

THE POLLS—TRENDS ECONOMIC EVALUATIONS AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN CHILE, 1966 TO 2018

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Abstract Over the past half century, Chile has fluctuated wildly in terms of economic prosperity and democratic health. Using 78 surveys archived at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, we document the evolution of Chileans' perceptions of their personal, family, and national economic conditions during major political and economic changes. The data show that prior to the Pinochet dictatorship, despite a growing economic crisis, Chileans' perceptions of their family's economic situation—particularly among the lower socio-economic class—improved, suggesting that Allende's social and economic policies may have had their intended effect. In contrast, through the democratic transition and the contemporary period, economic evaluations typically tracked objective economic conditions. We conclude by discussing how these patterns can inform public opinion research in Latin America and beyond.

The public's evaluations of the economy are thought to influence future economic conditions (e.g., [Barsky and Sims 2012](#); [Lahiri, Monokroussos, and Zhao 2016](#)) as well as political factors, such as vote choice, presidential approval, congressional approval, trust in government, and regime stability (e.g., [Holbrook 1994](#); [Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997](#); [Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000](#); [Acemoglu and Robinson 2001](#); [Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002](#); [Morrison 2009](#); [Enns and Richman 2013](#)). Yet, beyond the United States

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doi:10.1093/poq/nfz029

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and a handful of other countries with advanced economies, we know relatively little about the dynamics of economic perceptions and how they relate to economic and political conditions.

To highlight the value of considering other contexts, we use data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University to examine more than a half century of Chilean economic attitudes. The data offer an unprecedented look at economic evaluations during economic booms and busts as well as democratic breakdown and revival. During the period of analysis, Chile transitioned from a democracy to a dictatorship (1973) and then back to a democracy (1990). The period also includes the 1972–1973 Chilean economic crisis, the late 1990s economic crisis in Latin America, the post-2008 global recession, and the contemporary period when Chile drastically reduced extreme poverty, more than tripled its economy, and joined the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

In addition to offering historical insight into economic perceptions in one of the most important economies of Latin America, Chile is an informative case because the extreme political and economic variation it experienced parallels the political and economic volatility of many other Latin American countries. Although scholars have analyzed a variety of historical public opinion data in Chile (Prothro and Chaparro 1974; Bermeo 2003; Madrid 2005; Carlin, Love, and Martinez-Gallardo 2015; Navia and Osorio 2015, 2017; Cabezas and Navia 2019), Chilean economic evaluations have received much less attention than economic attitudes in other Latin American countries (e.g., Kelly 2003; Carlin and Hunt 2015). We seek to build on this literature by offering a comprehensive overview of the Chilean public's economic views. The patterns we highlight will also be of interest to public opinion scholars who focus on the United States and other advanced industrial democracies. The immense political and economic variation in countries like Chile allows an assessment of scope conditions of existing theories and opportunities to develop new theories about the causes and consequences of economic evaluations. For example, the relationship between economic conditions and vote choice in Latin America appears more complicated than in advanced democracies (Singer and Carlin 2013; Valdini and Lewis-Beck 2018). It is also possible that the political determinants of economic attitudes found in the United States (De Boef and Kellstedt 2004; Enns, Kellstedt, and McAvoy 2012) manifest differently in alternate institutional settings and in times of great political or economic change. The data we present could also speak to the generalizability of asymmetric responses to good and bad economic information (Soroka 2006, 2014) and whether economic opinion follows or leads economic news (Wlezien, Soroka, and Stecula 2017).

This article first considers data prior to the Pinochet dictatorship (1966 to 1973), which includes the presidencies of Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964–1970) and Salvador Allende (1970–1973). We then evaluate the transition to democracy, defined here as the final two years of Pinochet's dictatorship

(1988–1990), the first democratic election (December 1989), and the period up to the end of the first democratic administration (March 1994). Last, we examine the period of democratic consolidation: 1994 to 2018. The analysis presented herein highlights how these surveys can offer important insights into the impact of Allende’s social and economic policies, how economic perceptions shift before and after major political transitions, and the relationship between economic conditions and perceptions across diverse political and economic climates.

