

The New York Times



December 14, 2013

On Election Day, Latin America Willingly Trades Machismo for Female Clout

By **SIMON ROMERO**

SANTIAGO, Chile — When Chileans vote Sunday for their next leader, they will choose between a former president seeking to expand access to higher education broadly and a staunch conservative opposing tax increases aimed at reducing Chile's high levels of inequality.

The fact that both candidates — Michelle Bachelet, a former president who narrowly missed a first-round victory in November, and Evelyn Matthei, her right-wing opponent — are women reveals an area where Latin America is surging: the empowerment of female leaders in politics.

Eight of the estimated 29 women in the world who have been elected as presidents of their countries since the 1970s have done so in Latin America and the Caribbean, long considered a bastion of machismo, with half of them ascending since 2006. Up and down the Americas, with the notable exception of the United States, women are soaring into the highest political realms.

In Brazil, Latin America's largest country, Dilma Rousseff, a former energy minister who was elected in 2010, is preparing to run for a new term as president in 2014. In neighboring Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is in her second term as president, and in Central America, Laura Chinchilla is wrapping up her term as Costa Rica's first female president.

In the Caribbean, Portia Simpson-Miller is the prime minister of Jamaica, the Caribbean's largest English-speaking island, and Kamla Persad-Bissessar is the prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean's [biggest exporter of oil and natural gas](#).

“The gains for women in politics in various countries have been remarkable, reflecting a

broad shift in thinking,” said Marta Lagos, the director of a Chilean [polling firm](#) that works throughout Latin America. She said that about 80 percent of people in the region now thought that women should participate in politics, up from about 30 percent in the early 1990s.

Still, Ms. Lagos said, ingrained sexism persists across Latin America, reflected in income gaps between men and women and in the executive suites of corporations still largely dominated by men. “There’s a lot of hypocrisy,” she said. “Men are generally fine with women in positions of political power as long as they retain economic power.”

The income gap between men and women in Chile has actually widened, with men earning on average about \$1,172 a month and women about \$811, according to an [employment survey](#) this year by the University of Chile.

No nation in Latin America has achieved gender parity in government and, scholars say, the advances by women could be easily reversed. Overall representation in parliaments remains low, even in countries like Brazil, where Ms. Rousseff has named women to an array of cabinet posts and supported the appointment of a [woman to head Petrobras](#), the national oil company.

Yet while the results remain uneven, the Americas already have the second-highest regional average of [women in lower houses of congress](#) in the world, at about 24 percent, lagging behind only Scandinavia and other Nordic countries in Europe, at about 42 percent, said Joan Caivano, director of special projects at the [Inter-American Dialogue](#), a Washington policy group.

Such advances are partly the result of quotas. Argentina pioneered such measures in the early 1990s with a law establishing that 30 percent of legislative candidates must be women; more than a dozen countries now have similar laws. In Bolivia, Costa Rica and Ecuador, every other candidate on a political party election list must be female.

These measures contrast with the relatively short history of female participation in politics in some parts of Latin America. In El Salvador, for instance, women were not allowed to run for elective office until 1961, the same year that Paraguay changed its Constitution to give women the right to vote.

María Estela de Perón, the widow of Gen. Juan D. Perón, the populist leader of Argentina, became the [hemisphere’s first female head of state](#) in 1974 upon the death of her husband. Known as Isabel, she governed Argentina until she was ousted in a [1976 military coup](#). She

is living in exile in Spain, where Argentine authorities have unsuccessfully tried to extradite her in connection with [human rights violations](#).

In a break from the pattern established by Mrs. Perón in which Latin America's female heads of state were the wives or widows of male presidents or opposition leaders, the path to power has grown more varied, highlighted by the [election in 2006 of Ms. Bachelet](#), a pediatrician and single mother of three who served in important cabinet posts, including defense minister, before her first presidential run.

"Latin America is really ahead of the pack," said Farida Jalalzai, a scholar on gender politics at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. "This is interesting because it had seemed to stall by the early 2000s, but no more."

Once in power, Ms. Bachelet named a cabinet of 10 women and 10 men. But faced with street protests early in her term, she shook up her cabinet, replacing some of the female ministers with men. She also increased access to child care for poor families and helped create pensions for housewives and legalize alimony payments to divorced women. Chile, one of Latin America's most socially conservative countries, [legalized divorce](#) only in 2004.

But while she advanced some policies aimed at improving women's lives and finished her first term in 2010 with high approval ratings, her race this year against Ms. Matthei has shown that the presence of female candidates does not guarantee an embrace of feminist issues. Ms. Matthei, for instance, has supported exceptions to Chile's [total ban on abortion](#), contending that the procedure is needed when a woman's life is in danger, but she said she would not push such a change if elected, after facing resistance within her own party.

And while Ms. Bachelet supports legalizing abortion in cases of medical emergency or rape, she has also had to grapple with elements in her coalition who oppose loosening Chile's abortion laws. Some in Chile point to the heavy influence of the Roman Catholic Church, which opposes abortion but played an important role in fighting rights abuses during [Augusto Pinochet's](#) dictatorship.

"There is a certain irony that this election pits two women from very different party backgrounds," said Ms. Caivano, of the Inter-American Dialogue. "Yet each has been constrained by their respective party's orthodoxy on the abortion question."

