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All roads lead to disaffection: the constituent process and changes in the subjectivity of middle sectors in Chile

Todos los caminos conducen a la desafección: proceso constituyente y cambios en la subjetividad de sectores medios en Chile

Todos os caminhos levam à desafetação: processo constituinte e mudanças na subjetividade dos setores médios no Chile

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This article examines the evolution of emotions and attitudes toward Chile's constitutional process from the social uprising of October 2019 to the second attempt to draft a new constitution in 2023. Using a qualitative methodology based on focus groups with non-affiliated, middle-class voters, the study explores the possible causes and consequences of this evolution and identifies the main differences between those who approved and those who rejected the first draft of the constitution. The analysis reveals a consistent pattern across groups: regardless of their electoral choice, participants experienced a sense of frustration linked to a loss of confidence in political institutions and in the constitutional process's ability to produce meaningful change. The findings contribute to a better understanding of how both emotional and rational dimensions emerge as key factors explaining the transition from hope to political disaffection.
Keywords: Constitutional plebiscite, mistrust, misinformation, disaffection, political interest.

Este artículo estudia la evolución de las emociones y actitudes respecto del proceso constituyente en Chile considerando el periodo entre el estallido social de octubre de 2019 y el segundo intento de redacción de una propuesta de nueva Constitución en 2023. A partir de una metodología cualitativa, basada en grupos focales con votantes no militantes de sectores medios, se exploraron las posibles causas y consecuencias de esta evolución y se identificaron las principales diferencias entre votantes que aprobaron y que rechazaron el primer texto constitucional propuesto. El análisis permitió identificar un patrón transversal: independientemente de la opción electoral, los participantes experimentaron un sentimiento de frustración asociado a la pérdida de confianza en la política institucional y en la capacidad de transformación del proceso constitucional. Los hallazgos contribuyen a comprender cómo dimensiones tanto emocionales como racionales emergen como elementos gravitantes que explican el tránsito desde la esperanza hacia la desafección política.
Palabras claves: Plebiscito constitucional, desconfianza, desinformación, desafección, interés político.

Este artigo estuda a evolução das emoções e atitudes em relação ao processo constituinte no Chile, considerando o período entre o surto social de outubro de 2019 e a segunda tentativa de redigir uma proposta de nova Constituição em 2023. A partir de uma metodologia qualitativa, baseada em grupos focais com eleitores não militantes dos setores médios, foram exploradas as possíveis causas e consequências dessa evolução e identificadas as principais diferenças entre os eleitores que aprovaram e os que rejeitaram o primeiro texto constitucional proposto. A análise permitiu identificar um padrão transversal: independentemente da opção eleitoral, os participantes experimentaram um sentimento de frustração associado à perda de confiança na política institucional e na capacidade de transformação do processo constitucional. As descobertas contribuem para compreender como dimensões tanto emocionais quanto racionais emergem como elementos gravitantes que explicam a transição da esperança para a desaffectação política.
Palavras-chave: Plebiscito constitucional, desconfiança, desinformação, desafectação, interesse político.

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Introduction

On October 18, 2019, Chile experienced the largest social mobilization since its return to democracy. A series of mass protests, lacking centralized leadership or a specific agenda, spread throughout the country for months, causing significant disruptions in both political and daily life (Avendaño, 2019; Bachmann et al., 2022). In the largest demonstration, about three million people marched on October 25 in various cities, united by a broad demand for dignity (Araujo, 2019; Heiss, 2021; Humeres et al., 2024). The increase in public transport fares in the capital[7] triggered a nationwide wave of protests with demands related to political inclusion and improved living conditions (Somma et al., 2021). The social uprising or revolt[8] prompted political parties to propose an institutional solution by replacing the constitution enacted during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in 1980 through a democratic and participatory process (Escudero, 2022). However, the proposals drafted by two successive assemblies elected by popular vote –the Constitutional Convention and the Constitutional Council– were rejected in the plebiscites of 2022 and 2023, respectively.

