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**Disinformation, fake news and public opinion: a case study of the 2022 Chilean national plebiscite**

*Guilherme de Oliveira Scaglione*, Department of Development and Environmental Studies  
Supervisor: MSc. B.A. Radovan DLUHÝ-SMITH



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Master Thesis

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis “Disinformation, fake news and public opinion: a case study of the 2022 Chilean national plebiscite”, is my own work and by my own effort for the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s Degree in Global Development Policies – GLODEP. Where sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged.

Name: Guilherme de Oliveira Scaglione

Date: 22nd of May 2023

Signature: 

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### Zásady pro vypracování

The idea is that the thesis will cover relevant aspects of the political economy of Chile and an analysis of online media, using data retrieved from Twitter, of the political campaign for the 2022 plebiscite. It aims at identifying how the disinformation discourses of political actors, through the use of social media, have echoed to the public opinion sphere in Chile.

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L.S.

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doc. RNDr. Martin Kubala, Ph.D.  
děkan

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doc. Mgr. Zdeněk Opršal, Ph.D.  
vedoucí katedry

V Olomouci dne 30. ledna 2023

Disclaimer: Due to the impossibility of accessing the Twitter API tool, we have utilized another online platform named Google Trends.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the phenomenon of disinformation and fake news surrounding the 2022 exit plebiscite in Chile. It analyses the correlation between the popularity of chosen themes of the text that had been targeted by fake news and public opinion in favor of the rejection of a new Constitutional text. To do so, this work makes use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Our findings have suggested that, during the last 65 days of this political event, the popularity of the chosen themes did not have a statistically significant correlation with the results from public opinion polls. This research is part of an inclusive academic agenda that investigates the underlying structural issues of disinformation strategies in the Global South, using the recent Constitutional process of Chile as a case study. Due to the novelty of the event of interest, studies on this topic are incipient and scarce in academic literature.

**Keywords:** political campaigning and communication, disinformation, online media, manipulative techniques, Chile

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE – On digital disinformation and propaganda .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>1.1 A literature review on the phenomenon of disinformation: conditions, enablers and consequences to democracy.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>1.2 Confronting disinformation as an open-ended process.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<b>CHAPTER TWO – A historical review of contemporary Chile .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>2.1 An 'incomplete democracy' and a polished economic model .....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>2.2 The growing waves of social unrest.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>2.3 the estallido social and the Constituent process.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<b>CHAPTER THREE - Fake News and Public Opinion during the political campaign for the Chilean exit plebiscite: an assessment using Google Trends .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<i>3.1 Notes on our methodology.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>3.2 Qualitative analysis .....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>3.3 Quantitative analysis .....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>3.4 Correlation analysis .....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>3.5 Discussion.....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>3.6 Conclusion and future work.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<b>References (in order of appearance).....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Appendix 1 - Methods of debunking per item, divided by themes.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Appendix 2 – Keywords/terms used in queries (in Spanish) and their respective fake news items (in English) .....</b>	<b>41</b>

## **Introduction**

The rampant global expansion of internet users that has been taking place in recent years has created a fertile environment for the spread and development of disinformation strategies to reach desired political outcomes. These strategies have affected the outcome of important political events worldwide, with examples ranging from Brazil to the United Kingdom. The goal of this thesis is, therefore, to corroborate an inclusive research agenda that investigates the underlying structural issues of disinformation strategies in the Global South, using the 2022 constitutional plebiscite in Chile as a case study. As means of achieving this objective, we provide an analysis that discusses the relevance of themes that were subjected to "fake news" in the public discussion during the campaign for the exit plebiscite, which lasted from July to September. Due to the novelty of the event, studies on this topic are incipient and scarce in academic literature.

During this political event, disinformation was spread as means of creating confusion and concerns regarding a new Constitutional text which underwent a public vote in September 2022. To analyze this phenomenon, we aim at investigating the correlation between the popularity of three themes of the constitutional text and the levels of support of the rejection of the new text. These themes were selected among a total of thirteen themes that were all targeted by fake news, and such selection was done by adopting two comprehensive criteria. Thus, we rely on a mixed methods approach to test for correlation. First, we utilize qualitative procedures to group fake news items and select keywords related to their content. Next, we utilize quantitative data to measure the popularity of these keywords during the political campaign for the plebiscite. Lastly, we run a Pearson test with polling results to check for correlation.

The work is structured as follows. The first chapter is dedicated to the definition of key concepts connected to disinformation and examples of the emergence of its use as a political strategy, both in South America and the Global North. After that, in chapter two, we provide a historical contextualization of Chile, that pinpoints political and socioeconomic aspects leading up to the 2022 plebiscite. Later, in chapter three, we discuss the fundamentals of our methodology aiming at understanding its applicability and disclosing limitations. Lastly, we discuss the results of this proposed case study and give suggestions for other future investigations.

## **CHAPTER ONE – On digital disinformation and propaganda**

### **1.1 A literature review on the phenomenon of disinformation: conditions, enablers and consequences to democracy**

Quoting a 1992 term first coined by a Serbian-American playwright named Steve Teich, Keyes (2004) was incisive when affirming "we live in a post-truth era" (p. 16). To make his case, the author describes how a significant shift came about within contemporary ethics with the emergence of alternative approaches to morality, defined by him as "alt.ethics". In his view, this change has been enabled by a separation between behavior and values in society that became growingly accepted<sup>1</sup>. The result of this shift was a much broader acceptance of dishonesty. Later, in 2016, the term "post-truth" was elected by Oxford Dictionaries as "the word of the year" for its outstanding growth in popularity. The reason behind this surge is by no means any coincidence. We will see, further in this chapter, that this was exactly the year in which the term became an accurate indication of current issues that began posing threats to democracy worldwide.

Contemporary communication is marked by the widespread circulation of information (Castells, 2015). The development of modern technology that enabled the diffusion of the Internet worldwide, popularly known as the web, has contributed to this tendency and altered communication patterns profoundly in the last decades. The popularity of this means of communication is indisputable. In 2023, 91.8% of the population of the United States are internet users<sup>2</sup>. In South America, Chile is the country with the highest internet penetration, reaching 90.2%, as seen in Table 1 below.

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<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the author argues that this new conceptualization of ethics has been legitimized by elite groups, including politicians.

<sup>2</sup> DataReportal, & We Are Social, & Meltwater. Data available online through the link:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/209117/us-internet-penetration/#:~:text=As%20of%202023%2C%20approximately%2092,internet%20users%20in%20the%20country>

**Table 1 - Top 5 countries with highest internet penetration in South America<sup>3</sup> (January 2023)**

Country	Share of people online
Chile	90.2%
Uruguay	90.1%
Argentina	87.2%
Guyana	84.8%
Brazil	84.3%

Nowadays, search engines are an important source of checking or consulting information on the web. It has become customary in the daily life of many to "ask Google", that is, to input search queries on the website or mobile application and in return obtain, through the work of an algorithm, a list of other web pages related to the words used in the search. All that the website requires of the user is to agree with Google's Cookie Policy<sup>4</sup>. As of April 2023, Google's search engine had a market share of over 95% in Chile, just a few points above their overall share of the global market (92%)<sup>5</sup>. However simple and popular it may be, the act of using online search engines to acquire new information has deeper psychological implications for users and society. On this account, Narayanan & De Cremer (2022) declare that search engine algorithms have become sources of 'bent testimony' for users. According to them, the reasons are:

"(1) We trust that search engine algorithms reliably order relevant and useful content at the top of a search results page. Consequently, we only engage with a few pieces of content, and therefore only encounter one or two unique claims per search. In so doing, we treat search engine algorithms as if they are "recommending" the content featured at the top. (2) Disputed norms exist about whether the recommendation of a piece of content counts as an assertion of its claims. (...) It indeed seems as if these algorithms are making assertions and providing testimony—much like any other testifier. When we form beliefs based on the content we engage with online, we do so at least partly on the basis of such testimony." (p. 4 & 8)

Interacting through social media has also become common among internet users. Different from accessing search engines, becoming a social media user involves a step further which consists

<sup>3</sup> Source: DataReportal, & We Are Social, & Meltwater. (January 26, 2023). Internet users as a share of the total population in Latin America and Caribbean countries as of January 2023 [Table]. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/726145/latin-america-internet-penetration-countries/>

<sup>4</sup> This is a document/statement that outlines how a website uses cookies and similar tracking technologies. Cookies are files that are stored on a user's device (such as a computer or smartphone) that record their website accesses. These files are used to collect and store information about users' browsing behavior. The cookie policy document outlines which types of cookies are used, what is their purpose, for how long they shall be stored, and if they are accessible to third parties. The document also informs users about the available options for disabling or managing the cookie files. Additionally, cookie policies are essential for ensuring transparency and compliance with privacy regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union (available here <http://europa.eu/!fV47bf>).

<sup>5</sup> According to open data provided by StatCounter Global Stats. Available here: <https://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share/all/chile>

of creating an account on publicity-oriented platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram) or messaging applications (i.e.: Messenger, WhatsApp). When creating the account, the user is asked to provide personal information such as full name and e-mail address and to agree with the platform's "Terms of Use". After setting up an account, users are allowed to connect themselves to others by participating in shared online communities such as "groups" or "lists of contacts". Within these communities posting content is done efficiently and at a low cost, which meant that users began interacting frequently, either privately or with bigger audiences. On the other hand, the advent of this media has posed new-found hurdles to consumers of information. Marshall & Drieschova (2018, p. 92) observes that 'posts' can be created by everyone, and that their popularity within the platform depends only on the amount of 'shares' within social media, not on their accuracy. Checking the veracity of every content to which users are exposed has become a costly task for both users and platforms doing the vast amount of publications. Oftentimes, even the identification of simple features such as when, where and by whom a certain material was produced is not easily done<sup>6</sup>. In this circumstance, Gregor & Mlejnková (2022, p. 31) add that social media has become "highly problematic in the field of news and political content". The authors emphasize that the consumer logic on which their functionalities are based exacerbates polarization and presents an ideal setting for the dissemination of false content <sup>7</sup>.

In 2021, a Digital News Report written by Reuters Institute in collaboration with the University of Oxford<sup>8</sup> estimated that online media (including social media) represented 84% of the sources of news in Chile. The advent of this new online environment also occurred worldwide and has made it easier for disreputable "producers of information" to emerge, raising issues in media ethics. A recent study conducted in Nigeria by Apuke & Omar (2021) about the phenomenon of online journalism showed it undermined media ethics since it corroborated a surge of disinformation conveyed mostly through fake news<sup>9</sup>. What is more, their findings identify political motivations as one of the key drivers of the creation of deceitful content. In respect to voter preferences, a study carried out in Italy by Cantarella et. al (2023) has found that high degrees of exposure to pro-populism fake news drove voters to increase their support of populist parties. Since an educated and well-informed population is pivotal for a well-functioning democracy (Kuklinski et. al, 2003), exposure to high volumes of false information in the form of "fake news" raises concerns. Another reason is that

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<sup>6</sup> Porche et. al 2013 apud Pavliková et. al, 2022, p. 47

<sup>7</sup> Ihlen et. al (2019) apud Gregor & Mlejnková, 2022, p. 31. Social media can be seen as "echo chambers", since their members connect with people with shared beliefs who hardly ever have contest their opinion in the community.

<sup>8</sup> The analysis within their report is made with data provided by a several number of countries in different regions of the World. The specific cited report is available at: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Ruffo et. al (2023, p. 4) provide a comprehensive taxonomy of these terms based on a 2017 report by the Council of Europe and a 2018 handbook by Unesco. The first is "false information shared with harmful intent", whereas the second is defined as "disinformation in the format of news".



the ample availability of several sources of information on the web was interpreted as a threat by non-democratic actors. Pavlíková et. al (2022, p. 50) notes that these actors have articulated responses in order to preserve political power, which involve employing manipulation or censorship techniques as means of "controlling the situation".

