

Chilean Plebiscite – 1988 – Kenneth Wollack

Transcript

Ken Wollack: Hello, Henrique! How are you? I'm Ken Wollack I am currently a Vice Chair of the National Endowment for Democracy and have been its Chairman for the past four years. In the period leading up to the plebiscite, I served as executive Vice President of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), later as President of NDI until my retirement in 2018.

One of the major programs that NDI undertook during this period was supporting the democratic forces in Chile. I happen to be in Santiago in October 2023, at a ceremony at the US ambassador's residence that was marking the 50th anniversary of the military coup and the 35th anniversary of the 1988 plebiscite. The gathering was also to honor Harry Barnes, the U.S. ambassador during the runup to the plebiscite and to name the ambassador's residence in Santiago, the "Harry Barnes House." Harry played an instrumental role in the democratic transition and was seen as an important figure in supporting the democratic opposition. I would like, as a background for our discussion, to relay excerpts of remarks that I delivered at that ceremony in the presence of Chilean political leaders, the current U.S. ambassador, Bernadette Meehan, Harry Barne's widow and two daughters, NDI vice chair Hattie Babbitt, who was a member of the Institute's international observer delegation to the plebiscite, and Frank Greer and Annie Burns, two American consultants who had volunteered their time with NDI to provide technical assistance to the democratic forces during the run up to the plebiscite. I began by saying:

"We now look back at the democratic struggle that was 35 years ago as though its success was inevitable, when, in fact, at the time, it was improbable. In receiving the National Democratic Institute's Democracy Award, a month after the plebiscite, the NO Campaign coordinator, Genaro Arriagada, reminded a Washington, DC audience of that improbability. He told a story about how Chile's opposition leaders convened a team of international experts to advise them on how to defeat Pinochet. After deliberating for a week, the experts delivered their report. The opposition, they said, could defeat Pinochet by traditional means or by a miracle. The traditional way involved an assembly of a chorus of angels with blaring trumpets that would descend from the skies, surround Pinochet, and with religious hymns convince the general to resign and call free elections. 'If that is the traditional way?' asked one opposition leader, 'what is the way of the miracle?' The miracle, the experts responded, would be for the Chilean democrats to unite in order to defeat the dictator at the polls.

The story of the plebiscite, therefore, is truly a tale of miracles. A free election movement born of political parties, 16 of them, labor unions and civic groups banded together to capture the hearts and the minds of the Chilean people. They kindled a democratic spirit that the military junta thought was buried and forgotten years before. They withstood censorship, harassment, and arrest. They refused to be intimidated by the vast resources of the regime. Diverse ideologies were put aside for a common good. Old political adversaries work together in the same office space. They pooled their resources and their considerable talents. They listened to the voters and became the voice of the Chilean people.

The united opposition put aside street demonstrations, dropped their demand for an open election and decided to play by the dictator's rules. : They registered 92 percent of eligible voters, established monitoring systems to protect the vote, including a parallel vote tabulation that played a critical role on plebiscite night, and they developed a positive message that focused on bread and butter issues and the democratic future of the country. In the end they prevailed."

Henrique Arevalo: Thank you, Ken, for that wonderful introduction—it's truly fascinating to hear the speech that you gave in Chile. My name is Henrique Arevalo. I'm a research assistant at George University working with Professor Jeffrey Fisher in the Stories of Democracy Project, and we're very excited to touch upon this election today and to have Ken with us to cover his experience.

I think my first question for you, Ken, will be to walk us through the background of the plebiscite. What was the political and social context in 1988 Chile?

Ken Wollack: It is important to understand that in the beginning of the 1960s Chile enjoyed a reputation as one of the few stable democracies in Latin America. It was among the most advanced countries in the region, with high levels of political, social, and economic development. But later in the 1960s, the country experienced declining growth, rising demands, polarized politics, tearing the country into three blocks, no two of which could govern together. All of this led to the military coup in 1973 that overthrew violently the elected president, Salvador Allende. I remember the words of Genaro Arriagada, who said that it was not only Pinochet who destroyed democracy in Chile. It was the traditional political parties who refused to communicate and cooperate with each other. There was economic dislocation, country-wide strikes, and, in a sense, the democratic institutions of the country failed the people.

The 1980 Constitution stipulated that there would be a plebiscite in 1988, which would determine whether General Pinochet would remain in power for another eight-year term or, if a “no” vote won, a free and open election would be held a year later. However, even with a “No” victory, Pinochet would stay on as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and a Senator for life. That constitution led to massive protests with the extreme left bringing violence to the street; the regime responded violently to those protests.