Over a four-year period, the attitudes and emotions of Chileans shifted from enthusiasm to disappointment. Optimism about new forms of political engagement –demonstrated by the high voter turnout[9] and broad support for constitutional change[10] in the October 2020 plebi-

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7 This increase, recommended by a technical committee, was applied to public transport in Santiago and amounted to 30 pesos, equivalent to about 35 US cents.

8 Those who describe the 2019 protests as a revolt emphasize their programmatic continuity with previous social movements, while the term uprising refers to an unarticulated, spontaneous convergence limited to a shorter period (Aguilera & Espinoza, 2022).

9 More than half of the electorate voted, which is above the average for previous elections with voluntary voting (SERVEL, n.d.).

10 Eight out of ten voters supported the proposal to replace the constitution through an assembly elected for that purpose, without the participation of Congress (SERVEL, n.d.).

scite– gradually gave way to mistrust toward the elected constitutional body (Larraín et al., 2023; Sajuria & Saffirio, 2023) and ultimately resulted in 62 % rejecting the first draft and 55.7 % rejecting the second. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic forced social demobilization. Thus, a process that initially united the population on a massive scale and promoted an unprecedented effort ended with the constitution enacted under the Pinochet dictatorship still in force and a "radicalization of people's disaffection toward those who exercise representative functions" (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024, p. 230).

This article presents the findings of qualitative research based on focus groups conducted between Chile's two constitutional processes, a period marked by the public rejection of the first draft of a new constitution and the onset of the second drafting process. The study aimed to explore, through the narratives and discourses of middle-class, nonpartisan Chileans, the evolution of emotions and attitudes toward the so-called social uprising and the outcome of the first constitutional process. It also sought to identify the perceived causes and consequences of these shifts, as well as the main differences between voters who approved and those who rejected the initial constitutional draft. The analysis focused on identifying the elements participants described as central to understanding the emotional and attitudinal transformations experienced by both groups of voters in relation to the constitutional process.

Among the main findings, it is noteworthy that, regardless of voters' political stance, the process generally led to a state of profound disaffection with politics, mainly associated with mistrust of institutions, doubts about citizens' ability to achieve social change, and an emotional shift from hope to despair.

This article begins by describing the variation in public opinion during this process and continues with a theoretical discussion of disaffection and mistrust of institutional politics, the concepts that emerged as the main findings of this study. The methodological design of the study is then detailed, followed by a discussion of the main results, with emphasis on participants' narratives about the factors that shaped the evolution of their attitudes and emotions toward the constitutional process and influenced their disaffection.

Evolution of public opinion during the constitutional process

Although Chile's 1980 Constitution underwent significant reforms in 1988 and 2005, the persistence of its "authoritarian DNA", its "illegitimacy of origin and exercise", and its role in preventing democratic regulation of social rights (Ruiz-Tagle, 2016, pp. 259-260) have been seen as substantive reasons for changing it since the return to democracy. Although Sebastián Piñera's right-wing government (2018-2022) did not plan to replace the constitution with a democratically drafted text, this demand emerged as an institutional response to the social tension and mobilization that followed October 18, 2019. The opening of a democratic and participatory path to constitutional replacement began with the Acuerdo por la Paz Social y la Nueva Constitución (Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution), signed on November 15, 2019, by various political parties (Escudero, 2022). This agreement established that the process would begin and end with a plebiscite, the possibility of direct election of a Constitutional Convention, and various mechanisms for citizen participation (Delamaza, 2024; Fuentes, 2023), which generated expectations of a broad base of legitimacy.

The Constitutional Convention was elected under rules similar to those used to elect deputies in Chile, but with three innovations designed to ensure greater diversity (Contreras et al., 2022; Suárez-Cao, 2021): gender parity, seats reserved for indigenous peoples, and the participation of independent candidates on equal terms with political parties. The main winners were the independents: 64 % of the Convention's members had no party affiliation, a result that left the right with 24 % of the seats, the center-left –which had governed for much of the 30 years since the democratic transition– with 16 %, and the left with 18 % (Fuentes, 2023; SERVEL, n.d.).