All in all, the Internet has become a fruitful domain for developing political propaganda for many reasons. First, its digital format brought about advancements in patterns of interactivity between politicians and citizens since the dissemination of directed information and coordination of mobilization was enhanced through the use of a wider variety of media formats<sup>10</sup>. Second, it allows politicians to "short-cut" traditional media<sup>11</sup>. Third, fast-paced innovations in deep learning allowed propaganda to no longer be solely dependent on voluntary contributions of real users but also backed up by cyber troops<sup>12</sup> oftentimes financed by the political elites.

Online platforms such as social media or search engines are controlled by a group of companies popularly known as "Big Techs". These companies collect relevant user information to deliver tailored pieces of paid advertisement and thus generate revenues. This particular use of big data has changed capitalism. Zuboff (2019) argues that it has made it evolve to a new "age of surveillance" in which behavioral data is now used as "raw material" for predictions through artificial intelligence tools. An example of this practice was when a British political consulting company, named Cambridge Analytica, was funded by Donald Trump's political donors to make use of big data to decipher users' personalities on Facebook with the intent of manipulating voters and influencing the results of the presidential election of 2016. Similarly, Marshall & Driechova (2018) described the 2016 Brexit campaign led by Boris Johnson as the arrival of the "post-truth" mentality to the political sphere. In sum, the similarities between these political campaigns lie in the fact that they have resorted to spreading and sustaining falsehoods.<sup>13</sup>

In parallel, Internet and social media platforms were conniving with these manipulation strategies, since they have structured their functionality around algorithms which are:

"(...) Entirely opaque to external review and accountability. In this story Facebook and Google, much more than Russia or any state, were the primary culprits, building platforms for refined, scientifically informed manipulation of human individuals at population scales and doing so in pursuit of profit under the newly emerging surveillance capitalism". (Tufekci, 2014 apud Benkler et. Al, 2018, p. 345)

It is important to highlight that the tactics of adopting lies as a way of making politics have a psychological self-reinforcing effect on those who decide to do so. Bennet & Livingston (2021)

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<sup>10</sup> Klotz (2004).

<sup>11</sup> Schroeder (2018) calls attention on how the phenomenon of rising right-wing populism is related to the use of social media to deliver and spread political messages.

<sup>12</sup> Pavlíková et. al (2022). An example offered by the authors is of "internet bots", robot users solely dedicated to automated propaganda. Another sophisticated modern tool for disinformation is the "deepfake", which uses artificial intelligence to manipulate audiovisual content.

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion on this topic, see Osborne, P. (2021) and Allcott, & Gentzkow (2017).

recognize that this is because politicians perceive and take advantage of voters' inattention and lack of vigilance to carry with this strategy.

In Latin America, fake news and disinformation have served as useful tools to what Caballero & Sola-Morales (2020) have identified as "mediatic coups"<sup>14</sup>. The authors evaluate that this was the case surrounding many recent political events in Venezuela, Mexico, and Ecuador, and the 2016 impeachment of left-wing Dilma Rousseff in Brazil. Surely, the political campaign that led far-right politician Jair Messias Bolsonaro from being a Congressman to the presidency a few years later in 2018 also made use of these strategies. De Albuquerque Maranhão Filho et. al (2018) stress that during this campaign, false information was fabricated and intentionally spread through several social media platforms as means of demoralizing the opposition and, concurrently, winning more voters<sup>15</sup>. More recently, the Federal Police has found that, during his presidency, computers of the Institutional Security Office were used to create fake news supporting his political campaign.<sup>16</sup> A similar configuration has been also reported to exist within a department of the Peruvian National Police and right-wing political parties<sup>17</sup> while a deep social crisis soars following the impeachment of former president Pedro Castillo.

In Chile, Providel et. al (2022, p. 4397) show that the online disinformation playbook for political propaganda began to be developed online during a wave of social unrest that took over Chile in 2019, known as *estallido social*<sup>18</sup>. After analyzing trending news in the country paired with Twitter data, the authors identified that false rumors (containing distorted or inaccurate information) were mainly about the events surrounding the protests and that these rumors spread more quickly through the network of users than true news items. Traditional media also contributed to this, as observed in the review of a 2022 book named "Disinformation in the Global South" published by John Wiley & Sons and edited by Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales:

"TV channels were accused of misinforming, manipulating, and censoring information because they disproportionately focused on the violence of the protesters and avoided to talk about the social demands that triggered the outbreak or human rights violations that police officers and the military had been committing. As a result,

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<sup>14</sup> The authors define this concept based on Sharp (2011), stating that this type of "soft coup" is generally assisted by repressive forces (e.g.: the police, internal security forces) and makes use of different features (e.g.: political, economic, psychological, etc.) so as to prevent or undo any social transformation that is contrary to the dominant geopolitical interests and/or the interests of local elites. In Latin America these coups were mostly coordinated by right-wing movements.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, the authors highlight that Bolsonaro insistently repeated for 2 years leading up to his presidency that his political opponent, who had been the Minister of Education during the mandate of Dilma Housseff, was responsible for coordinating the distribution of a "gay kit" in public schools, which consisted of items devoted to turning children homosexual. The allegation was first made in a video posted on Facebook.

<sup>16</sup> #238: Não olhe agora. Podcast Foro de Teresina. February 3rd 2023 [Internet broadcast]. Rádio Piauí. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipOcLIm6xZU&t=1032s> (in Portuguese)

<sup>17</sup> La desinformación profundiza la polarización y la crisis institucional en Perú. News article written by Saldaña Cuba, José Denis Cruz. 04th February 2023. Available at: <https://www.newtral.es/peru-desinformacion-protestas/20230204/> (in Spanish)

<sup>18</sup> We will analyze the roots of this historical event and explain why conservative political elites opposed it in the next chapter.

Chileans turned their attention to social media, even if there were false alerts circulating about the crisis." (Brandao, 2023, p. 459)

Another example of how social media and disinformation interplay in contemporary Chile can be found in the study carried out by Valenzuela et. al (2018), which was structured to analyze the results of a two-wave survey. Their findings point out the existence of a paradox: the use of social media platforms makes citizens more politically engaged but, on the other hand, increases their predisposition to share false content.

## 1.2 Confronting disinformation as an open-ended process

The proliferation of anti-democratic online forces worldwide has urged the creation of a multi-lateral "task force", focused on generating responses to their disinformation "influence operations". Hanzelka & Pavliková (2022) provide a useful summary of their categories and the course of action pursued by these agents of change, summarized in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 - Countermeasures against influence operations**

Category	Activities
a. Actions with the public	Clear warnings, public statements, voter education and education of parties;
b. State measures	Creation of dedicated Ministries/other institutions and employee education;
c. Legal framework	Implementation of legal measures, cooperation with business;
d. Actions with the media	Train communication officers, strengthen disinformation monitoring and support investigative journalism;
e. Actions with political parties	Urge parties into political culture compliance, organize training for political parties and campaigners;
f. Direct countermeasures	Information operations against hostile actors, diplomatic pressure;
g. Actions with supranational entities	Cooperation, join task forces and discussions, accept recommendations.

Source: Hanzelka & Pavliková (2022)

The political willingness or opportunities for adhering to these practices have been mixed across the world. In Europe, the Danish and Finnish regulatory frameworks are regarded as role models (Hanzelka & Pavliková, 2021). As one of these examples, Denmark is very well-organized in terms of regulation and monitoring/reporting, which are done by a national Information Technology security authority created as a result of government initiatives in 2019.

In comparison, the institutional response in South America is ongoing. In 2021, the Supreme Court of Brazil determined the blocking of a group of accounts that were spreading false information to support Jair Bolsonaro<sup>19</sup>, and just recently the House of Representatives approved a request to

<sup>19</sup> Singh et. al (2023, p. 329)

analyze with urgency a bill on fake news, which will create a "Law of Freedom, Responsibility and Transparency on the Internet"<sup>20</sup>.

After growing evidence of the leniency of platforms with the disinformation phenomenon and its impacts, big tech companies such as Google and Meta have started to pursue responses to a certain extent. In 2019, Google announced practices of ranking and labeling content within its search engine to "less credible news less relevant"<sup>21</sup>. Meta has collaborated with the Electoral Service of Chile (Servel) from 2020 to 2022 to reduce the spread of false information. The actions were multiple, such as launching a transparency feature for political and electoral ads on Facebook and Instagram and establishing reduced forwarding limits on private message applications such as WhatsApp and Messenger<sup>22</sup> during the periods of recent political campaigns. However, as we have pointed out previously, their algorithms (which contain the parameters for content sharing and exposure) content remain opaque to external review.

Given the fast-evolving misuse of digital platforms, further steps and collaborations to tackle disinformation are in the works. In 2022 the Transport and Telecommunications Commission of the Senate, with the support of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Association of Telecommunications Companies (Chile Telcos), and the Chilean Chamber of Digital Infrastructure have drafted a long-run digital strategy for the country. One of the pillars of this proposal bringing together the interests of the State, private sector actors, and civil society to "create a digital environment in which people are protected from disinformation and other forms of harmful content." (CEPAL, 2022, p.30).

In the Chilean Chamber of Deputies, eight bill proposals targeting disinformation have been proposed between 2018 and 2022 and are in the preliminary stage for processing<sup>23</sup>. Although these bills target disinformation, their content differs. For example, the first bill presented in 2018 concerns the accountability of high authority figures and determines they must be removed from their positions if proven they are disseminating, promoting, or financing false news<sup>24</sup>. Then, on August 2022 another bill was presented, this time proposing sanctions to the found culprits of spreading "fake news"

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<sup>20</sup> Despite being popularly known as the "Fake News bill", the text of the new law does not concern matters related to the veracity of contents, but aims at strengthening the accountability of online platforms in terms of monitoring and controlling potentially harmful content. Ortellado, Pablo. (2023, May 5th) A guerra em torno do PL das Fake News. Podcast O Assunto. [Internet Broadcast] G1. Available at <https://g1.globo.com/podcast/o-assunto/noticia/2023/05/03/o-assunto-952-a-guerra-em-torno-do-pl-das-fake-news.ghtml> (in Portuguese)

<sup>21</sup> Hanzelka & Pavlíková (2022)

<sup>22</sup> Information available at the following links: <https://about.fb.com/ltam/news/2020/10/como-nos-preparamos-para-el-plebiscito-de-chile-en-facebook/> <https://about.fb.com/ltam/news/2022/08/nuestro-trabajo-para-proteger-el-plebiscito-constitucional-en-chile/> <https://about.fb.com/ltam/news/2021/11/nuestros-esfuerzos-para-proteger-la-integridad-de-las-elecciones-presidenciales-en-chile/> (in Spanish)

<sup>23</sup> Data was reported by Fast Check, an initiative of several academic projects to verify the veracity of public discourse, which exists since 2013 at the Faculty of Communications of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Available at: <https://www.fastcheck.cl/2022/09/20/los-ocho-proyectos-de-ley-presentados-en-chile-para-combatir-las-fake-news/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.camara.cl/legislacion/ProyectosDeLey/tramitacion.aspx?prmID=12838&prmBOLETIN=12314-07>

regarding a specific political event: the constitutional plebiscite of September 4, 2022<sup>25</sup>. It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the political disputes involving these bills and their potential effects on disinformation in Chile. Next, we provide a historical and economic contextualization of Chile so as to understand how this constitutional process came about.

