The arrival of Michelle Bachelet at the Presidency of the Republic represented a political sea change in Chile. Besides being the first woman President, Bachelet was also the fourth consecutive President from the Concertación, the centre-left coalition in power since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship. In addition to being a successful combination of change (first woman President) and continuity (fourth Concertación President), Bachelet also incorporated new elements to Chile’s democracy. During her first two years in office, she has striven to implement a safety net for those who are less capable of competing in a market economy. She has also sought to introduce bottom-up mechanisms of democracy, as opposed to the top-down approach that traditionally characterized the previous Concertación governments. Although the long-term effects of the initiatives aimed at strengthening participatory democracy and a ‘citizen government’ (gobierno ciudadano) are not yet known, Bachelet has successfully added a new dimension to the ongoing debate on consolidating and strengthening democracy in Chile.

Change and Continuity in Bachelet’s Presidential Election Victory

Although Michelle Bachelet’s presidential election victory understandably made news around the world for she was the first woman in Chile to win the Presidency, the fact that she was elected as the candidate of the Concertación, the longest ruling coalition in the country’s history, is more revealing of political developments in Chile. Because she successfully combined a message of change (her being a woman) with a message of continuity (promising to retain the policies of her predecessor), she won the run-off election on January 15th of 2006, defeating a moderate right-of-centre candidate.
It is very likely that had Bachelet not been a candidate of the popular Concertación coalition, her being a woman would not have been sufficient to carry the day. As the fourth consecutive Concertación President, she represents more continuity than change. Given that she promised to maintain the economic policies that made Chile the most successful economy in Latin America, her election was as much an approval of the neo-liberal model implemented by the Concertación as an endorsement of her promise to bring about more social inclusion.

The Concertación has long been associated with neo-liberalism. The first Concertación President, PDC Patricio Aylwin (1990–1994) announced a ‘free market social economy’ while vowing to give neo-liberalism a human face. In the following ten years, poverty in Chile was reduced from 40 per cent to 20 per cent, and GDP per capita more than doubled. Yet the policies adopted by Aylwin and Eduardo Frei (1994–2000) were squarely in tune with those promoted by the Washington Consensus. President Ricardo Lagos (2000–2006) only deepened Chile’s commitment to neo-liberalism. In addition to signing free trade agreements with the U.S. and the European Union, Lagos adopted a conservative fiscal policy, with a structural fiscal surplus of 1 per cent of the GDP into the national budget. Even in 2005, an election year, and despite soaring copper prices, the Lagos administration showed remarkable fiscal restraint. Yet, earmarked social programmes aimed at promoting access to health and education, and infrastructural development helped to transform Chile.

Bachelet’s rise to power is closely associated with the Lagos government and the success of the Concertación’s neo-liberal economic policies. First appointed Minister of Health in 2000, she was one of five women to form part of Lagos’s first cabinet. She received wide press attention soon after Lagos’ inauguration when she was given a 90-day limit to end lines in public health clinics. After failing to fulfil her impossible assignment, she offered to resign, an act of honesty that made her very popular. Although her accomplishments as Minister of Health for the two years of her portfolio were questioned by conservatives, she became one of the most popular ministers in Lagos’ cabinet (Insunza and Ortega 2005).

In January of 2002—following a midterm parliamentary election—Bachelet was appointed Minister of Defence. Though trained as a paediatrician, her personal interests led her to develop a parallel career as a defence expert. The daughter of an Air Force General who served under Allende, Bachelet was arrested and tortured after the military coup of