Political Shifts and Democratic Breakdown (1966–1973)

This section examines economic evaluations from 12 surveys from 1966 to 1973 (CEDOP/Hamuy Polls, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research), a period that precedes the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. These years include the presidencies of Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964–1970), from the Christian Democratic Party (center), and Salvador Allende (1970–1973), from the Popular Unity coalition (left).¹ The surveys were conducted in the capital, Santiago, which included about 30 percent of the total population at the time.² Although not shown here, the Roper Center also holds surveys conducted in the second (Valparaiso) and fourth (Viña del Mar) largest Chilean cities during this period. The data patterns in these cities largely parallel the results for Santiago. [Figure 1](#) reports Santiago residents’ evaluations of their families’ retrospective economic situation compared to the previous year. This question, which was the only economic question during the period, asked: “Considering the last 12 months, would you say that your family has improved its economic situation, stayed the same, or worsened?” In [figures 1–3](#), when more than one survey was conducted in a single year, we present the average of the surveys. The online appendix includes tables with all survey marginals.³

The years during Allende’s presidency (November 1970 to September 1973) are especially noteworthy. During this period, the increasingly positive views of family economic conditions moved *opposite* to deteriorating economic conditions. Economic growth, inflation, and the annual increase in real wages were all much better in 1970 than in 1972 and 1973. Specifically, in 1970, 1971, 1972, and 1973, the economic growth rates were 3.6, 8.0, –0.1, and –4.3; the annual inflation rates were 36.1, 22.1, 260.5, and 605.1; and the annual increases of real wages were 8.5, 22.3, –11.3, and –38.6 ([Larrain and](#)

1. Frei Montalva was president from November 3, 1964, to November 3, 1970. Allende was president from November 3, 1970, to September 11, 1973.

2. For census data on the Chilean population, see Memoria Chilena, Archivos <http://www.memoriachilena.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0018840.PDF>.

3. All surveys were conducted in Spanish. The tables in the online appendix present the questions and answer options in Spanish and English.

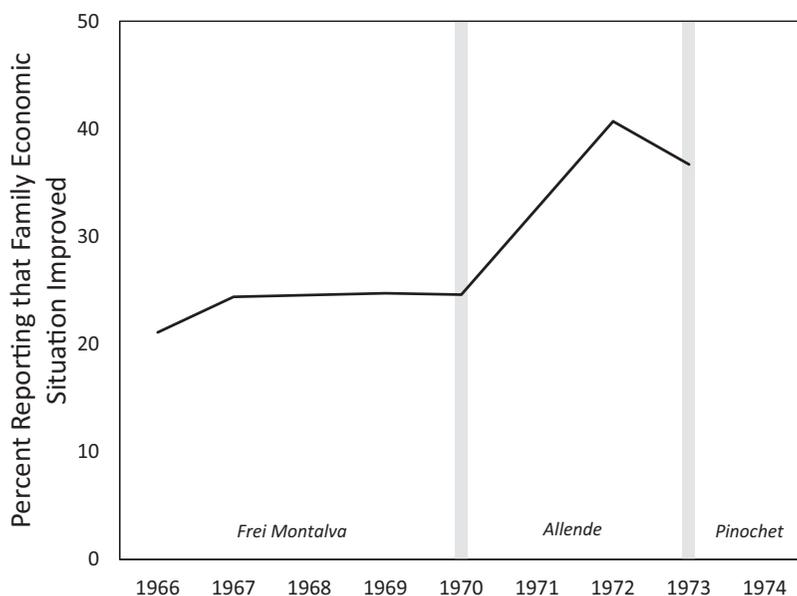


Figure 1. Retrospective family economic situation (considering the past year), Santiago, 1966–1973. The vertical lines indicate changes in presidential administrations/political transition. SOURCE.—Authors using data from CEDOP/Hamuy Polls (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research).

Meller 1991, p. 200).⁴ The fact that economic evaluations were more positive in 1972 and 1973 than in 1970 (despite the growing economic crisis) may suggest that policies Allende implemented, such as increased social spending (Pribble 2013) and wage adjustments (Kaufman 1988), benefited enough of the public in Santiago—especially the lower classes—to improve overall economic assessments.