Democratic coalitions began to emerge in the 1980s - - coalitions that would eventually set the stage for their collective efforts around the plebiscite. The first was the 1983 Democratic Alliance that brought together two political forces, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. The 1985 National Accord comprised more than a dozen political parties and included a detailed roadmap for a democratic transition. What these efforts had in common was a demand to replace a plebiscite with a competitive, democratic election. Later, three so-called free-election movements were formed, all of which called for open elections instead of a plebiscite.

Finally, in 1987, the opposition dropped its demand for competitive elections and, instead, began preparations for its participation in a process set out by the 1980 Constitution.

Henrique Arevalo: And, as you say, those strategic decisions were critical for the eventual outcome of the plebiscite. Walk us through what drove the opposition to participate in the plebiscite, as opposed to advocating for competitive elections; and what led them to unite, which proved to be central for their victory.

Ken Wollack: The opposition recognized that their campaign for free elections was not going to succeed nor were demonstrations. So, a number of key decisions were made. The first was for the opposition to call-off street protests that had grown more violent. Second was the decision to drop the demand for free elections and to unite the three free election movements into what became the Command for the NO (or the Campaign for the NO) that would campaign for a “no” vote in the plebiscite and to focus, first, on registering Chilean voters.

Approximately 4.5 million Chileans had already registered to vote, but most of these registrants were considered more sympathetic to Pinochet, and, therefore, supporters of a “yes” vote in the plebiscite. The opposition calculated that they needed at least 6.5 million registered voters to offset the pro-regime vote. So, they began a massive voter registration drive. Ultimately, they registered 8.2 million Chileans, more than 90 percent of eligible voters. This was a door-to-door, nationwide effort that was a predicate to the opposition’s ability to wage an effective campaign under unlevel playing conditions, given the junta’s resources and its control of the political environment.

Henrique Arevalo: As you hinted in your introduction and in the speech, the international community, of course the US, played a critical role in the plebiscite. Walk us through their role, of both the US and wider organizations in the plebiscite.

Ken Wollack: Well, there was a decision on the part of the Chilean democrats that they would welcome outside assistance and would make that assistance known publicly. They recognized that after 15 years of dictatorship, they needed a crash course in normal political organizing. And on the side of the international community, the German government and the German party foundations played an important role in providing financial and political assistance. In the United States, NDI played a role, as did The National Endowment for Democracy, with its grants program to civil society, as well as labor’s Solidarity Center. It was our view that we could openly support a “no” vote. Such an intervention would not be a partisan activity by taking sides in a competitive election; rather it was supporting an outcome that would lead to a democratic election. The International Republican Institute was not quite as active but did sponsor an important poll with a conservative think tank in the days leading up to the vote. The poll showed the “no” vote decisively winning, making it more difficult for the regime to commit fraud.

Soon after the 1985 National Accord, NDI had brought together party leaders who signed the Accord in a large international gathering in Venezuela; was hosted by the President of Venezuela and the two major political parties in the country. It included political leaders from a variety of countries in Latin America and Europe. And that was the beginning of the opposition’s willingness to consider participation in a plebiscite.

Then there was a decision on the part of the State Department and its Assistant Secretary of State, Elliott Abrams, and his deputy, Bob Gelbard, to seek a Congressional appropriations of \$1 million for the Chilean democratic forces—similar to the Congressional initiative that had earlier provided \$1 million to the Solidarity movement in Poland. Gelbard approached Senator Tom Harkin from Iowa who subsequently introduced the legislation. The funds ultimately went to the National Endowment for Democracy with the lion’s share for the Endowment itself and for NDI.

I think both the Endowment’s grant program and the technical assistance provided by NDI played an important role during the lead up to the plebiscite. One American consultant commented at the time that “the Chileans had the talent, and we had the experience; it was a perfect marriage.” That partnership had an impact on the opposition’s strategy and the execution of its campaign.

Henrique Arevalo: Looking at NDI specifically, what sort of support did it provide in Chile? Tell us a bit about your role there.

Ken Wollack: In 1987, we brought four Chilean political leaders to the Philippines to observe the legislative elections following the “people power” revolution the year earlier. While there, they examined the work of the National Citizens Movement for Free Election [NAMFREL], which was a massive effort by 500,000 volunteers that monitored the vote at 100,000 polling sites in the

country during that 1986 “snap” presidential poll. The Chileans also observed NAMFREL’s parallel vote count (or “quick count”) that was conducted along-side the official count to ensure that the will of the people was actually expressed at the poll. It was that quick count that revealed the fraud being perpetrated by the Marcos regime.