Public opinion greeted this unprecedented configuration with anticipation and initial expressions of confidence (Sajuria & Saffirio, 2023). However, positive feelings gradually declined. While a month after the Convention began (August 2021) half of respondents gave it the highest confidence rating, by March 2022, less than a third said they trusted it. The feelings of hope (73 %) and joy (64 %) that prevailed

in August 2021 fell by March 2022 (to 49 % and 44 %, respectively), while negative feelings such as uncertainty and mistrust increased (Sajuria & Saffirio, 2023).

These shifts in public perception have been attributed to the Constitutional Convention's failure to connect with the electorate and, specifically, to the ineffective mediation by political parties (Keefer & Negretto, 2024; Larraín et al., 2023). Certain operational rules of the Convention revealed design flaws that distorted representation and discouraged compromise among divergent positions, a dynamic intensified by its composition: the right wing held only about one-quarter of the seats, departing from its traditional representation of at least one-third of the electorate, and creating an imbalance that led some actors to overinterpret the electorate's reformist mandate (Fuentes, 2023; Palestini & Medel, 2025).

While the initial plebiscite and the election of the Convention were conducted under voluntary voting, the September 2022 plebiscite, when citizens rejected the proposed text, was held under compulsory voting. The resulting shift in the composition of the electorate revealed a clear inconsistency between the preferences of the 43 % who participated in the Convention election and the 86 % who voted in the exit plebiscite. This change brought more than 4.5 million additional voters to the polls, most of whom voted to reject the draft (Fuentes, 2023; Keefer & Negretto, 2024; Palestini & Medel, 2025). Although 62 % of voters rejected the proposed text, a survey conducted two months later found that 74 % still supported the idea of drafting a new constitution (Ipsos & Espacio Público, 2022). However, nearly one-quarter of respondents considered the issue non-urgent and by April 2023, more than half of the population reported feeling indifferent or opposed to a new process (Activa, 2023).

Disaffection: mistrust and frustration toward political institutions

Political disaffection is defined as a "subjective feeling of ineffectiveness, cynicism, and lack of trust in the political process, politicians, and democratic institutions that generate distancing and alienation, but

without questioning the legitimacy of the political regime" (Torcal, 2001, p. 233). Its opposite is political engagement, which may arise from membership in political parties or from nonpartisan cognitive mobilization (Díaz Jiménez, 2022). According to this definition, disaffection is linked to mistrust of political actors and institutions, as well as a decline in individual feelings of political efficacy and agency, though not necessarily to questioning the political regime. Therefore, support for democracy and dissatisfaction with the government and public policies are distinct from disaffection, although all are part of political culture. Disaffection can be divided into feelings of "external" political ineffectiveness, defined as the perception that institutional actors are unresponsive to citizens' needs, and "internal" political ineffectiveness, defined as the perception of having little chance to influence the political system (Torcal, 2001, pp. 233-234).

In Chile, signs of citizen disaffection with the political regime and representative institutions are longstanding and have steadily deepened over time (Castiglioni & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; Luna, 2016; Siavelis, 2016). Since the mid-1990s, academic research has documented growing discontent and political disenchantment (Disi & Mardones, 2019). Earlier works such as Lechner (1994) and successive UNDP reports (UNDP, 2015, 2017b) introduced the concept of political disaffection, linking it to declining interest in politics, low levels of trust in democratic institutions and political actors, and feelings of political inefficacy. While in the early 1990s nearly 80 % of Chileans identified with political parties, by 2016 that figure had fallen to barely 20 % (Argote & Visconti, 2023), amid a sharp decline in voter turnout (UNDP, 2017a). The rise in electoral abstention has been associated with the elitization and erosion of the social roots of political parties (Luna & Altman, 2011), as well as the widening gap between political elites and citizens (Barozet, 2016; UNDP, 2015, 2024). This has weakened partisan identities (De la Cerda, 2022), intensified disaffection with the political system (González et al., 2023; Palestini & Medel, 2025), and deepened institutional mistrust (Arana, 2017; Gamboa & Segovia, 2016), trends consistent with those observed in other Latin American countries (Wences & Güemes, 2016).