To evaluate this possibility, figures 2 and 3 report evaluations of families' economic situation by social class. We follow Navia and Osorio (2017) and use type of housing and education background to measure class.⁵ Since Allende's

4. Only the unemployment rate held relatively constant during this period.

5. "Lower-class housing" corresponds with "poor housing" ("Vivienda pobre") and "Very poor housing" ("Vivienda muy pobre"), "Middle-class housing" includes "Average lower housing" ("Vivienda media inferior") and "Modest housing" ("Vivienda modesta"), and "Upper-class housing" includes "Isolated luxury home" ("Vivienda aislada de gran lujo"), "Apartment of great luxury" ("Departamento de gran lujo"), and "Upper middle housing" ("Vivienda media superior"). "Low education" includes "Elementary, more than 4 years" ("Primaria, más de 4 años") and lower categories, "High education" includes "Professional or secondary, more than 4 years" ("Media profesional o secundaria, más de 4 años") and higher categories.

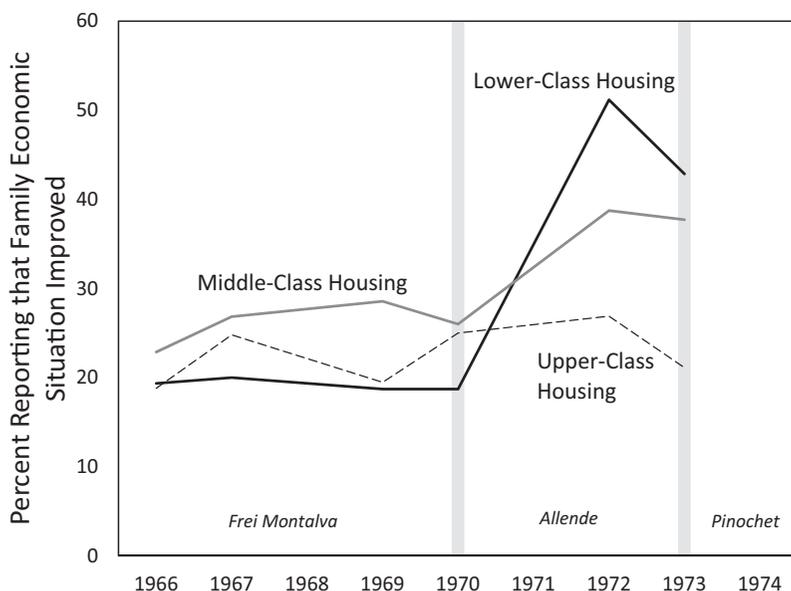


Figure 2. Retrospective family economic situation, by housing type (Santiago, 1966–1973). The vertical lines indicate changes in presidential administrations/political transition. SOURCE.—Authors using data from CEDOP/Hamuy Polls (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research).

policies targeted the lower social class, if these policies had their intended effect, we would expect those in “lower class housing” and those with less education to have more positive views of the economy. In line with expectations, [figure 2](#) indicates that there was a major increase in the percent indicating their family’s economic situation had improved among those with lower-class housing in 1972, a smaller increase for those with middle-class housing, and a relatively flat trajectory for those with upper-class housing. [Figure 3](#) shows a similar pattern for education levels. In 1972 and 1973, respondents with lower levels of education reported more positive views of their family’s economic conditions than respondents with higher levels of education.

Together, the data suggest that Allende’s policies substantially mitigated the effects of deteriorating economic conditions. Although factors such as political identification with the party were also relevant to Popular Unity support ([Navia and Osorio 2015, 2017](#)), these patterns may help explain how, despite rising inflation and declining wages, Allende’s Popular Unity coalition improved its numbers in the municipal elections of 1971 (*New York Times* 1971) and gained seats in Congress between 1970 and 1973 ([Kaufman 1988](#), p. 187). Popular Unity’s success amid a deteriorating economy has typically been used to show the limits of economic considerations in politics (i.e.,