## CHAPTER TWO – A historical review of contemporary Chile

### 2.1 An 'incomplete democracy' and a polished economic model

The fact that Chile is a young South American democracy is noteworthy<sup>26</sup>. On March 12th, 1990, Patricio Aylwin, the first democratically elected president after a period of almost seventeen years of dictatorship, gave an enthusiastic speech at the *Estadio Nacional*, located in the Santiago Metropolitan Region. In his words:

"(...) Our beautiful national history teaches us how this small and distant but hardworking and enterprising population, overcoming the difficulties of poverty and their beautiful but challenging geography, rebuilding after earthquakes, were able to construct an exemplary Republic admired among nations. Ideologically divided by irreconcilable utopias, hatred momentarily prevailed over solidarity, and force over reason. After years of bloody divisions and the predominance of violence, today we reunite once again with a patriotic spirit and a willingness to understand, determined to make Chile reach the dawn of the new century as a prosperous and peaceful nation. At this crucial moment in our national life, I invite each and every one of my fellow citizens to ask themselves, looking deep into their conscience, how each one can contribute to the great common task and be willing to assume their share of responsibility. The world is watching us. The great figures of our history demand consistency. Future generations will judge our conduct. The task is beautiful: to build, together, the homeland we want, free, just, and good for all Chileans."<sup>27</sup>

It was indeed a crucial moment, that took place in a historical venue. In 1973 the *Estadio Nacional* had been turned into a detention center by the military authoritarian government of General Augusto Pinochet and a place where many political prisoners were tortured or killed<sup>28</sup>. The military rose to power following a coup that overthrew Salvador Allende in that same year<sup>29</sup>. Besides being brutally violent, the authoritarian regime imposed many institutional safeguards and some of its legacies persist to this day. Additionally, the economic landscape of Chile was drastically altered by Milton Friedman and his Chilean students who became known as the “Chicago boys”<sup>30</sup>. Klein (2007)

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<sup>25</sup> *Proyecto de Ley* (n. 12314-07) Available for consultation at: <https://www.camara.cl/legislacion/ProyectosDeLey/tramitacion.aspx?prmID=12838&prmBOLETIN=12314-07> (in Spanish)

<sup>26</sup> One of the last countries in the region to restore a democratically elected government after a military dictatorship period. In comparison, the authoritarian governments in Brazil and Argentina finished in 1986 and 1983 respectively.

<sup>27</sup> Translated from the original speech in Spanish, available at: <https://www.gob.cl/noticias/el-discurso-con-que-patricio-aylwin-reinauguro-la-democracia-1/>

<sup>28</sup> More information on the significance of this particular venue in Chilean history can be found on the thesis of Fernando Guzman Muñoz, published in 2014 and entitled "*Estadio Nacional : la sangre o la esperanza*". The document is available through the link: <http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-62155.html> (in Spanish)

<sup>29</sup> The political events leading up to this coup were the subject of a three-part award-winning documentary directed by Patricio Guzmán entitled "*La Batalla de Chile: la lucha de un pueblo sin armas*".

<sup>30</sup> The term refers to the team of orthodox Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago between 1957 and 1970 under scholarships funded by “the Chile Project”. See more in Klein (2007, p. 60)

argues that the political momentum generated after the violent coup drew Chileans into a state of collective shock<sup>31</sup> which was seized by these economists as an opportunity to turn Chile into a neoliberal “free market”, which involved limited government intervention. Also, the brutality of the regime allowed unpopular measures necessary for this transformation such as privatizations, deregulations, and cuts in social spending to be imposed without resistance. Amid these is the imposition of a Constitution in 1980.

The promulgation of the new charter radically altered the space for state interference in the public sphere. Bórquez (2000) describes that this charter restricted the Chilean state to a subsidiary role, solely conducting market-regulating policies, whilst prioritizing principles of economic freedom and private property as fundamental rights. The social consequences were severe. Overall, inequality worsened during the authoritarian regime, fuelled by rampant income concentration (Flores et. al, 2018, p. 14), and corruption<sup>32</sup>. In 1990 the authoritarian regime came to an end following the results of a plebiscite held two years earlier.

During the following twenty years of re-democratization, members of the center-left party coalition that defeated Pinochet, named *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia* (or *Concertación*) took turns in the presidency of the country<sup>33</sup>. These new democratic governments then began pursuing reforms to the 1980 Charter gradually, through conciliations with the right-wing political elites and the military (Moulian, 1998). The more pronouncedly-authoritarian impediments (such as the existence of designated senators and the inability to remove the Army commander) were only fully eliminated ten years after the re-establishment of democracy through reforms approved during Ricardo Lagos' presidency (2000-2006) (Fuentes, 2014).

Nonetheless, several other institutional arrangements from authoritarianism remained *in esse*, which meant that the Chilean return to democracy was 'incomplete'<sup>34</sup>. One example is the need for a high quorum of representatives to reform organic laws<sup>35</sup>. Since these laws deal with crucial issues (institutional, political, social, and economic), the need for high quorums rendered structural reforms politically unviable<sup>36</sup>. As a result, the 'privatization-commodification' of social services (education,

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<sup>31</sup> This collective state of disorientation drives citizens to give up on certain values and principles that otherwise they would defend. Idem, p. 17

<sup>32</sup> Mockenberg (2015) analyses how the privatizations of public companies consisted in a deliberate process of transferring economic and political power from the state to private economic groups. On this particular subject, Tombs & White (2015) have describe how privatizations create an illusion of separation between companies and the state, but in fact act both are partners in “corporative crimes”.

<sup>33</sup> This period is subdivided in the governments of Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994) & Eduardo Freire Ruiz-Tagle (1994-2000) both from the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (PDC), and Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006) & Michele Bachelet (2006-2010) both from the *Partido Socialista* (PS). Nowadays, after the composition of the political parties of this coalition has changed, it is called "*Nueva Mayoría*".

<sup>34</sup> Garretón & Garretón (2010)

<sup>35</sup> In order to be reformed, these laws require a special quorum of 4/7, higher than the one demanded by reforms in other laws (Siavelis, 2000 apud Fuentes, 2014). These authoritarian features that permeated the Chilean transition to democracy are described by Carmona (2009) as "*huella institucional*".

<sup>36</sup> Nolte, 2022.

health, pensions), that was inaugurated during the dictatorship, persisted during the return to democracy alongside several other institutional regulations<sup>37</sup>. Another example is the regulatory framework regarding the definition of Indigenous lands, which has allowed the exploitation of territories considered ancestral by these communities to proliferate<sup>38</sup>. In sum, Chile's history of constitutional reforms had been characterized by a low degree of citizen participation and the prevalence of interests of the elite alongside the influence of some academics (Fuentes, 2014).

The debate on the economic policies of the *Concertación* has been constructive and agrees that some of the past neoliberal norms were upheld and became hegemonic. Gomá (2007) describes that the "economic model" of the *Concertación* sought to implement a "market economy" in Chile was developed with institutional strengthening, meaning more State interjection in terms of macroeconomic stability regulations and also on the development of policies targeting extreme poverty<sup>39</sup>.

Indeed, ensuring stability became the defining economical objective of these democratic governments. According to Moreno (2014) this is the key difference between the economic policies of the *Concertación* from those of the "Chicago boys" that were, on the other hand, primarily focused on fostering investment to boost economic growth. The author argues in favor of the idea that the economic strategy of the *Concertación* consisted of a "third-way consensus", intercalating between economic orthodoxy and more institutional pro-activity<sup>40</sup>. Moreover, the past strategy of the Pinochet administration of lowering tariffs to achieve greater trade openness was abandoned and, instead, the governments of the *Concertación* focused on diplomacy to ratify bilateral free trade agreements. Nonetheless, it was clear that the overall strategy of trade liberalization and insertion into a global capitalist economy was maintained. Mayol (apud Zapata, 2015) points out that the moment to pursue policies in this direction was opportune. This is because the profitability of the traditionally important<sup>41</sup> mining sectors grew outstandingly due to rising international prices of goods such as copper, molybdenum, iron ore, and gold in the period of 1983 to 2013. In parallel, other smaller primary-export-oriented sectors (winery, fruits, lumber, and salmon production) began to develop. Graph 1 shows how exports have played an increasingly important role in Chile's national income since the 1960s.

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<sup>37</sup> These include the 'anti-terrorist law', labor market regulations, part of the electoral regime and the amnesty law.

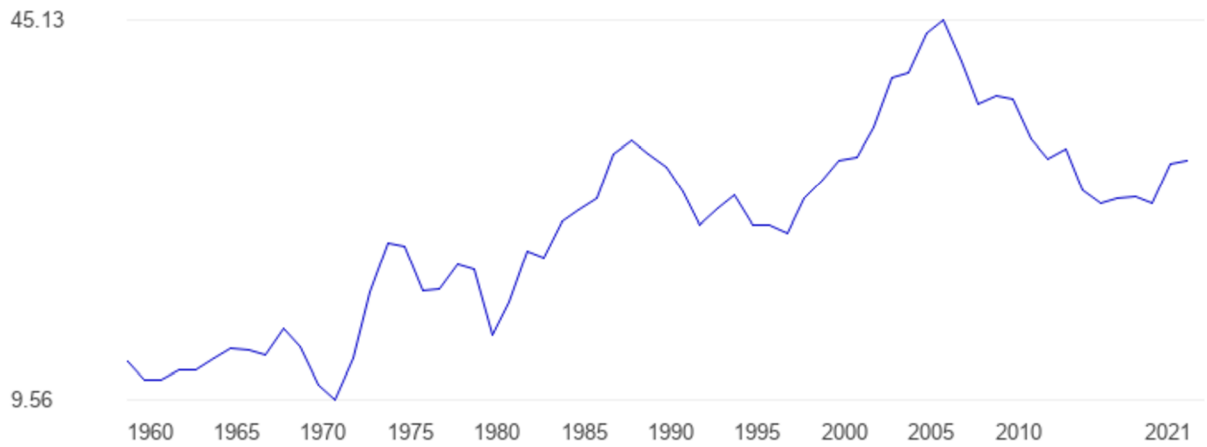
<sup>38</sup> Arias-Bustamante (2022)

<sup>39</sup> According to Gomá (2007, p. 103) extreme poverty went from 38% in 1990 to less than 14% in 2006.

<sup>40</sup> The author exemplifies that conservative banking regulations began to be enforced by a proactive Central Bank, an anti-cyclical fiscal spending rule known as the "*Balance Estructural*" was adopted and spendings in infrastructure and social areas increased.

<sup>41</sup> The Chilean territory is endowed with many regions home to vast amounts of mineral deposits (copper, silver, gold, iron, lithium, and soil rich in nitrates). Mining has been a crucial pillar of the local economy since its independence in 1818 (*Ministerio de Minería de Chile*). In 2021, according to data from Statista, the mining sector in Chile accounted for approximately 14.6% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

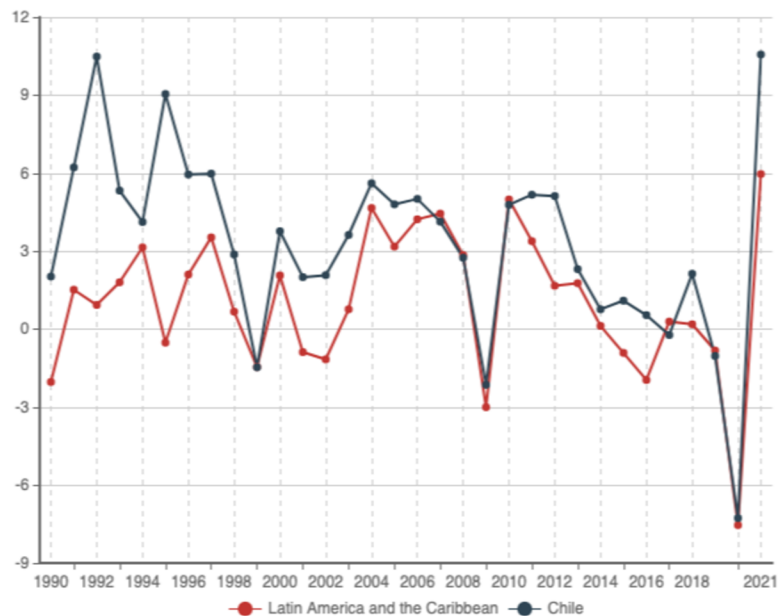
**Graph 1 - Exports of goods and services (as % of Gross National Product [GDP]) in Chile (1960-2021)**



Source: The Global Economy

Moreno (2014) denotes that this high degree of trade openness pursued by the governments of the *Concertación* did not lead to a significant diversification of exports, making Chile increasingly vulnerable to external demand and changes in international commodity prices. He added that on the one hand, the "Chilean Model" allowed national income to grow considerably and but on the other hand, it did not create mechanisms to improve income distribution. Nonetheless, in the early 1990s, Chile began to be seen as a beacon by other economies in Latin America<sup>42</sup> because of its high rates of GDP growth (see Graph 2).