The decline in party identification and the sustained rise in voter abstention (Disi & Mardones, 2019) led, from the mid-2000s onward, to a process of repoliticization expressed through protests and social movements (Barozet, 2016; Donoso & Von Bulow, 2017; Somma et al., 2021; UNDP 2015). This cycle of contentious politics included environmental demands, calls for redistribution in education, pensions, health, and housing, as well as for the recognition of rights and the inclusion of underrepresented groups, including feminist, indigenous, and gender-diversity movements. A distinctive feature of this period in Chile was the growing autonomy of social movements from political parties, along with broad public support for many of these mobilizations and protest actions (Donoso & Von Bülow, 2017; Somma et al., 2021; UNDP, 2015).

Regarding citizen subjectivity, several authors identify feelings of frustration and anger toward a system perceived as benefiting only a small segment of the population (Argote & Visconti, 2023; Palestini & Medel, 2025; Somma et al., 2020). The increasing politicization of structural inequality in Chilean society (UNDP, 2017b) has led to discontent, reflected in the growing perception of such inequality as intolerable, resulting in mobilizing attitudes outside traditional politics (Castiglioni & Rovira, 2016; UNDP, 2015, 2017b). This occurs despite the country's strong development indicators compared to the rest of the continent.

The social uprising of 2019 erupted in this context and can be seen as the culmination of a cycle of social mobilization that began more than a decade earlier to confront the political elites. The political parties responded to the crisis with a proposal for constitutional change, hoping it would channel the protests and, initially, the public embraced it with optimism. However, the process not only failed to succeed but was frustrated twice in succession.

Methodological design

This study aims to deepen understanding of the factors underlying this phenomenon by analyzing the narratives and discourses of citizens who approved and those who rejected the first constitutional proposal. Its main objective is to examine the evolution of attitudes

and emotions regarding the so-called social uprising and the outcome of the first constitutional process, to identify the perceived causes and consequences of this evolution, and to explore the main differences between supporters and opponents of the initial constitutional draft. In line with this objective, the research questions that guided the study are as follows:

RQ1: How did the attitudes and emotions of Chilean middle-class voters evolve regarding the so-called social uprising and the outcome of the first constitutional process?
RQ2: What were the possible causes and consequences of this evolution?
RQ3: What are the main differences between voters who approved and those who rejected the first proposed constitutional text?

We used a qualitative approach based on focus groups. While public opinion research has traditionally relied on quantitative designs to measure attitudes and opinions toward political processes, focus groups, conceived as spaces for discursive interaction (Krueger & Casey, 2009), provide a valuable way to explore public opinion in greater depth. They enable researchers to identify tensions, discursive patterns, and conversational dynamics that arise as participants exchange experiences, articulate reasons, and share emotions to justify or explain their political behavior. This discourse-oriented qualitative design allowed for a closer examination of the meanings embedded in citizens' narratives and a better understanding of how Chileans made sense of and emotionally engaged with the constitutional process.[11]

Four focus groups were conducted, each with eight participants from middle socioeconomic backgrounds, including men and women aged 25 to 50, all residing in the Chilean capital. Two groups included only men, and two included only women. This design aimed to create a safe and trusting environment for discussing a sensitive topic such as political conversation, and the use of gender-homogeneous groups is common in

[11] We present the qualitative results of a broader study on politics, media, and public opinion that incorporates quantitative techniques (Pavez et al., 2024).

qualitative research when addressing issues that may generate controversial discussions, such as the formation of political attitudes (Pavez et al., 2024).

Regarding electoral behavior and political affinity, the groups were organized according to participants' voting decisions in the exit plebiscite of the first constitutional process held on September 4, 2022 (Reject and Approve voters). All participants were required to have no formal party affiliation to minimize potential bias related to partisan identification in their voting decisions.

Recruitment was conducted by a company specializing in public opinion studies, which used screening questions to identify participants who met the study criteria. Participants received compensation in the form of a gift card valued at 10 US dollars in Chilean pesos. The process complied with the ethical procedures for this type of research and was certified by the university of the project directors.[12] At the beginning of the session, participants received and signed an informed consent form containing all relevant information about the project.

The discussions proceeded smoothly, with no participant dominating the conversation. The groups met in July 2023 at the recruiting company's facilities, which included a closed room with a glass/mirror behind which part of the research team took notes using the venue's audio system.