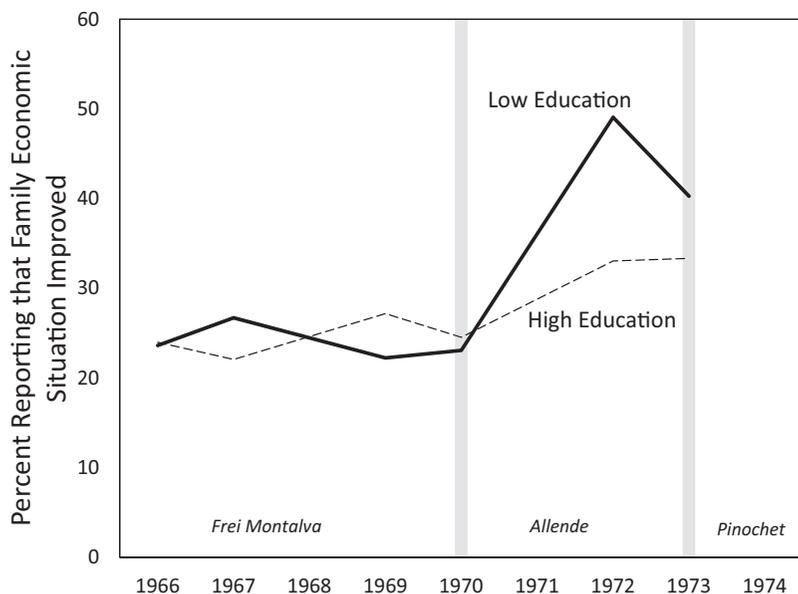


Figure 3. Retrospective family economic situation, by education level (Santiago, 1966–1973). The vertical lines indicate changes in presidential administrations/political transition. SOURCE.—Authors using data from CEDOP/Hamuy Polls (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research).

Bermeo 2003, pp. 170–71), but the evidence that assessments of family economic conditions were improving may indicate that the Chilean case is consistent with pocketbook voting (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979). Future research could further test this hypothesis with individual-level analysis of these data and the survey data from Valparaíso and Viña del Mar.⁶ The economic views of those with upper-class housing and more education also warrant further consideration, as these groups also seem somewhat insulated from deteriorating economic conditions.

Unfortunately, because surveys stopped after February 1973, we cannot explore the evolution of economic evaluations right before the military coup or during most of the authoritarian period. However, access to surveys from the final two years of Pinochet’s rule allows us to have a sense of economic evaluations in the period immediately before and after the transition to democracy.

6. In their study of political and electoral attitudes in pre-1973 Chile, Navia and Osorio (2015) also highlight the value of survey questions like optimism *and* pessimism about the general situation of the country (not just the economy), and they offer important insights into electoral preferences, ideological identification, presidential approval, and views about the future of the country.

The Transition to Democracy (1988–1994)

On October 5, 1988, a plebiscite was held to consider an extension of Pinochet's rule. The “No” option won, meaning that Pinochet had to leave power and initiate a transition to democracy. Thereafter, a constitutional reform adopted democratic rules, and in December 1989, Patricio Aylwin became the first democratically elected president since Salvador Allende (1970–1973).⁷

This section focuses on economic evaluations during the transition to democracy, a period that we define as beginning the year of the referendum (1988) and ending in March 1994, when Aylwin left office. The data here come from 16 surveys conducted by Centro de Estudios Públicos between November/December 1988 and October/November 1993. The surveys use two different samples. The first sample (six cities) includes the six most populous cities in Chile, Santiago, Antofagasta, Valparaíso, Viña del Mar, Concepción, and Talcahuano, which constituted 46 percent of the population. The second sample (13 cities) includes the previous six cities and Rancagua, Arica, Iquique, Talca, Temuco, Valdivia, and Osorno, which totaled 54 percent of the population.⁸

Figure 4 reports the percentage of individuals offering a positive response to personal (ego-tropic) prospective economic expectations, personal retrospective economic evaluations, and current (socio-tropic) evaluations of the country's economic situation. The specific question wording included: (1) “Thinking about the future, how do you think your economic situation will be in one year?”; (2) “How would you describe your current personal economic situation compared to one year ago?”; and (3) “According to the following scale, how would you describe the present economic situation of the country?”⁹ Figure 4 reports both urban samples (six cities and 13 cities), because the two samples overlap substantially (the six largest cities account for 85 percent of the population covered by the 13 cities sample). The black line (June/July 1988 to April 1992) reflects the six cities sample, and the gray line (August 1992 to October/November 1993) represents the 13 cities sample.

Several patterns emerge in figure 4. As indicated by the top series in the figure, Chileans had more positive views about their personal economic future compared to their personal retrospective evaluations and compared to their

7. Aylwin was from the Christian Democrat Party, which, together with other center and leftist parties including the Socialist Party, formed the Coalition of Parties for Democracy (known as “the Concertación”).

8. CEP also conducted three national surveys in 1989, but since these three surveys were from the same year, we do not analyze them here. Because these were face-to-face interviews, it is not surprising that most samples focused on urban areas. Population source: Memoria Chilena, Archivos. See <http://www.memoriachilena.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0018840.PDF>.