**Graph 2 - Rate of Growth of Total Annual GDP per capita at constant prices in dollars (%)**



Source: CEPALSTAT

<sup>42</sup> According to Paredes (2019), the reasons behind this consideration were the country's institutional strength and macroeconomic stability.

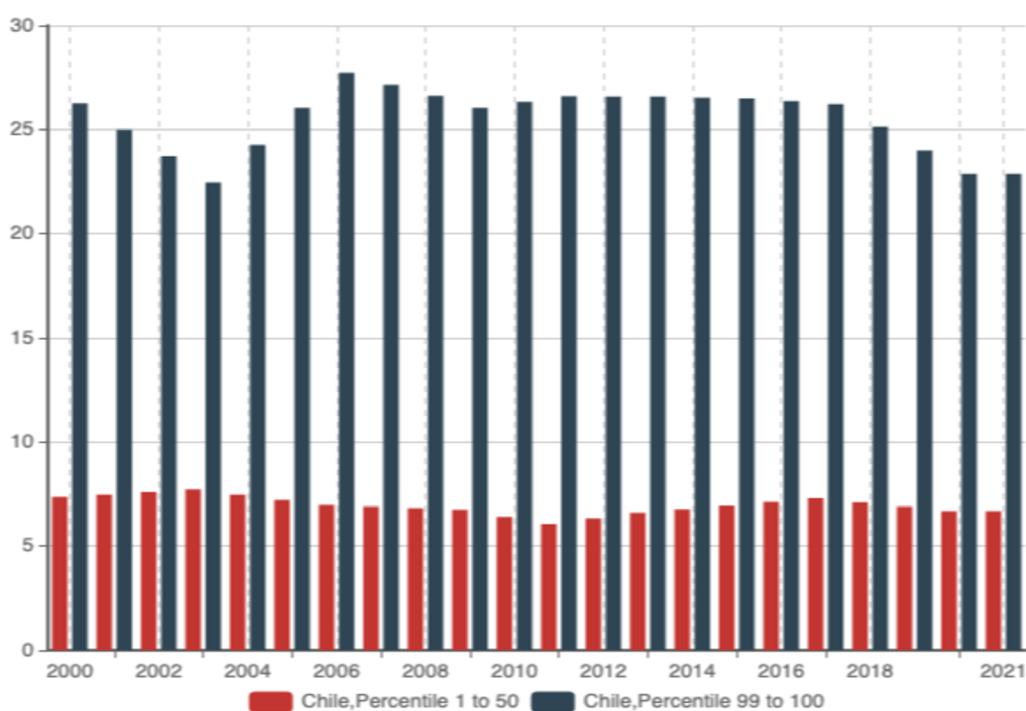


Although the "model" helped boost economic growth, it had considerable negative environmental and social impacts. First, the boom in exports which led to economic growth did not occur hand in hand with sustainability<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, the intensive exploitation of natural resources has led to severe negative externalities which caused growing conflicts with the indigenous population<sup>44</sup>. As observed by Carruthers (2001, p. 355):

"Poisoned water, smog-choked air, eroded slopes, lifeless soils and mountains of toxic wastes and tailings all bear inescapable witness to an ominous environmental debt and to the unsustainability of the current path."

As previously mentioned, the high rates of GDP growth did not translate into socioeconomic advances toward a more equal society in terms of income. In 2018, Chile ranked as one of the most unequal countries not only within the OECD but also in Latin America<sup>45</sup>. Below, Graph 3 shows the disparity of income between those belonging to the top 1% (dark blue) and bottom 50% (dark red) of the national income percentiles, and how the difference has remained steady from 2000 to 2021.

**Graph 3 - Share of the top 1% and the bottom 50% in the distribution of national income (%)**



Source: CEPALSTAT

<sup>43</sup> Gomá (2008) observes that the environmental policies developed during the 1990s have had mixed results: they were in some cases proven to be successful but they were still deficient, which has led to episodes of environmental crisis (eg.: the poisoning of swans in Valdivia)

<sup>44</sup> Romero-Toledo, 2019

<sup>45</sup> Atria et. Al 2018

Finally, we rely on the work of Gomá (2007) which summarizes the main critics that Chileans had as this "economic model" of the *Concertación* lost its growth momentum with the arrival of the New Millennium (see Graph 2). The critics were a result of a growing sense of frustration among the population. Costs of living increased, following the privatization of companies in many sectors (telephony, electrical services, potable water) and the arrival of multinationals resulting from government efforts to attract foreign investments. In other words, the tariffs and prices of these sectors were no longer to be defined by the Chilean state and instead became the responsibility of the private companies. This was also true for other sectors such as health care and education. All in all, subsidies were established to support the poorer, whereas the middle class ended up on the losing end. Also, the "model" has privileged the concentration of capital in economic conglomerates (the *Sociedades Anónimas*), owned by a small elite. This meant that these same elites, by owning a significant portion of the national capital, had an exacerbated economic power over society.

## **2.2 The growing waves of social unrest**

Social movements in Chile have gained considerable momentum in the last two decades. The inaugural social outburst dates back to 2006 when secondary education students organized protests and the occupation of schools. The movement became known as the "*Revolución pingüina*" and was motivated by students' disapproval of the educational "Organic Law" (or *Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Educación* [LOCE]) and their demands for a structural transformation of the educational system. The reason behind the emergence of this movement is explained by Vera Gajardo (2013), who points out that the educational sector had been fiercely subjected to the "market ideology" which imposed budget cuts, segregation, and privatization since the dictatorial period. Penaglia & Mejías (2019) call attention to the fact that protests of the student movement occurred in a historical moment characterized by the increase of other types of social conflicts all over Chile. The authors mention that the protests reached their peak of popularity in June 2006. Consequently, the government of Michelle Bachelet invited leaders of the student movement to participate in a newly assembled presidential Advisory Council for education composed of 74 people from various backgrounds (i.e.: politicians, business representatives, social leaders, university faculty members, etc). However, the authors denote that this conciliation strategy was proven unsuccessful when, six months later, the Council was dismantled and criticized for its ambiguous proposals and the consequent lack of the structural reforms students were demanding.

The second wave of social unrest took place in 2011, during the first mandate of right-wing Sebastián Piñera as president (2010-2014). It was marked by the massification and longevity of marches and demonstrations that lasted for months all over the main cities of Chile. According to

Vera Gajardo (2013), the main motivation behind them was still the unresolved student movement discontent with the country's educational system. Unlike the *Revolución penguinina*, some demands of the protests of 2011 were met<sup>46</sup>. However, their main aims of achieving educational gratuity and abolishing profits in educational institutions abolition were not attained. In sum, it became clear that, citing Gaudichad (2013, p. 134), "the growing crisis of legitimacy and the partial fissure of the hegemony of Chilean mature neoliberalism" was taking place.

### **2.3 the *estallido social* and the Constituent process**

Dissatisfaction with the persistent inequality and the longevity of the "authoritarian straitjacket"<sup>47</sup> caused protests against the rise of the metro fare in Santiago to scale up and disseminate fast throughout the country in 2019, during the second mandate of Sebastián Piñera. This massive wave of protests brought the country to one of the biggest social crises in the history of its democratic rule (Piscopo & Siavelis, 2021). In agreement, Luna et. al (2022) argued that the reason for social unrest's apogee has to do with the high level of frustration with the "Chilean model and its unfulfilled promises" of equitable growth. The authors add that:

"(...) In post-transitional Chile, capitalist modernization and the expansion of tertiary education enabled the emergence of new middle-class sectors and the strengthening of upward intergenerational social mobility. However, social vulnerability, income inequality, and increasing financial debt to fund consumption were also prevalent<sup>48</sup> (...). Moreover, between 2010 and 2020, economic growth stalled. In such a context, the increasing exposure and politicization of corruption scandals involving collusion between political and business elites gradually consolidated into a notion of "elite abuse." The social outbreak of October 2019 finally consolidated into a cleavage between sociopolitical elites and popular sectors." (p. 4)

A great dose of state repression was applied in a disastrous attempt to destabilize the wave of manifestations, leaving almost four thousand citizens injured and some killed<sup>49</sup>. Despite the brutality, the citizen uprising continued delivering strong messages against the 1980 Constitution and advocating for a new Constituent process (see Image 1). These events culminated in the signing of an agreement named "Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution" by the majority of parties across Chile's political spectrum and initiated the process for the draft of a new Charter.

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<sup>46</sup> These gains include: the promotion of higher technical education; the creation of a single student ticket for school transport, etc.

<sup>47</sup> The term was used by Piscopo & Siavelis (2021) to refer to the impediments to structural changes deriving from the 1980 Charter, which we have discussed in section 2.1.

<sup>48</sup> Based on a report of United Nations Development Programme [UNDP]. (2017). *Desiguales*. Orígenes, cambios y desafíos de la brecha social en Chile [Unequal. Origins, changes and challenges in Chile's social divide]. UNDP.)

<sup>49</sup> Statistics provided by the National Institute of Human Rights (INDE). The full report (in Spanish) can be found here: <https://www.indh.cl/bb/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Reporte-31-enero-2020.pdf>

**Image 1. Photos of the *estallido social***



On the left, a protester in Santiago holds a sign saying “New Constitution or nothing”. On the right, protestors carry the cover of the 1980 Constitution juxtaposed by chains and a lock, Sources: Pedro Ugarte/AFP, Getty Images.

The official inauguration of the Constituent process was followed by an array of constitutional reforms approved by the National Congress so as to establish regulations and schedules. The process was divided into three phases:

- a) in October 2020 an "entry plebiscite" took place and voters were asked to choose whether they approved or rejected: i) the draft of a new Constitution and ii) the election of representatives to integrate a Constitutional Commission (CC) responsible for discussing and redacting the draft. Participation was staggering. Even among COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and no obligatory voting, almost 7.5 million Chileans (50,9% of the voting population) showed up at voting booths across Chile (Cruz & López, 2022).
- b) the election of 155 representatives for the composition of the CC in May 2021. Suárez-Cao (2021, p. 258) emphasizes that the composition of the CC was based on gender parity and the designation of seats for indigenous representatives. In June 2021 an article published by the United Nation Development Program characterized the CC as a "triumph of inclusion" referring to this broad participation of sectors generally excluded from the sphere of political decisions.<sup>50</sup> Voter participation remained high (42,5%) and independent representatives were elected for almost a third of the seats of the CC, whereas politicians from traditional parties received fewer votes<sup>51</sup>. Piscopo & Siavelis (2023, p. 148) highlight that within these parties, the ones belonging to the right wing were the ones who ended up on the losing end, since they had few representatives elected (less than a third of the seats on the CC). The Convention was dissolved on July 4th, following the official release of the Constitutional charter, or *Borrador de Nueva Constitución Política de la República de Chile* or *Propuesta de Nueva Constitución* (PNC), which contained a wide range of social and environmental rights resulting from the demands of the aforementioned formerly marginalized groups who were able to participate in the draft.

<sup>50</sup> UNDP. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/latin-america/blog/chiles-constitutional-convention-triumph-inclusion>

<sup>51</sup> Suárez-Cao (2021) denotes that low levels of voter trust in these parties were the main reason for this.

c) a final stage consisting of an "exit plebiscite" (or *Plebiscito Nacional de Salida*) held in September 2022, when citizens were asked if they approved (*Apruebo*) or rejected (*Rechazo*) the proposed charter. For this round of consultation, that took place in early September, suffrage was obligatory, and participation reached 85% of all Chilean voters. The result was that the option Reject (or *Rechazo*) was triumphant (62%) meaning a significant defeat to the progressive field that campaigned in support of approving the PNC.