The sessions lasted a maximum of one hour and 30 minutes. A researcher from the team led each focus group using a discussion guide that addressed political knowledge or preferences, emotions regarding the constitutional process, and media and information consumption during the constitutional process. The conversations were recorded and fully transcribed, then analyzed thematically, to identify, analyze, and report patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Two researchers from the team conducted the coding, jointly comparing and validating the findings through analytical triangulation sessions. We used Atlas.ti software to organize and compare the data.

Through an iterative reading of the transcripts, we inductively constructed emergent categories based on the principles of grounded theory

12 Ethical approval was granted by Universidad Adolfo Ibañez, Chile.

(Glaser & Strauss, 2006) to address the research objectives. We then organized the results around two analytical axes: 1) the meaning of the constitutional process, which examines the emotional trajectory of voters from hope for change to disaffection, and 2) the elements –reasons or arguments– that explain the attitudinal shift toward disaffection.

Results: from hope to disaffection

Regarding the meaning of the constitutional process, there is a shift from hope for change to disaffection with the process itself and with politics more broadly. This trend, reflecting an evolution in the participants' emotional engagement, is evident across both groups of men and begins with a desire for and recognition of the need for change.

For men who voted Approve, the desire for change is rooted in disappointment with the right-wing government at the time and in the aspiration to realize the reforms sparked by the social uprising. In this context, changing Pinochet's constitution emerges as a meaningful goal, linked to the creation of a more democratic founding document designed by a representative collective from civil society: "We were all already fed up ..., regardless of political affiliation, left or right ... with conventional politics, dirty politics, corrupt politics" (Men, Approve).

Among male Reject voters who participated in the study, most had initially supported the creation of a fully elected Constitutional Convention in the first plebiscite but later became critical of the process. They acknowledged the legitimacy of the demands arising from the social uprising, particularly regarding pensions, health, and education, yet agreed that the constitutional process was not the most effective way to address these issues. A significant divide between the two groups concerned the relationship between the social uprising and the Convention elected in the first constitutional process. For those who voted Approve, the process and the diversity of candidates aligned with their desire for greater social participation, i.e., more citizen voices free from the constraints of traditional politics. As a result, they experienced the process with emotions such as excitement, joy, and hope, although they recognize –as will be discussed in the next section– that the behavior of some Convention members affected the final outcome.

In contrast, Reject voters felt that the constitutional process politicized the social movement, rendered citizen demands invisible, and favored the interests of particular groups. Elements of disaffection thus emerge from the perception of external ineffectiveness: a political institutional framework increasingly detached from the needs of citizens: "One feels a sense of revenge ... that this is being done for only one side, that it will benefit a particular political group" (Men, Reject).

For women who voted Approve, their positive attitude toward the constitutional process is marked by hope for greater social justice, equal opportunities, and respect for human rights. This is the only group that reports maintaining this emotional connection throughout the process leading up to the first exit plebiscite; their conviction of the need for social change was independent of the proposed text for a new constitution.

> I could have not read it and would have approved it anyway because I believed it was a constitution for everyone, given the diversity of the people drafting it and, above all, because of the respect for Human Rights in abolishing the old constitution (Women, Approve).

After the exit referendum, women voters who approved the constitution shifted from hope to disaffection, marked by disappointment with the result and the conviction that they had lost the opportunity to push for social change, which was their main source of hope. We observed consensus on the outcome –disaffection caused by frustration and despair– but this occurred at different times and for different reasons: for male Reject voters, it was due to the development of the Constitutional Convention, while for female Approve voters, it was due to the victory of Reject in the exit plebiscite.

> After the anger, I felt sad. I don't think any other country has had that kind of opportunity: we had indigenous peoples, women. And then people just go: "You know what? I'm not voting anymore, I'm not getting involved in politics anymore". And thus: the Reject vote! (Women, Approval).

The group that made a difference was women who voted Reject. They showed both initial and final attitudes toward the process rooted in negative emotions such as discontent and anger at the outbreaks of violence (police repression, street demonstrations that turned violent, riots, and damage to public and private property) associated with the social uprising. They also expressed fear that the changes included in a new constitution might be inspired by countries in the region perceived as more unstable and less democratic, generating uncertainty and mistrust: "Changes are dangerous. What has happened in other Latin American countries worried me a lot ... I read it [the proposed new constitution] and there were things that were dangerous for the future of the country" (Women, Reject).