Each of those four Chilean political leaders played an important role in the plebiscite. The visit helped lead to election monitoring groups and the development of a parallel vote tabulation, albeit different from the one executed in Manila. The Philippine’s quick count was based on the monitoring of 100 percent of the polling sites, whereas the parallel count in Chile would be based on a random statistical sample of about 10 percent of the 20,000 polling sites in the country.

Secondly, NDI brought to Chile teams of political consultants. They included NDI’s Pat Keefer, Larry Garber and Glen Cowan, pollsters Peter Hart and Fred Hartwig, media consultants Frank Greer and Annie Burns, political organizer Jack Walsh, and leaders from NAMFREL in the Philippines. The consultants were not paid but volunteered their experience and expertise. They didn’t run the campaign but provided advice and ideas as the campaign unfolded.

Greer and Burns developed a manual for a nationwide voter registration campaign that was produced in both Spanish and English. The campaign was unveiled at a gathering of 350 Chilean organizers from around the country.

Hart and Hartwig conducted a poll in cooperation with the Chilean think tank, FLACSO, that was the country’s first nationwide political survey in decades. It was conducted in May 1988 when opposition leaders had come to believe that a victory for the ‘no’ vote was a virtual certainty. That view was based on Chilean surveys conducted only in urban areas. The FLACSO poll, however, revealed that only one-third of the Chileans would vote “no”; one-third would cast a “yes” vote; and the remaining one-third was undecided. At a gathering of opposition leaders in Santiago, known as the “cold shower” meeting, Hart concluded that the democrats had to change their campaign message that was to be focused on the regime’s repression. The poll showed that the undecided voter was more concerned over economic conditions of the country and not about Pinochet’s human rights abuses. If the opposition were to base its campaign on human rights, it could very well lose the plebiscite.

Each night during the last 27 days of the campaign, the election law provided the “yes” and “no” campaigns 15 minutes each on television. The Chilean technical team abandoned its human-rights focused broadcasts and instead developed a campaign message based on the economic future of the country, around the theme “Happiness is Coming.” The opposition understood how important these broadcasts would be; it would have to demonstrate to the Chilean electorate that the democratic parties could actually cooperate and govern. The broadcasts, therefore, would need to show the competence and unity of the democratic forces.

Jack Walsh had recommended to the technical team that the broadcasts avoid talking heads - meaning the political leaders. The nightly programs should be about the voice of the people. A respected TV news anchor was the host of the evening programs, which the regime made sure were aired late at night. There were professionally made skits featuring ordinary people, upbeat music and even clowns. The first broadcast took the Pinochet regime by total surprise. In response, the ‘yes’ campaign ran broadcasts that were dark and ominous, featuring a headless horseman. The contrast could not have been more stark.

The development of the parallel vote tabulation by a coalition of civic groups and the No Campaign, in cooperation with consultants Larry Garber and Glenn Cowan, also proved critical on plebiscite night. The PVT was designed to project the outcome of the election as a check on the results to be announced by the Interior Ministry.

Henrique Arevalo: Thank you very much. I think you gave us a great, sort of, idea of what the campaign was like, and the main topics. I think it's a perfect segue to the campaign and the election night itself, and the biggest challenges faced by democratic forces. Tell us a bit more about that, and how the election night went through.

Ken Wollack: Election night was quite tense. There had been a blackout the night before, and rumors were floating that a coup was about to take place, and the plebiscite would be called off. U.S. Ambassador Harry Barnes, who played such an important role in his relationship with the democratic forces in the country, was sending warnings to the regime on behalf of the U.S. We forget today how unusual his efforts were at the time, when many American envoys worked to protect their relationship with governments.

NDI at the time had an international observer delegation spread across the country. It was led by Adolfo Suarez, the former Prime Minister of Spain, who played a central role in the democratic transition in Spain; Peter Dailey, a Republican, who had served as a former U.S. ambassador to Ireland; Bruce Babbitt, a former Arizona Governor and Secretary of the Interior; and Misael Pastrana, a former President of Colombia.

