but also to a recognition by the people of his excellent job as a subdelegate. He concluded with the hope that the Ministry of Interior would permit him to continue drawing his subdelegate's salary even though he now held elected office. At the Radical Club, Zepeda, soon quite inebriated, announced his plans for the coming four years. The first item would be a municipal land reform, followed by the building of a community center with a free movie theatre and swimming pool. Also he would initiate plans for a new medical center with suitable facilities for the dental equipment he would have trucked from Santiago. To carry out his projects, he admitted it would be necessary to stretch the municipal yearly budget of twenty thousand dollars as far as possible. Finally, he postulated that his overwhelming victory in the municipal elections probably meant that he would be drafted by the provincial party headquarters to run for national deputy, a position he would gladly accept--but only as a public service.

Following Zepeda's words, Segundo Camalleun stood up to congratulate him, and to offer an emotional statement of his own sentiments: after he had served so faithfully for four years, it was quite disheartening to have to turn his back on political life with the knowledge that he had been forsaken not only by the people, but also by the party. He would remain, however, a true militant, and do his best to help Zepeda fulfill his mandate. Sitting down to laudatory claps and pats on the back, he was obviously quite distraught by the circumstances of his defeat.

Around one-thirty in the morning, when the liquor was exhausted at Cueto's home and at the Radical Club, the two ideological groups converged en masse on the National Party headquarters, where wine was still plentiful. In addition, the famished party activists were relieved to find a large table covered with chicken, empanadas and sweets, which they attacked immediately as a fine compensation for a dinnerless night. Pablo Vergara, the only National victor, highly intoxicated, was dancing around the room, slipping and falling occasionally. Cueto and Zepeda joined in the dance, holding Vergara up by the shoulders, all three shouting a victory chant.

Later, to prove the strength of local democracy, all the remaining male candidates, except the Communist, finished the celebration in the hospitable company of the local madam and her maidens.

During the night the results of the Petorca election were sent by special carrier to each central party committee in Santiago. There the totals from many towns like Petorca were tabulated and compared with the totals of other parties. By morning, each party committee had formulated a statement which proved without any doubt that their particular party had emerged victorious the previous day. Back in Petorca, when they awoke late in the day, the candidates would agree.