Notes for understanding changes in attitudes

As reviewed in the theoretical section, one of the central dimensions leading to political disaffection is linked to mistrust in political actors and institutions, as well as to perceptions of both external and internal political inefficacy (Torcal, 2021). The arguments discussed in the various focus groups to explain the evolution of their attitudes toward the constitutional process, which converge in their political disaffection, are also rooted in this key element: mistrust, expressed on two levels. The first is institutional or external, aimed at political institutions, the media, and social networks. The second focuses on citizens, both others and the respondents themselves.

The level of institutional mistrust, which can be associated with external disaffection (Torcal, 2001), emerges as the general framework shaping attitudes toward the constitutional process. This mistrust is present across all groups, whose responses reveal a perception of a corrupt political class motivated by self-interest rather than the welfare of citizens, a dynamic seen as likely to be replicated in the drafting of a new constitution. "It benefits those in power for us to remain ignorant and uninformed: educated people do not serve their interests" (Women, Approve); "Someone is going to take advantage..., someone is going to profit, and ... we will be just part of the package, another aspect, another item" (Men, Reject).

Although this general framework of mistrust toward politics and politicians also extended to the Constitutional Convention and its members, there are some nuances. Among Approve voters, the Constitutional Convention did not inspire mistrust; on the contrary, its composition –associated with qualities such as diversity and broader democratic representation– represented hope, as previously discussed. In a sense, it suggested that the people, the citizenry, and not only the political elite, were now involved in shaping a new social order in the country: "It was the option that best aligned with what we were seeking. It was also well represented, including people from all walks of life: housewives, teachers, public servants, academics, and those with some knowledge of constitutional processes" (Men, Approve).

This initial predisposition also changed during the process among Approve voters, particularly men, due to the performative behavior –the show– of some Convention members. Male Approve voters criticized this shift sharply, arguing that certain actions by Convention members may have sparked public mistrust and reinforced the right wing's argument to discredit the process: "It was an own goal" (Men, Approve).

Reject voters mistrusted the Constitutional Convention as much as they mistrusted politics and politicians, a stance they held from the very beginning, in direct opposition to what Approve voters valued: while the latter saw diverse, more popular, and independent representation as positive, Reject voters considered these qualities a drawback for a task they believed should be handled by individuals they regarded as experts: "I didn't trust the people participating either, like this guy who claimed he had cancer, but it later turned out he didn't"[13] (Men, Reject).

Thus, the attitudes of this group were rooted not only in the content of the proposal but also in characteristics that can be described as performative within the political process of the Constitutional Convention. Women who voted Reject reported mistrust toward certain Convention members and perceived a lack of seriousness in how they carried out the task entrusted to them: "It made me feel insecure to see the constituents putting on a show, dressing up, playing the guitar, pretending

13 For more information, see Radovic and Chernin (2021).

to be sick[14] ... This is a very sensitive issue for the country, you can't be putting on a show" (Women, Reject).

In contrast to this critical perception, women who voted Reject valued qualities in the second constitutional process (carried out by the Constitutional Council) that set it apart from the first experience: they appreciated what they saw as technical expertise over the social diversity of the initial process, and discretion over political showmanship or performance: "It was better to repeat it [the process] and have competent people handle it, because those who drafted this constitution fell short in many ways. They weren't very educated and couldn't be trusted" (Women, Reject).

A paradox emerges: although they acknowledged being uninformed about the new Council's work, this very lack of knowledge gave them confidence and cautious hope, as they associated discretion with serious work and less show: "Now I feel uninformed. I don't know anything. Nothing is clear. Yet, despite that, I feel hopeful that something better can come out of it" (Women, Reject).

This level of institutional mistrust –or external disaffection– also extends to the media and social networks, not only regarding their role in the constitutional process, but also as part of a broader perception that the national media do not fulfill their duties in a credible, impartial, or objective manner: "[In the international media] the way the news is presented is very different from what you see here" (Men, Approve); "[The media] interpret things as they see fit or in ways they believe could help or harm people. I don't trust much of what is on TV" (Women, Reject).