9. Response options “good” and “very good” and “better” and “much better” were combined in the figure.

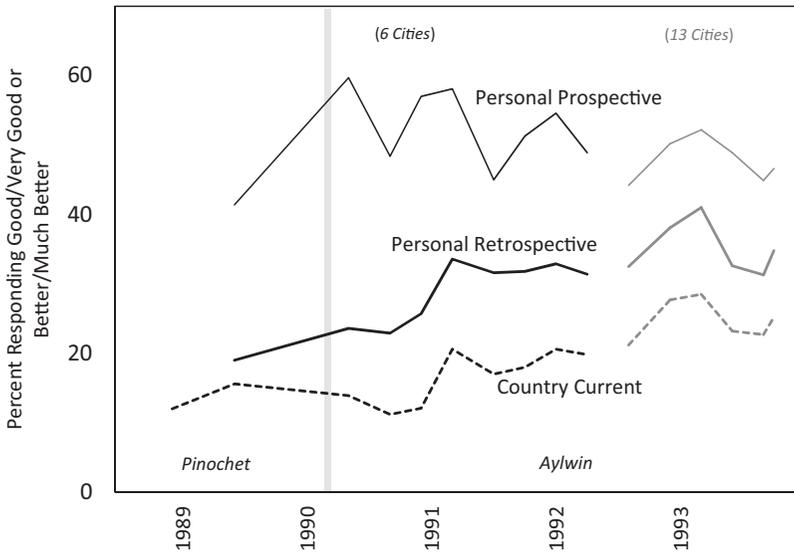


Figure 4. Economic evaluations (1988–1993). Different line colors indicate different samples; either six cities or 13 cities. The vertical line indicates political transition. Years on the x-axis correspond with January of each year. SOURCE.—Authors using data from CEP surveys (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research).

view of the country's current economic situation. The largest increase in economic expectations occurred around the transition from Pinochet's rule, when the percent offering a positive prospective economic evaluation increased from about 41 percent (June–July 1989) to about 60 percent (May–June), perhaps suggesting economic optimism about the transition back to democracy. This series also stands out because prospective economic evaluations fluctuate the most, especially in the early years, which may indicate that even though Chileans seemed optimistic, there was also uncertainty about the economic future.¹⁰ Alternatively, this variance could suggest that prospective evaluations responded to cyclical conditions. Personal retrospective economic evaluations and current evaluations of the country's economy diverge slightly at the end of Pinochet's rule, and then move mostly in sync, although assessments of the country's current economic situation correspond most closely with annual economic growth between 1989 and 1993 ($r = 0.43$).¹¹

10. Change in personal prospective economic evaluations has a standard deviation of 8.2, compared to 4.0 for change in personal retrospective evaluations.

11. GDP growth data is from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CL>.

Democratic Consolidation, Frei Ruiz-Tagle to Piñera (1994 to 2018)

Following the Aylwin presidency, Chile continued its process of democratic consolidation (González 2008; Navia 2010). From 1994 to 2018, Chile elected six presidents. In 1994, another Christian Democrat (center), Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, son of former president Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964–1970), won the presidential election for the 1994–2000 term. In March 2000, Ricardo Lagos from the Party for Democracy (center-left) reached the presidency and pushed the country toward the left. Lagos was followed by President Michelle Bachelet (Socialist Party) in March 2006.¹² In 2010, Sebastián Piñera (National Renewal Party) reached the presidency and shifted the government to the right. In 2014 Bachelet was elected to a second term, and in 2018 Piñera became president one more time.

Figure 5 shows how economic evaluations changed during this period of democratic consolidation. The data come from 50 surveys of national adults carried out by CEP and reflect four economic questions consistently asked in the period: (1) “How would you classify your current economic situation?”; (2) “In one year, what do you expect will be your economic situation?”; (3) “How would you classify the current economic situation of the country?”; and (4) “Do you think that in the next 12 months the economic situation of the