The delegation was there to observe the election impartially. But it was interesting what the delegation was hearing from the Chilean opposition. Don't shade your observations we were told; if we considered the process credible and reflected the will of the people, we should say so in unambiguous terms. So, the message from the opposition was, basically, to do our job. The Chilean people, they said, would listen to what we say, irrespective of our conclusions. It was unusual to hear communications like this from an opposition that was fighting peacefully against dictatorial rule.

On plebiscite night, as official results were being withheld, and tanks were reportedly moving to surround the NO Campaign headquarters, a team from our observer delegation visited the headquarters as a demonstration of solidarity. At the time, the opposition and the civic organizations were collecting the results of their parallel vote tabulations which were being broadcast over Radio Cooperativa, an opposition media outlet, and shared with Andres Allamand, leader of the conservative Renovacion Nacional party, which was a signer of the 1985 National Accord. RN was supporting the "yes" vote but Allamand, who was with NDI in the Philippines, warned the regime that the party would not support any effort to alter the results.

The PVT clearly showed that the NO Campaign had won but the Interior Ministry was suspiciously silent. It was already past midnight and the streets were deserted. Needless to say, everybody was quite nervous.

Then the unexpected happened. One of the Junta members, Fernando Matthei, the Air Force General, walked out of La Moneda, the presidential palace, and told a journalist that the "no" vote had won. This simple declaration seemed to break the ice and, shortly thereafter, the Interior Ministry released the official count. In a later interview, Matthei said his comment outside La Moneda was based on the results of the PVT, which he said were known to the Chilean people.

I'll always remember one very emotional moment for me. The entire NDI observer delegation had been up most of the night as had the Chilean leaders. The next morning, I was sitting among the observers in our hotel office when, at 9:00 am, I received a call from Genaro Arriagada. "We will never forget you," he said. Genaro wasn't referring to me personally, but to those who had spent the past two years working on behalf of freedom in Chile. After all, the history of American intervention in the country was not always a proud one. In fact, there were so-called experts in Washington who had warned NDI that a U.S. organization would not be welcomed in Chile. So, I think our efforts helped change the relationship between the Chilean and American people.

As I said at the outset, we look back at the Chilean transition as though it was preordained, or a natural occurrence. It was not; no one really knew what the outcome was going to be.

Henrique Arevalo: Of course, and in the end the NO vote victory was quite big. 56 percent against the 44 percent of the YES, changing Chile's history and ending the dictatorship well, a year later. Looking back at your experience in the 1988 plebiscite, how do you think it influenced democracy promotion in the US, in Latin America, and beyond? What are the key lessons to come out from Chile in 1988?

Ken Wollack: First, I think the relationship between the Philippines and Chile was a very important one. Many people thought that the impact of the Spanish transition in the 1970s had a huge impact on Chile. I think the lessons from the 1986 "snap" elections in the Philippines were, at the time, even more relevant. It also was an early example of the importance of transnational and transregional cooperation among small "d" democrats.

Second, after the plebiscite, the Chileans, often working with NDI, took their experience in coalition building on the road, in such diverse places as Nicaragua, Panama, Bulgaria, Venezuela, Cuba, South Africa and Serbia. This was a story of how 16 parties came together to defeat a dictator at the polls. That coalition then stayed together to govern the country for 20 years.

Third, the plebiscite had an impact on the debate in the U.S. over democracy promotion efforts, bringing skeptical Republicans and Democrats together. There were Republicans, at the time, who felt that we should not be challenging non-democratic regimes friendly to the United States if they were engaged with us in a larger struggle against Soviet Communism. And they were also concerned that oftentimes, the alternative to autocratic regimes were Communist insurgencies. But the Philippines and Chile demonstrated that there was a democratic alternative to the dictator - - that the alternative to Pinochet was not the Communist insurgency; that the alternative to Marcos was not the Communist insurgency. In fact, these two extremes had enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, drawing strength from each other.

And there were Democrats who were suspicious of democracy promotion, seeing the effort as a Cold War tool. After all, the inspiration for creating the National Endowment for Democracy came from President Ronald Reagan. Yet, the NED mission in both Chile and the Philippines was to stand behind democratic forces challenging dictatorial regimes on the left and the right.

Henrique Arevalo: Thank you very much, Ken, for speaking to us today. I can tell you from my experience and from my home country of Venezuela, the Chilean plebiscite, even 35 years later, continues to inspire the opposition and those uniting against authoritarian forces. So, it's been fascinating to hear your story and thank you for your time.

Ken Wollack: Thank you for the opportunity to tell this story.