Building on this narrative of mistrust toward traditional and social media, participants in all four focus groups reported perceiving an overabundance of misinformation. There is a widespread belief that the media –especially TV– and social media disseminate inaccurate or false content, whether as rumors or deliberate lies about the process: "Many people are influenced by these social networks without forming their own opinions, the rumors spread by others lead them to believe certain claims that are not true" (Men, Approval); "Television takes a stance,

14 For more information, see Sánchez (2021) and Castillo (2021).

television lies, social media lies too, so you shouldn't rely on just one perspective" (Men, Reject).

This argument appears across groups –except for women who voted Reject– as a possible explanation for the plebiscite outcome: mistrust of the media and the perception of misinformation are linked to the idea of a campaign of terror promoted by the Reject sector. The effect of this campaign was to instill fear among the public and is seen as one of the main reasons for the shift in voting from Approve to Reject the text proposed by the Constitutional Convention: "It was a brutal campaign targeting people's fears … and I think it succeeded, combined with a kind of collective ignorance" (Men, Approve); "My brother is 25 years old. He fully supported Approve, but after reading so much misinformation –for example, that free education would be eliminated– and the fear campaign, he and his girlfriend ended up voting Reject" (Women, Approval); "There was all this false information that circulated endlessly, it was ultimately a fear campaign, and many people, including myself, were influenced by it and voted Reject because of that" (Men, Reject).

Alongside this institutional mistrust –or mistrust directed at elements of the social system, such as political institutions, the media, and social networks– there are factors related to the internal disaffection described by Torcal (2001), specifically a dimension of mistrust toward other citizens and, notably, toward oneself: self-mistrust appears strongly in the narratives of those who voted Reject. Among this group, there is a lack of confidence in their own knowledge, information, or ability to fully understand the proposed new constitution, which they cite as a reason for their voting choice: "I admit... my ignorance for not having read it and voting without understanding. I went along with that. After a while... I started reading it and found things that were really beneficial" (Men, Reject); "It was my ignorance. I didn't know if some things required a law. I said, 'I don't understand', so I said no, it had to be clear to me" (Women, Reject).

Among those who voted Approve, mistrust at the citizen level is projected onto the other, those who voted against the Constitutional Convention's proposal. They, the Others, are seen as uninformed, uninterested in politics, and as people who concealed their voting intentions:

> Everything that happened was due to a lack of civic culture … Because it was mandatory, people who didn't want to vote and didn't want to be informed ended up voting. If the informed people had voted, the outcome would have been different (Women, Approve).

> My cousin, who … has four children, a good job, a solid financial situation, a swimming pool, everything, hid his true [voting intention] from me until the last moment. But about a week before we had a barbecue, and his niece gave him away (Men, Approve).

For women who voted Reject, being silent about their voting intentions was a necessary response to the aggressive and intolerant behavior of Approve voters, which can be understood as another form of mistrust toward others: "I didn't say I was going to vote Reject because they were very aggressive, but you didn't say anything to people who voted Approve" (Women, Reject).

> It was strongly assumed that those who voted Reject were right-wing. That was clearly debunked. To avoid that kind of conflict I don't argue …. People who voted Approve were very aggressive in their arguments, more focused on fighting than on presenting solid reasoning (Women, Reject).

Conclusions

The results show a progressive deterioration in institutional trust and in the perception of both external and internal political effectiveness, which explains the emotional shift from initial hope to political disaffection. Political disaffection is understood as a "subjective feeling of ineffectiveness, cynicism, and lack of trust in the political process, politicians, and democratic institutions that generate distancing and alienation, but without questioning the legitimacy of the political regime" (Torcal, 2001, p. 233). The findings indicate a process of ongoing decline in institutional trust and perceptions of political effectiveness. The analysis of the focus groups reveals that mistrust and frustration are the main factors shaping citizens' attitudes toward the constitutional process.