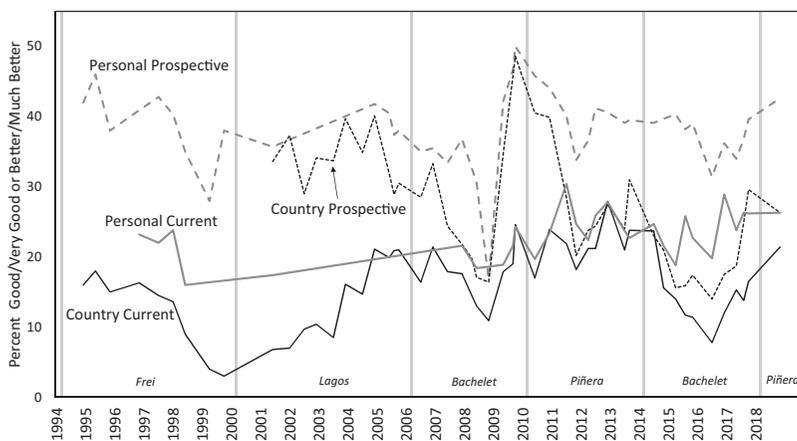


Figure 5. Economic evaluations (1994–2018). The vertical lines refer to changes of presidential administrations. Years on the x-axis correspond with January of each year. SOURCE.—Authors using data from CEP surveys (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research).

12. The new four-year term reflected a 2005 constitutional reform. Chilean presidents cannot run for successive terms.

country will improve, will not change, or will be worse?" Figure 5 presents the percent offering a positive economic assessment.¹³

Consistent with figure 4, respondents' expectations about their prospective personal economic situation were more optimistic than evaluations about their own and the country's current economic situation. In contrast to economic evaluations in the early 1970s, shown in figure 1, economic evaluations appear highly responsive to the economic crises of the late 1990s and 2007–2008.¹⁴ Also of note, after 2010, expectations for the country's economic future drop dramatically, diverging from personal expectations. Understanding this shift offers an important avenue for future research.

Conclusions and Implications

Given the massive political and economic changes that Chile experienced between 1966 and 2018, it is not surprising that large shifts existed in Chileans' economic evaluations. However, these shifting economic evaluations did not always align with conventional wisdom. Between 1970 and 1973, the Chilean economy plummeted. Yet, despite the deteriorating economic conditions, perceptions of family economic conditions improved in the first two years of Allende's administration and, even during his third year, economic evaluations were higher than before he took office. Our analysis of different social classes (figures 2 and 3) suggests that Allende's social and economic policies may have had their intended effect and alleviated much of the impact of the declining economy. Another notable result appears in figure 4, where personal economic expectations were consistently higher than assessments of the current economic situation, perhaps suggesting that expectations of democratic change increased optimism about the economic future. As shown in figure 5, during the last quarter century, various economic evaluations often moved in tandem. However, toward the end of the period, Chileans' expectations for the country's economy became more pessimistic than personal economic expectations.

These data offer important insights into Chileans' economic perceptions in contexts of political change and economic volatility. Future research ideally will extend our subgroup analysis through the post-Pinochet period and also conduct analyses using the underlying individual-level data. The immense political and economic variation in countries like Chile allows for myriad studies related to economic attitudes, asymmetric responsiveness to good and bad

13. The response options "Better" and "Much Better" and "Good" and "Very Good" were combined, with the exception of prospective country evaluations, because "better" was the only positive response option.

14. Only one survey asked about current personal evaluations between 1998 and 2007, making it impossible to fully evaluate how these perceptions responded to the economic crises.

news, and economic voting. More important, it allows scholars who typically study the United States or other advanced industrial democracies to evaluate the scope of existing theories and leverage opportunities to develop new theories. As a result, public opinion scholars with a broad range of interests will benefit from the Chilean data highlighted here.

Appendix 1: Data Sources

The data reported in this work were collected from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University (<http://ropercenter.cornell.edu/>). All the surveys were conducted in Spanish. The exact wordings are offered in the online appendix tables along with the translations to English. When available, percentages were taken directly from the original topline reports reported with the survey questionnaires.

The organizations responsible for the studies were CEDOP/Hamuy Archive for the period 1966–1973 and CEP for the period 1988–2018.

The online appendix tables include available information on samples, sample sizes, dates, and locations of the surveys. For the surveys carried out by CEDOP/Hamuy Archive and CEP, data collection was done via face-to-face interviews. Face-to-face surveys followed stratified probability samples. For more information about the surveys, visit www.ropercenter.cornell.edu. Response rates were not available for any of the surveys.

Appendix 2: Abbreviations

CEDOP: Centro de Estudios de Opinión Pública

CEP: Centro De Estudios Públicos

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available at *Public Opinion Quarterly* online and are reproduced with permission from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University.

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