Some recent studies have investigated the political campaign to understand this turn of event. After all, it seemed odd that the same citizens who were eager to replace the 1980 Charter ended up rejecting a text that was much more progressive in terms of social rights. One view of Titelman & Leighton (2022, p. 10) points out the frantic fragmentation of demands and opinions defended by the politically inexperienced independent representatives and their 'extremism' when discussing proposals<sup>52</sup>. Accordingly, professor Jorge Luis Astudillo Muñoz of Andrés Bello University denoted that many Convention members acted with an exacerbated feeling of superiority when debating proposals<sup>53</sup>. In sum, these aspects helped undermine public opinion about the Convention. For example, during the debates, a radical group proposed to replace republican institutions with a new "Assembly of the People". Although extreme proposals did not prosper (i.e.: were not included in the PNC), it is clear that they generated concern about the directions the Convention was taking. On May 2022, professor Marcelo Santos of the Diego Portales University affirmed in an interview<sup>54</sup> that many false information pieces began to circulate online during the Constituent process and that they aimed to prejudice the public image of the PNC and also the reputation of some constitutional representatives.

Then, in October, after the exit plebiscite had taken place, the *Nucleo Constitucional* coordinated by academics of Alberto Hurtado University (UAH) in collaboration with a company named Criteria<sup>55</sup>, published an Executive report named *Encuesta Chile Dice* at the website for the Latin American Observatory on the Constituent Process of Chile<sup>56</sup>. The report is based on a quantitative study using data from self-administered online surveys and brings to light important aspects of public opinion about the constitutional process, some of which we have summarized below:

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<sup>52</sup> The authors also defend that the progressive field was unable to re-think the strategies for the political campaign for Apruebo since it did not realize its loss in political space in the light of the election results for parliament and the Executive in 2021.

<sup>53</sup> "Comentarios sobre el proceso constituyente chileno a la luz del resultado del plebiscito de salida de 4 de septiembre de 2022. Published at the website of the *Asociación de Constitucionalistas de España* (ACE). Available at: <https://www.acoes.es/comentarios-sobre-el-proceso-constituyente-chileno-a-la-luz-del-resultado-del-plebiscito-de-salida-de-4-de-septiembre-de-2022/> (in Spanish)

<sup>54</sup> The full interview is available here: [https://youtu.be/39t\\_WFHRC1E](https://youtu.be/39t_WFHRC1E) (in Spanish)

<sup>55</sup> Criteria is a Chilean company that provides services in consulting, opinion studies and data analysis.

<sup>56</sup> The document is available here: <https://observatorioconstituyentelatam.cl/index.php/2022/10/24/encuesta-chile-dice-una-radiografia-de-la-sociedad-chilena-de-cara-a-un-nuevo-proceso-constitucional/> (in Spanish)

I) A really small group of participants (4%) stated that Chileans have high confidence in their institutions while the great majority reported that they have low (40%) or no (42%) confidence in them. This means that institutional crisis is a serious issue in Chilean society, and is manifested in a deep-seated public discredit;

II) In terms of interpretations of the result of the exit plebiscite, 70% of respondents that had voted for *Rechazo* agreed with the idea that the result "saved [Chileans] from a disaster" while 80% of participants pro-*Apruebo* agreed with the affirmation that the result "puts [Chileans] at risk that no change will be made";

III) Almost half of the voters pro-*Rechazo* (42%) reported they lost their interest in the constituent process even before the proposed Charter was finished. Meanwhile, the voters of the *Approval* acknowledge having followed the process until the delivery of the new magna carta (43%). When asked about familiarity with the content of the PNC, the majority of *Rechazo* voters (43%) declared they knew about some specific themes of the text while over a half of *Apruebo* voters (51%) claimed to have read the PNC and considered they were very well informed.

IV) In regard to the perception of overall citizen knowledge about the PNC, the majority of *Apruebo* supporters (74%) considered that voters were not well informed and that the political campaign of the plebiscite was "dirty, with a lot of misinformation and lies about the options." (71%). Among the supporters of *Rechazo*, the opinion was divided between those who believe that the campaign was clean (29%) and those that agree that the campaign was "dirty" (36%). This finding illustrates the point raised by professor Santos.

V) When asked about the specific issues which influenced their decision to vote, 40% and 34% of pro-*Rechazo* voters opted for "Plurinationality" and "Health". Indeed, these are sensitive topics in Chilean society. As denoted by Seminario and Neaher (2020), the "Plurinationality" theme, which relates to the inclusion of the rights of the indigenous populations in the Constitution is delicate because this population has been subject to historical scrutiny:

"Like many other former colonies, Chile has a long history of violence, discrimination, and conflict with its indigenous communities, which continues even today. The Mapuche, Chile's most numerous indigenous community, are not formally recognized in Pinochet's 1980 constitution, making it much more difficult for them to engage in politics or take legal action as a group."

Complimentarily, Emilio Santelices provides a possible explanation of why the theme "Health" was also pointed out as a relevant reason behind the *Rechazo* votes. According to his article published in *El Mostrador*<sup>57</sup>, the new health system proposed by the PNC was controversial and consisted of a significant shift away from the current financing model for health institutions (composed of public-private funds) and towards the consolidation of a more centralized public model. In his view, this change would propel an increase in the demand for public health services which

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.elmostrador.cl/destacado/2022/06/30/propuesta-de-nueva-constitucion-y-salud/>

might not be properly absorbed given the present limitations of the health system in Chile. The lack of clarity behind the effects of the profound changes proposed by the PNC was also criticized by relevant groups of private healthcare providers<sup>58</sup>.

The constituent process has also been marked by the persistent tension “between inclusion and liberalism”. Pioscopo & Siavelis (2023) used the term 'inclusion' side to refer to the radical transparency and openness of the CC<sup>59</sup> that were primarily designed to better inform the population but ended up generating confusion, since following all the aspects of the long debate conducted in the CC integrally was very time-demanding (p. 146). On the other end, the opposition sought to manipulate the public debate through the use of "illiberal" strategies, such as disinformation, to support the option for *Rechazo*. It became clear that during the PNC campaign that, fabricating and spreading false information served as a rebound tactic for the right in face of its decreased political space inside the CC. Ultimately, the use of fake news to foment resentment and mistrust against the Constituent process and the new Charter was done with the objective of steering the political debate away from more important issues such as the impact of proposed reforms on inequalities. In sum, as exposed previously, the fabrication and spread of false claims about the Convention and the content of the PNC was noticeable. A public poll conducted by Datavoz identified that 65% of the participants confirmed that they had been exposed to false information<sup>60</sup>. On October 2022, the *Centro de Investigación Periodística* (Ciper) had access to data provided by Servel and published an article<sup>61</sup> reporting that, during the campaign for the exit plebiscite, 202 complaints for the alleged dissemination of false news were made. In spite of the high volume of complaints, Servel did not have investigative powers which meant that the complaints had to be archived. All in all, as observed by Ciper, lying during the campaign turned out to be free of any sanctions.

Academic investigations that discuss the political campaign for the exit plebiscite of 2022 are incipient due to the novelty of the event. A social media study conducted by Riquelme et. al (2022) demonstrated that many far-right political actors adopted a “politics of the end” narrative to articulate

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<sup>58</sup> These critics were issued by the ISAPRES Association of Chile (AICH) a union association which was founded in 1984 and is connected to the private system of health insurance, named Instituciones de Salud Previsional (Isapres), and also by another group of healthcare providers named Clinicas Chile. See more in: <https://www.df.cl/empresas/salud/sistema-de-salud-isapres-lanzan-duro-rechazo-y-clinicas-confian-en-la>

<sup>59</sup> The CC set up a channel on Youtube to stream the debates of commission meetings regarding different themes (e.g. *Comisión Provisoria de Reglamento, Comisión Provisoria de Participación y Consulta Indígena*, etc). The sessions comprising of a debate and deliberations were very long (for the examples provided, there are 35 and 36 videos respectively). The CC YouTube channel has 1,453 videos in total, which are available here: <https://youtube.com/@Convencioncl>

<sup>60</sup> Data reported by the Reuters article "El plebiscito constitucional de Chile entre 'Fake News' ". Available at: <https://www.reforma.com/el-plebiscito-constitucional-de-chile-entre-fake-news/ar2461426> (in Spanish)

<sup>61</sup> "Desinformación en el plebiscito: el vacío legal que dejó a 202 denuncias ante el Servel sin ser investigadas ni sancionadas". Written by Ignacia Herrera, Paulina Toro y Macarena Segovia. The article is available through the link: <https://www.ciperchile.cl/2022/10/28/desinformacion-en-el-plebiscito-el-vacio-legal-que-dejo-a-202-denuncias-ante-el-servel-sin-ser-investigadas-ni-sancionadas/> (in Spanish)



the political debate<sup>62</sup> on Twitter. Their results confirm that these actors articulated their speeches in support of *Rechazo* using war-like identification strategies to enable a polarization of society between "us" and "them", who were regarded as "communists who want to steal 'the progress' from the last thirty years in Chile" (p. 161). Indeed, this observation relates to finding II of *Encuesta Chile Dice*.

Complimentarily, a research initiative of the *Instituto Milenio Fundamento de los Datos*<sup>63</sup> named *Plataforma Telar* (PT), carried out studies about the false information regarding the Constitutional process. On July 2022, Professor Magdalena Saldaña, who worked in *Plataforma Telar*, gave an interview<sup>64</sup> to CNN Chile exposing their findings. The studies of PT were based on information reported by fact-checking platforms<sup>65</sup>. According to them, disinformation has grown since the Constitutional process was installed, mainly in the form of false or inaccurate content depicted as "news" that circulated in different online platforms and social media. Also, the increase was more pronounced considerably between February and June 2022. This was the period in which some articles of the *Borrador* were being voted within the Convention. Saldaña also understands that the spread of disinformation was related to the difficulties that the Convention was having to communicate with citizens. She adds that, because of this, voters were not certain about what was being voted for or about the meaning of an specific article and pieces containing false information about the content of the PNC proliferated online. In regards to the two main themes of these pieces, "personal aspects of Constituent representatives" was the most representative followed by the "content of the PNC". Images of their results reached the public eye and were heavily scrutinized, since some of them associated constituent representatives to the production of false contents. A few weeks later, a public apology was published the PT webpage stating that:

"(...) We were not rigorous or precise enough when communicating and distinguishing the concepts of false information, imprecise information and disinformation, mistakenly using the concept of false news, whose negative connotation affects the figure of the aforementioned ex-conventionalists."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The objective was to polarise society by creating a divide between "them" (the left, alleged communists/terrorists looking to undermine Chile's economic progress) versus "us". The authors argue that the far-right understood the inaugural event of the constituent process as an illegitimate violent imposition and modulated their speeches to undermine it.

<sup>63</sup> The institute is part of a Scientific research Initiative in Chile program named "Millenium Science" More information on the institute is available on their website: <https://imfd.cl/en/acerca-de-nuestro-instituto/> (in Spanish)

<sup>64</sup> The full interview is available on YouTube through the link <https://youtu.be/VqhkVQ-K-cw> (in Spanish)

<sup>65</sup> These platforms were created all over the world recently, and aim at informing citizens by publicly reporting the veracity of analyzed allegations made through means such as news or social media posts (Rufflo et. al, 2023). Nonetheless, using data provided by these platforms has to be taken with precaution. On this aspect, Miró-Linares & Aguerri (2023) argue that most of the studies that so lack transparency and deeper reflections on the "fakeness of the news", thus having relevant gaps. Quoting the authors "(...) the different algorithms proposed for the detection of fake news have been trained on databases that have been constructed using information labelled as fake news by the aforementioned fact-checking organizations [news agencies or 'fact-checkers'] (...) However, in this kind of approach the object is no longer the fake news itself, understood as the 'original' false information. The focus of the research, and consequently of the classification model, becomes the characteristics of the vehicles, accounts and messages through which fake news is disseminated and the patterns of dissemination." (p. 365-366)

<sup>66</sup> Translated from <https://web.archive.org/web/20221204054655/https://plataformatelar.cl/> (in Spanish)



Even so, the investigation conducted by the PT provides interesting pointers on the discussion about fake news that was very much alive on the public debate during the constituent process.