The data show that the change in voters' decisions, from approval in the initial plebiscite (2020) to rejection in the exit one (2022), can be explained more by concerns about the legitimacy, behavior, and communication of the process than by the content of the proposed text. Factors such as the perception of dysfunction among political elites and the tension between the need for technical expertise and mistrust of the Convention members –especially due to the performative behavior of some of them (Álvarez Fuentes & Coleman, 2024)– shaped a narrative that weakened the connection between the Constitutional Convention and the electorate and strengthened disaffection stemming from institutional mistrust of politics. These conclusions are echoed in the Human Development Report in Chile (UNDP, 2024), which identifies dysfunctional relationships between citizens, elites, and social movements as key inhibitors to driving change.

Likewise, it is recognized that emotions such as fear and mistrust of the media and social networks –rather than misinformation in the strict sense– shaped voting behavior. A necessary clarification on this point: although some studies suggest that smear campaigns against the Convention, as well as misinformation about the proposal circulating on social and traditional media, amplified fear of the constitutional proposal and influenced the rejection vote (Piscopo & Siavelis, 2023; Saldaña et al., 2024), the focus group discussions we collected do not address misinformation directly. Instead, they reflect widespread skepticism about the media's ability to report with credibility and balance, which may have contributed to eroding public confidence in the process.

Regarding gender, it is noteworthy that women, particularly Reject voters, displayed more conservative attitudes toward change. This result may be explained by their caregiving role and the perception of risk to their immediate environments, which remains prevalent in the experience of women in Chile and other countries in the region. This finding suggests the need for deeper future exploration of dimensions related to understanding female political subjectivity.

This study shows that the failure of the first constitutional process did not diminish the desire for change in Chilean society, but it did amplify feelings of anger and pessimism. This emotional and individual withdrawal aligns with an implosive discontent, manifesting as

disaffection with public and political life. As highlighted by the UNDP (UNDP, 2024), although 83 % of those surveyed believe the demands of the social uprising remain relevant, the prevailing perception is that political leaders are obstructing change (67 %). This is consistent with our findings, which underscore feelings of both external and internal political ineffectiveness.

Another notable point regarding the contribution of our findings to the field of political communication emerges from the narratives of female Reject voters about their decision to conceal their voting intentions from Approve voters. Conceptually, this illustrates the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) in shaping public opinion, with a silent majority choosing to vote Reject without expressing it beforehand. It also highlights the need to reflect on the dynamics of mistrust toward the Other, specifically those who vote differently.

In summary, this analysis shows that the failure of Chile's first constitutional process resulted not only from disagreements over the proposal's content, but also from complex dynamics of mistrust and disaffection, intensified by the participation of previously disengaged voters (who were thus structurally disaffected) due to the shift to compulsory voting (Palestini & Medel, 2025). Addressing these factors in future political processes will require transparent and effective political communication, reforms to rebuild citizen trust, and inclusive social dialogue that acknowledges the diversity of perspectives and experiences in Chilean society.

Beyond the Chilean case, this study contributes to the broader theoretical and empirical literature on the prolonged constitutional moment by offering a situated, qualitative, and discursive perspective. Unlike dominant approaches that rely on surveys or aggregate analyses of electoral behavior, this qualitative approach examines the meanings that voters attribute to the process and their experiences, within a protected environment that allows for an understanding of nuances, ambivalences, and emotions that quantitative methods cannot capture. From this perspective, the study proposes a communicational turning point: it approaches the constituent process as a phenomenon of political communication, in which citizen narratives express, reproduce, and contest the frameworks of legitimacy and mistrust circulating in the public sphere.

The Chilean case also connects to broader processes in Latin America: countries such as Colombia, Peru, Nicaragua, and El Salvador have faced political and social crises marked by the erosion of trust and the fragmentation of ties between citizens and their representatives. Understanding how disaffection is discursively constructed in polarized and binary contexts, such as the Chilean constitutional plebiscite, sheds light on the communication challenges faced by contemporary Latin American democracies.

In short, the crisis of the constitutional process was above all a crisis of trust –in institutions, in the media, and among citizens themselves. Rebuilding that trust requires not only institutional reforms but also communication strategies capable of restoring bonds of listening, credibility, and representation between politics and society.

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