Another preliminary study that tried to capture the effect of disinformation during this political event was done by Bargsted & González (2022), based on surveys carried out by Cadem. In these polls, participants were asked to answer five questions about the content of the PNC (eg.: identifying one out of three rights was not included), and then separated into two groups according to their level of knowledge (high or low). The authors' findings state that having low knowledge of the text, as a feature that could favor disinformation, was not an important factor to explain the results of the plebiscite. In other words, lack of knowledge about the PNC was not a relevant factor behind the triumph of *Rechazo*. Nonetheless, given that disinformation was widespread and oftentimes related to specificities within many different articles of the PNC<sup>67</sup>, it would have been plausible to submit participants to a wider array of questions before evaluating the impacts on the result of the exit plebiscite.

In sum, considering the complexity of the topic of disinformation surrounding the Constituent process in Chile, it may be worthwhile to explore alternative research designs or methodologies.

### **CHAPTER THREE - Fake News and Public Opinion during the political campaign for the Chilean exit plebiscite: an assessment using Google Trends**

#### **3.1 Notes on our methodology**

Our case study is based on the methodology adopted by Lorenz et. al (2022). In their study, Google Trends (GT) was used as means of obtaining primary data on public opinion about perceived immigration threats in Germany. The use of data extracted from platforms as opposed to traditional surveys has become frequent in academic research. Within the realm of online platforms which are used for analytical objectives is GT, a website run by Google Analytics since 2006, that reports data from Google's search engine. It allows users to extract the search volume index (SVI)<sup>68</sup> for specific keywords and find out more information about their popularity. Moreover, it allows users to define their location and specific time units of interest, going as far as 2004. Lórenz et. Al (2022, p. 195) highlights that the advantages of using search data (such as the one obtained through GT) are the possibility of studying events due to its high recording frequency and its relatively low cost.

Indeed, GT has proven to be a useful source for a handful of studies in different areas as an alternative to traditional surveys. Prado-Román et. Al (2020) have utilized it to make successful

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<sup>67</sup> There are 388 articles in total in the final document, called *Borrador or Propuesta Constitución Política de la República de Chile 2022*. The full document is available here: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Texto-Definitivo-CPR-2022-Tapas.pdf> (in Spanish)

<sup>68</sup> The SVI is a type of normalized data which ranges from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest) to measure the interest in a certain keyword/topic as a proportion of all other searches done on Google in specific dates.

electoral predictions for the United States and Canada. When studying the labor market of Romania, Mihaela (2020) also used GT data panel to set up models which improved unemployment forecasts. In addition, Quintanilha et. Al (2019) evaluated the effectiveness of prevention campaigns in Brazil based on the search popularity for certain types of cancer. GT has also been used to study fake news. For example, Gracia & Martínez (2020) found a strong correlation between the popularity of search for terms such as "hoax" and "fake" and the number of Covid-19 victims in Spain.

There are also limitations when using GT data. First, coverage bias exists since only part of the population has gadgets with internet access and uses Google's search engine (Mellon, 2013). Second, reproducibility is not always exact and results vary slightly, since the extraction of the same GT data performed at different moments does not return the exact same sets of results (Cebrián& Domenech, 2022). Third, as mentioned before, the algorithms which base the functioning of search platforms such as Google are not publicly available for consultation.

It is worth mentioning that, on the one hand, our study might not be greatly affected by coverage bias since, as mentioned before in chapter one, the market share of Google's search engine and internet coverage in the country we have chosen to investigate are very high. Unfortunately, on the other hand, there is not much we can do on our end regarding the reproducibility and the closed algorithms issues besides contrasting our results with a new similar study done in the future, even more so if by then Google decides to enhance the transparency of their services. With that in mind, we have taken the precautions of detailing every step of our methodology in the following sections with attention to detail so as to minimize possible sources of subjectivity. All in all, given the resource limitations and time constraints, our choice of methodology represents a pragmatic approach to addressing the research question.

### **3.2 Qualitative analysis**

The first part of our analysis consists of an identification of the main themes of fake news items about the new Constitutional Charter and the Constitutional Convention. The items were extracted from two reliable sources: the websites of the traditional online news outlet *El Desconcierto*<sup>69</sup> and of the Association of Academics Enrique Molina Garmendia of the University of Concepción (UdeC)<sup>70</sup>. First, we performed a text analysis in the database comprised of 59 pieces of content that were reported as fake by these sources and grouped them according to common themes. For our classification, we selected thirteen themes: seven themes previously suggested by Bargsted & González (2022) [1-3, 5, 7-9], in addition to two themes proposed by UdeC [12 and 3] and other

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<sup>69</sup> The items can be found here: <https://www.eldesconcierto.cl/reportajes/2022/07/13/el-contador-de-fake-news-actualizado-lista-de-noticias-falsas-sobre-la-nueva-constitucion.html>

<sup>70</sup> Available at the Academicos UdeC website: <https://www.academicosudec.cl/8-noticias-falsas-que-circulan-sobre-la-nueva-constitucion-y-que-no-están-en-ninguna-parte-del-borrador/> (in Spanish)

four individual themes [4, 6, 10 and 11]. Table 3 contains all thirteen themes with examples of "fake news items" about the New Constitution and the Constituent Commission.

It is important to distinguish that debunking false information was done with different degrees of objectivity according to the themes. For instance, for testifying that the examples of content in theme 1 were false (see Table 3), simple cross-checks against the text of the PNC would have been enough: any reader could identify that, in fact, the word "property" is repeated fourteen times throughout the Articles, and that among these, the specific Article about the right to housing (*Artículo 51, Propuesta Constitución Política de La República de Chile*) does not establish any circumstance in which expropriation is permitted. The same procedure of 'cross-checking' with the text would be enough to prove the inveracity for a majority of the items within themes 2-9 and 12-13. Thus, we have done the "cross-checking" procedure with the items in our database against the articles of the PNC and display the results in Table 3 below (a more complete version containing the specific items and articles can be found in the Appendix 1).

Instead, for the items within themes 10 and 11 the debunking procedure is more nuanced. In the latter all the false information items are related to specific issues on the overall or daily work of the Constitutional Convention, which lasted months and was comprised of dozens of commission meetings with long sessions and debates between the representatives<sup>71</sup>. This meant that it was difficult for citizens to gather information about all aspects that were discussed, meaning that the debunking procedure was oftentimes possible, but much more 'time-demanding'. This is also the case of other two items (one in theme 6 and another in theme 12) that are very related to very specific matters regarding the CC and were considered cases of 'time-demanding' debunking (see Appendix 2). In regards to theme 10, the "fake news" items are about specific controversial issues in Latin American politics<sup>72</sup>, such as the example for this theme in Table 3. This means that for citizens, the act of debunking false information on these topics was "subjective". Using data from Chile, Halpern et. al (2019) have found statistical evidence that performing an attestation of veracity is significantly influenced by voters' political identification. In sum, it is impossible to debunk all the fake news items of the themes 10 and 11 by comparing them with the articles of the PNC.

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<sup>71</sup> We discussed this issue on chapter two.

<sup>72</sup> The fake news items of theme 10 try to associate the PNC and the work of the CC with, for example, the far-left dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. This association is considered harmful since his regime is popularly known for the use of the military to commit several violations of civil and human rights. For more on this topic, see Svensson (2019). Other items in this theme deal with the scandal of Constituent representative Rodrigo Rojas (who renounced his chair at the Convention following a scandal). For more, see <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-58464987> (in Spanish)

Other items in this particular theme mention Bolivia, which has recently been transformed into a Plurinational State following an indigenous 'resurgence'. This Constitutional change has divided opinions since it raised concerns of ethnic partitioning (Gustafson, 2009).

The main aim of grouping and cross-checking the items was to assist us in the selection of themes that will be used in the second part of our analysis, which will be developed in the next section. Thus, we have adopted the following criteria to guide our selection of themes using the data from Table 3:

i) limit of three themes (which represents 23% of all themes we disclosed previously) with the most fake news items.

ii) we prioritize themes in which the attestation of veracity is straightforward, that is, involves little time and effort from the checker. We have described this type of debunking as "cross-checking" (i.e.: a simple comparison of the "fake news" items with the articles of the PNC is enough to attest to their inveracity). The formulation of this second criteria was adopted as a safeguard against semantic bias (that could occur from selecting themes with keywords that are open to interpretation or overly specific in nature, making our analysis ambiguous or difficult to understand).

**Table 3 - Constitutional "Fake news" in Chile: themes, examples, number of items and cross-checking results**

Themes	Examples of items	Number of items	% of items debunked by 'cross-checking'
1. Regulations for the protection of private property	"The word "property" does not appear anywhere in the text."	6	100
2. Design of the national justice system	"The judiciary system will be extinguished."	4	100
3. Security regulations and public order	"The armed forces would no longer be able to cooperate as they have in catastrophic situations."	4	100
4. National sovereignty	"The territorial unity of the State will cease to exist."	6	100
5. Social Rights (health, education, housing)	"With the approval, they will close private or subsidized schools"	5	100
6. Economy	"The Central Bank will no longer be independent."	3	66
7. Rules on social rights and termination of pregnancy	"Abortion will be possible even days or hours before the birth."	3	100
8. Design of the political system (executive and legislative)	"The Convention has been suggested to eliminate the Senate and merge the Executive and Legislative powers in the National Congress."	5	100
9. Plurinationality and Rights of Indigenous Population	"This will not be the first time that the Chilean Constitution recognizes the existence of the indigenous population."	6	100
10. Ideological association	"Maduro has celebrated and sent greetings to the Convention for the delivery of the draft."	6	-
11. The functionality of the convention	"Each day of work at the Convention costs Chile more than 30 million pesos."	7	-
12. Religion	"The Evangelical Church flag was banned in the Convention."	2	50
13. Nationality and Immigration	"With the New Constitution, newly-arrived foreigners can go to the notary's office and will be given Chilean citizenship."	2	100

Hence, we selected the themes: "Regulations for the protection of private property" (6 items), "Social Rights (health, education, housing)" & "Plurinationality and Rights of Indigenous Population". All of them are composed of 6 "fake news" items. The choice of keywords was done through text analysis of these items. First, we summarized the content and then eliminated as many conjunction words as possible without prejudicing the main subject of the "fake news". The results are displayed in Table 4. An extended version with all the items of these three selected themes and their corresponding keywords can be found in the Appendix 2 (in English). Following Lorenz et. al (2022), we added two new groups of keywords: neutral terms (which are general words related to the constituent process) and random terms.

**Table 4 - Keywords for selected themes, neutral and random categories**

Groups	Google search terms (English translation)	Google search terms (Spanish)
<b>1. Regulations for the protection of private property</b>	Private property *, Constitution word property *, expropriation *, inheritance *, houseowning *, dislodgement *	propiedad privada *, palabra propiedad *, expropiación *, herencia *, desalojo *
<b>4. National sovereignty</b>	Territorial union state *, Patriotic emblems *, division of states *, Chilean republic *, different nations *, name of the country *	unidad territorial estado *, emblemas pátrios *, división estados *, República de Chile *, distintas naciones *, nombre del país *
<b>9. Plurinationalism and Rights of Indigenous People</b>	Plurinational parliament *, indigenous people *, indigenous territory *, indigenous self-government *, indigenous territory independence *, indigenous sovereignty *, mapuche privilege *	Parlamento plurinacional *, pueblos originarios *, territorio indígena *, autogobierno indígena *, independencia territorio indígena *, soberanía indígena *, privilegio mapuche *
<b>Neutral terms</b>	Constitution, Conventional Constitution	Constitución, Convención Constitucional
<b>Random terms</b>	Salary, life, children	Sueldo, vida, niños

\*= To ensure the specificity of the data retrieved, these terms had the word "Constitution" (in English) or "*Constitución*" (in Spanish) added at the end.

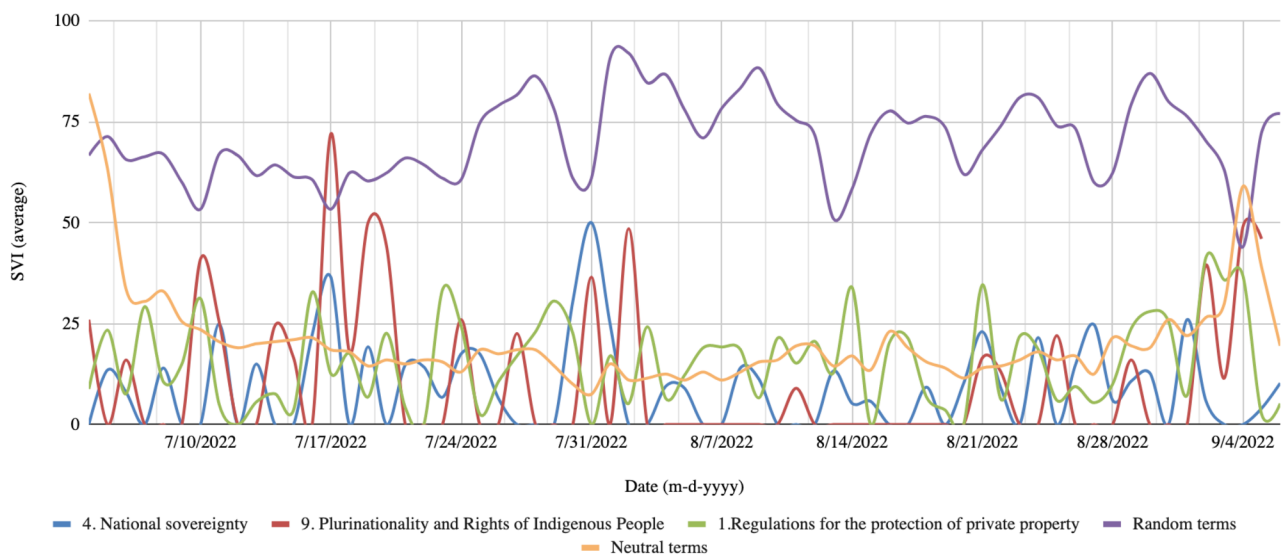
### 3.3 Quantitative analysis

For this study, we extracted and analyzed data from GT using Python version 3.10, which is offered free online by Google Colaboratory. The application programming interface (API) used for data extraction is named pytrends 4.9.2<sup>73</sup>. The API provides the "interest over time" variable, or SVI, which is the level of popularity of certain terms or words on Google in a specified time period (ranging from 0 to 100). Since we are interested in themes of the PNC that were subject to false information, we extracted a dataset with the SVI for each of the keywords/search terms in Table 5. Since GT is "case sensitive", that is, returns different information for search queries done with

<sup>73</sup> More information available here: <https://pypi.org/project/pytrends/>

accentuation, we also included all the possible variations of the words inside each term<sup>74</sup>. Moreover, the location of interest and time of the API were set to Chile (country code: CL) and July 04th-September 06th 2022 (a period of 65 days that constituted the third phase of the Constituent process). We extracted one dataset for each of the keywords, which contained their daily SVI value, during our period of interest. Then, we summed the SVI for all five terms/keywords by groups and calculated a daily SVI average. The result is displayed in Graph 4 below.

**Graph 4 - Daily Average of Search Volume Index (SVI) in Chile [three fake news themes + neutral and random terms (between July 4th-September 06th 2022)]**



Among the three chosen themes, the keywords associated with theme 1, "Regulations for the protection of private property", were the ones who had more relative search popularity (SVI average for all 65 days was 15.55). Comparatively, for keywords belonging to theme 4, "National sovereignty" and theme 9, "Plurinationality and Rights of Indigenous People", in which the values were lower (10.60 and 9.11 respectively). Although variation occurred in all of these three themes, their popularity peaks did not coincide, either on time period or level. Theme 9 reached its popularity peak (70 average SVI) on July 17th. On that same day, the vice-presidency of the neighboring Plurinational State of Bolivia hosted an international conference, named "Historical subject, progress and challenges in the construction of the Plurinational States", in which one of the Chilean indigenous constituent representatives named Isabella Brunilda Mamani Mamani gave a speech, that said: "The

<sup>74</sup> With this, a search term is reproduced with different accentuations. For example, we used two terms for "Private Property": "propiedad privada constitución" & "propiedad privada constituicion".

Chilean Plurinationality does not mean severing Chile, it is not dividing Chile<sup>75</sup>, referring to the controversies concerning this theme in the public debate at the time.

The peaks of the neutral terms coincide with the political events. The first one was on June 4th, when the official version of the PNC was released (82 average SVI). The second one was on September 2nd, only a few days before the voting for the exit plebiscite (59 average SVI), followed by theme 9 (41 average SVI). It is also worth mentioning that, during the period analyzed (65 days), the theme with the most SVI inconsistency was number 9 (a null value was reported for 42 days). It is also worth observing how neutral terms became less popular over the period, which is in line with the *Encuesta Chile Dice* result that pointed to "a loss of their interest" in the Constituent process over time. Also, similarly to the results of Lorenz et. al (2022), our chosen random terms (in this study: 'wages', 'life', 'children') have kept their high popularity pattern somewhat consistent throughout the whole period of interest.

### 3.4 Correlation analysis

If the popularity of the words associated with the themes chosen by us demonstrate actual shifts in public opinion supporting *Rechazo*, we expect to observe a statistically significant correlation between the SVI of these themes with the polling and electoral results of the constitutional campaign in Chile. Thus, we used RStudio (version 2021.09.2) to conduct Pearson correlation tests between these variables. The dataset is composed of:

i) panel data from GT containing the SVI daily averages of our keyword/terms groups, imported from our pytrends API operations (theme 1, theme 4, theme 9, neutral and random groups).

ii) data on public opinion measuring the level of *Rechazo* support among voters. We used public poll data published by CADEM<sup>76</sup> (a traditional company in the field of market and public opinion research in Chile) and the result of the exit plebiscite<sup>77</sup> (only for the final date of our analyzed period, that is, September 6th, 2022). Because the CADEM public polls were made available roughly 2-3 times/month, we input the missing values for the other dates because the SVI data was recorded daily. The rationale for our input for all 65 days was to repeat poll values for the missing days and update them according to new releases. For example, if a public poll result was published on July

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<sup>75</sup> News article of the Agencia Boliviana de Información, available here:

<https://www.abi.bo/index.php/noticias/politica/24462-intelectuales-aymaras-debaten-desafios-en-la-construccion-de-los-estados-plurinacionales> (in Spanish)

<sup>76</sup> *Encuesta Plaza Pública* CADEM. *Tercera semana de Agosto (Estudio 449)*. Available in: <https://cadem.cl/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Plaza-Publica-449-A-dos-semanas-de-las-elecciones-37-1pto-votaria-Apruebo-y-46-Rechazo.-17-no-sabe-no-responde-o-no-vota.pdf> (in Spanish)

<sup>77</sup> The result was officially disclosed by Servel. Available in: <https://historico.servel.cl/servel/app/index.php?r=EleccionesGenerico&id=237> (in Spanish)



10th and the following one on the 17th, we repeated the results from the first poll for all the dates in between (July 11th-16th).

Since we have seen that most fake news items were a part of the strategy of the political right supporting *Rechazo* and we want to investigate this particular correlation (between political advertising for one option of the exit plebiscite and conquering public support), we did not include the numbers for *Apruebo*. This was a step taken to compact our dataset and ensure that it is comprehensive, organized, and contains all the information needed to answer the correlation investigated by this study.

The results of the empirical statistical analysis are shown in Table 5 and are comprised of the correlation coefficients and their corresponding p-values for the different groups of keywords/terms. In line with the findings of Lorenz et. al (2022), the random terms were found to have a statistically significant estimate (p-value < 0.05). Nonetheless, this was the only keyword group with this type of result, since we found no statistical evidence for the correlation between all the other four keyword groups and the poll/electoral results for *Rechazo*.

**TABLE 5 - Pearson's r for keyword groups and results for *Rechazo***

Keyword Group	Correlation estimate	p-value
National Sovereignty	0.0571199	0.65130
Plurinationality and Right of Indigenous People	0.1906454	0.12821
Regulations for the protection of private property	-0.1907983	0.12789
Neutral terms	0.1853923	0.13926
Random terms	-0.2820004**	0.02285

\*\* = p-value < 0.05

### 3.5 Discussion

The online availability of low cost "big data" with high recording frequency, such as the one provided by GT, has to be faced with reservations when using it for conducting academic research. This has proved to be true for us in this study using GT as one of the sources to investigate popular themes in public opinion. Nonetheless, since Google's algorithm is not publicly available for consultation, it is very difficult to determine what were the real reasons which led to the lack of significant correlation in four out of our five keyword groups. One possible reason might have been

that GT reports higher volumes of data for shorter terms, specially those comprising of a single keyword. As seen in Graph 4, the SVI volume for random terms is fairly superior to all other groups which comprise terms with a higher number of words during the whole period. On the other hand, observing steady popularity indexes for more specific themes/issues and comprised of more keywords was much rarer. This means that the task of attaining SVIs for these themes different from zero was difficult (in our case this is what happened exactly with theme 9). Therefore, the more intricate the chosen search queries are, the harder it becomes to investigate their popularity using GT. As mentioned, this was particularly relevant to our case study.

### **3.6 Conclusion and future work**

In the beginning of this study we have addressed how the phenomenon of disinformation has spread in the digital age. The overwhelming amount of content that is easily accessible through the internet has made it easier for false information to spread. We also pointed out how a shift in human ethics and how a 'bent testimony' provided by algorithms corroborated for this phenomenon. Moreover, we have given examples of how powerful politicians operated their communication through the internet, oftentimes relying on manipulation strategies such as spreading disinformation in the form of "news", with a clear objective of tailoring messages that support their own electoral agendas. The growing concerns that disinformation poses for democratic countries have urged the creation of a comprehensive set of different strategies around the world. Nonetheless, given the novelty of the digital age disinformation phenomenon, the fast-paced technological innovations surrounding it, and the political processes involving the regulation of legal measures, the development of responses can be considered 'open-ended'.

Throughout the second chapter, we have discussed relevant aspects of recent Chilean history extensively. First, we described how the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet was a period of disruptive changes which have reshaped the state and the economy. Then, we analyzed how, in the following democratic period, the governments of the *Concertación* carried out reforms gradually and only partially. Because of this, some important institutional legacies of the authoritarian regulatory framework persisted, making democracy in Chile 'incomplete'. We have also explored how some features of economic orthodoxy became deeply ingrained as fundamentals into what became the "Chilean model" of a market economy (namely privatizations and trade openness) paired with the main role attributed to the primary export sectors. This model brought about virtuous economic growth (especially during the early 1990s) but did not promote structural transformations in the productive sphere, which made the Chilean economy overly volatile to international commodity price cycles. However, as the expressive rates of economic growth started to diminish with the arrival of the New Millenium, the number of critics of the model began to grow. Indeed, as we have pointed

out, the economic framework Chilean "model" had several flaws that manifested especially on the environmental and social fronts, in the form of degradation and persistent income inequality, respectively.

Generalized public discontent, or *malestar*<sup>78</sup>, was very much present in Chilean society for a considerable amount of time and is understood as the reason behind the successive episodes of popular uprisings in Chile in the last two decades. As previously exposed, the uprisings delivered strong messages against the authoritarian legacies that had persisted during democracy and that hindered significant structural reforms in many social areas. Then, in 2021, political parties reached a historical agreement to start a three-part constituent process, that ended in September 2022 after an exit plebiscite.

The political campaign for the exit plebiscite that involved the Approve (*Apruebo*) and Reject (*Rechazo*) options was turbulent. On the one side, the progressive field supporting *Apruebo* was unable to communicate clearly with citizens, which meant that potential voters lost interest in the constituent process and were not completely up-to-date with what was being discussed during the draft. On the other side, right-wing political parties supporting *Rechazo* have, according to political scientist Claudia Heiss<sup>79</sup>:

"(...) run a novel campaign compared to other campaigns on the right if we consider that the *Rechazo* is basically the defense of the *status quo* and upholding the Constitution"

As pointed out previously in this study, this campaign of the political right made use of different manipulation strategies to defend the 1980 Charter. The first of them was the "politics of the end narrative". This strategy was carried out through posts on social media of profiles of right-wing politicians, used to disseminate a narrative of an impending doom when referring to the approval of the new Constitution and to polarize Chilean society. The second strategy consisted of resorting to disinformation in the form of news to generate confusion or controversies in public opinion regarding the new Constitutional text or the Constitutional Convention. This particular strategy became evident in the public eye as the majority of voters understood the constitutional process as a "dirty" political campaign. Nonetheless, as Klotz (2004) anticipated, this dishonest behavior seems to have been excused under the umbrella of the emerging "post-truth alt.ethics" given that the option *Rechazo* was triumphant.

It was the goal of this study to further investigate the effectiveness of the disinformation campaign during the constituent process in Chile. Therefore, we structured the methodology in

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<sup>78</sup> This topic has been widely discussed in contemporary sociologic studies in Chile. De Valle Orellana (2021) is one of the authors who explore this topic in further depth, arguing that the discontent among Chileans was the result of sociologic processes of modernization, which have caused progressive social differentiation and increased complexity of social systems over time.

<sup>79</sup> The interview is available at <https://larepublica.pe/mundo/2022/08/27/plebiscito-nacional-a-una-semana-del-plebiscito-en-chile-encuestas-apuntan-a-rechazo-de-nueva-constitucion>

different steps. First, we obtained a corpus with the Constitutional fake news items and cross-checked their allegations against the articles of the new Charter. Next, we subjected the items from three chosen themes to text analysis and derived related terms/keywords. Additionally, we supplemented this list with two new groups, comprising of terms considered neutral and random. After that, we used this full list of keywords/terms as parameters for data extraction using the API to gather information on their popularity during the last 65 days of the campaign for the 2022 exit plebiscite. With this, we were able to visualize the averages per group of the daily reported search volume indexes. Finally, we used the daily SVI group average to perform statistical analysis to check whether they were correlated with the reported levels of voter support for the option *Rechazo*. Our findings did not display any statistical evidence in support of such correlation for four out of five chosen word groups.

A growing body of academic literature discussing the disinformation phenomenon in the digital age has come about in the last decades. Nonetheless, studies that utilize mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) to assist the statistical analysis of these issues in South America are incipient. Having this in mind, this work has been developed to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the effects of disinformation within the region. Given the previously disclosed limitations of this study, future works could explore new alternatives. For example, by including qualitative data of new words/terms associated to our selected queries. Another line of possible future investigation could focus on evaluating the popularity of keywords/terms within a longer time frame, so as to understand their trajectory throughout the recent decades in which Chile has experienced growing social unrest. Additionally, it would be fairly interesting to make use of cross-country data to understand similarities in the public opinion of other countries that have also experienced recent political events marked by disinformation, such as Brazil. A final example of future lines of work would be to pair search query data with data extracted from social media so as to understand if there is any significant correlation between search popularity levels of our selected terms/keywords and the speed at which has false information about the new Constitution has spread on platforms such as Facebook.

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## Appendix 1 - Methods of debunking per item, divided by themes

	Fake news item (English)	Debunking method
<b>Regulations for the protection of private property</b>	1 The effective protection of the right to property in all its forms will be extinguished.	Cross-check (Art. 78)
	2 The word "property" does not appear anywhere in the text.	Cross-check (Art. 78)
	3 It will no longer be possible own two houses since they will be expropriated and distributed to the homeless/migrants.	Cross-check (Art. 78)
	4 With the New Constitution, houses will be no longer inherited	Cross-check (Art. 51)
	5 If I vote Approve, my house/part of my house will be taken from me and given to a migrant	Cross-check (Art. 51)
	6 The proposal does not include the right to home ownership.	Cross-check (Art. 78)
<b>Social Rights (health, education, housing)</b>	1 " <i>Casa digna, no significa que sea propia</i> "	Cross-check (Art. 51)
	2 The private healthcare system (ISAPRES) will cease to exist.	Cross-check (Art. 44)
	3 The principles of <i>buena vida</i> , secularism, intersectionality, among others, are not included in the right to education.	Cross-check (Art. 35)
	4 "We will lose access to healthcare"	Cross-check (Art. 44)
	5 "With the approval, they will close private or subsidized schools"	Cross-check (Art. 41)
<b>Design of the national justice system</b>	1 The hierarchy and effect of the protection resource will be extinguished.	Cross-check (Art. 108)
	2 There will be no equality before the law.	Cross-check (Art. 4 & 25)
	3 There will be no neutrality in the law when introducing the gender approach.	Cross-check (Art. 312)
	4 The judiciary system will be extinguished.	Cross-check (Art. 271)
<b>Security regulations and public order</b>	1 The institution of the Carabineros (police) will be extinguished.	Cross-check (Art. 297)
	2 The limits to worker strikes, even those who seek to preserve the integrity of the company or the operation of essential services, will be abolished.	Cross-check (Art. 47)
	3 The armed forces would no longer be able to cooperate as they have in catastrophic situations.	Cross-check (Art. 303)
	4 The Carabineros and Policia de Investigaciones (PDI) are replaced by a civil police directed by politicians.	Cross-check (Art. 297)
<b>National sovereignty</b>	1 The territorial unity of the State will cease to exist.	Cross-check (Art. 3)
	2 National emblems such as the anthem, the flag, the shield and also the cueca will no longer exist.	Cross-check (Art. 1)
	3 Chile will be divided in 12 states.	Cross-check (Art. 3)
	4 The Constitutional Convention has excluded the Republic of Chile from the new Constitution.	Cross-check (Art. 1)
	5 There will no longer be a State, a Republic or a nation. Instead, there will be different nations.	Cross-check (Art. 3)
	6 Some representatives in the Constituent Assembly want to change the name of the country.	Cross-check (Art. 1)
<b>Economy</b>	1 The Central Bank will no longer be independent.	Cross-check (Art. 357)
	2 The Natural Resources Commission is against the export of fruit.	Time-consuming
	3 Companies will no longer be able to hire workers temporarily.	Cross-check (Art. 46)
<b>Rules on social rights and termination of pregnancy</b>	1 Abortion will be possible even days or hours before the birth.	Cross-check (Art. 253)
	2 The new Constitution will establish that all public goods are provided exclusively by the State.	Cross-check (Art. 354)
	3 "If [the New Constitution] is approved, abortion will be legal"	Cross-check (Art. 253)

<b>Design of the political system (executive and legislative)</b>	1	The world will no longer be as the focus of the international relations of the State.	Cross-check (Art. 14)
	2	A foreigner with 5 years of residence in Chile would have the right to run for President.	Cross-check (Art. 40)
	3	The Convention has been suggested to eliminate the Senate and merge the Executive and Legislative powers in the National Congress.	Cross-check (Art. 252 & 279)
	4	Article 210 says that the constitutions of neighborhood associations will be made by the municipal council and the mayor.	Cross-check (Art. 120)
	5	"Drug traffickers may be presidents, mayors, governors and occupy positions of power"	Cross-check (Art. 172)
<b>Plurinationality and Rights of Indigenous Peoples</b>	1	New norms will subtract power from regions and transfer them to the Executive. The end of democratic equality will separate citizens between 1st (indigenous) and 2nd (Chilean) categories.	Cross-check (Art. 4 & 25)
	2	The Plurinational Unilateral Parliament was approved by the Convention.	Cross-check (Art. 251)
	3	This will not be the first time that the Chilean Constitution recognizes the existence of the pueblos originarios (indigenous citizens).	Cross-check (Past Constitutions)
	4	The text that will allow you to establish, through Plurinationality with autonomy and self-government, the independence or annexation of any declared territory of Original Peoples.	Cross-check (Art. 1)
	5	The consent of the pueblos originarios will be needed to make any amendments to the Constitution.	Cross-check (Art. 383)
	6	"With this new Constitution, the Mapuche will have privileges"	Cross-check (Art. 4 & 25)
<b>Ideological association</b>	1	Maduro has celebrated and sent greetings to the Convention for the delivery of the draft.	Subjective
	2	Rodrigo Rojas Vade participated in the drafting of the New Constitution	Subjective
	3	The Convention has a Bolivarian agenda.	Subjective
	4	Rojas Vade has declared that he feels represented by the New Constitution.	Subjective
	5	The left refuses to condemn violence.	Subjective
	6	The text is a copy of the Bolivian Constitution.	Subjective
<b>Functionality of the convention</b>	1	The Catholic University has not participated in the constituent discussion.	Time-consuming
	2	The <i>semanas territoriales</i> (periods of Constituent field work), were eliminated.	Time-consuming
	3	Chile lost a US\$60 billion megaproject due to its constitutional uncertainty.	Time-consuming
	4	Deputies can oversee the activities of the constituent body.	Time-consuming
	5	Early elections have been called.	Time-consuming
	6	Each day of work at the Convention costs Chile more than 30 million pesos.	Time-consuming
	7	The committee proposed a work schedule with a one-year extension period.	Time-consuming
<b>Religion</b>	1	The Evangelical Church flag was banned in the Convention.	Time-consuming
	2	"With the Approval, the churches will close"	Cross-check (Art. 9)
<b>Nationality and Immigration</b>	1	With the New Constitution, newly-arrived foreigners can go to the notary's office and will be given Chilean citizenship.	Cross-check (Art.114)
	2	"With this new Constitution, migrants will have privileges"	Cross-check (Art. 4 & 25)

## Appendix 2 – Keywords/terms used in queries (in Spanish) and their respective fake news items (in English)

	Fake news item (English)	Keywords used for queries (Spanish)
<b>National sovereignty</b>	1 The territorial unity of the State will cease to exist.	Unidad territorial
	2 National emblems such as the anthem, the flag, the shield and also the cueca will no longer exist.	Emblemas patrios
	3 Chile will be divided in 12 states.	Division estados
	4 The Constitutional Convention has excluded the Republic of Chile from the new Constitution.	Republica de chile
	5 There will no longer be a State, a Republic or a nation. Instead, there will be different nations.	Distintas naciones
	6 Some representatives in the Constituent Assembly want to change the name of the country.	Nombre pais
<b>Regulations for the protection of private property</b>	1 The effective protection of the right to property in all its forms will be extinguished.	Propriedad privada constitucion, propiedad privada constitución
	2 The word "property" does not appear anywhere in the text.	constitucion palabra propiedad, constitución palabra propiedad
	3 It will no longer be possible own two houses since they will be expropriated and distributed to the homeless/migrants.	expropiación constitucion. constitución expropiación, constitucion expropiacion, expropiacion constitucion, repartición constitución, constitución reparticion, constitucion reparticion
	4 With the New Constitution, houses will be no longer inherited	herencia constitucion, herencia constitución, constitución herencia, constitucion herencia
	5 If I vote Approve, my house/part of my house will be taken from me and given to a migrant	Casa constitucion, desalojo constitucion, migracion constitucion, casa constitución, desalojo constitución, migración constitución
	6 The effective protection of the right to property in all its forms will be extinguished.	Propriedad privada constitucion, propiedad privada constitución
<b>Plurinationality and Rights of Indigenous Peoples</b>	1 New norms will subtract power from regions and transfer them to the Executive. The end of democratic equality will separate citizens between 1st (indigenous) and 2nd (Chilean) categories.	igualdad democratica constitucion, categoria ciudadanos constitucion, poder regiones constitucion, poder presidencialismo constitucion
	2 The Plurinational Unilateral Parliament was approved by the CC.	parlamento plurinacional constitucion
	3 This will not be the first time that the Chilean Constitution recognizes the existence of the pueblos originarios (indigenous citizens).	pueblos originarios constitucion
	4 The text that will allow you to establish, through Plurinationality with autonomy and self-government, the independence or annexation of any declared territory of Original Peoples.	territorio indigena constitucion, territorio indigena autogobierno constitucion, territorio indigena autogobierno constitucion, autogobierno indigena constitucion, territorio indigena independiente constitucion
	5 The consent of the pueblos originarios will be needed to make any amendments to the Constitution.	soberania pueblos originarios constitucion, reformas aprobadas pueblos originarios constitucion
	6 "With this new Constitution, the Mapuche will have privileges"	privilegio mapuche constitucion