

# When Music Resists: Nueva Canción Chilena and the Voice of Democracy

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## Research Focus:

- This project explores the role that music plays as political communication, specifically looking at the Nueva Canción Chilena movement and its songs
- Research Question: How does popular music function as political communication and what effect could it have on maintaining and building democratic values in post-dictatorial countries?

## Motivation for this Study:

- Studying abroad in Salamanca, Spain I learned a lot about Francisco Franco's dictatorship, and being a Political Science and Spanish double major, I wanted to research a topic that relates to the global trend of democratic backsliding into authoritarian-style governance
- Learning about Franco's dictatorship led me to investigate the various dictatorships across Latin America and ultimately choose Chile for their rich expression of culture through song in the 1960s and '70s
- My study dives into the scholarship on what creates an authoritarian legacy in post-dictatorial countries and analyzes how music from the Nueva Canción Chilena helps to promote democratic values and anti-authoritarian sentiment in post-dictatorial Chile
- After understanding the role of music as political communication and the prevalence of the concept of framing in songs, I argue that the songs "Canción de Muerte y Esperanza por Víctor Jara" by Osvaldo Rodríguez and "El Derecho de Vivir en Paz" by Víctor Jara were used to reflect public desire for democracy or policy change under various administrations



## Understanding Framing:

- Framing is a tactic used to effectively create a message and shape the ways in which an individual perceives it
- Jay G. Blumler describes framing as something that is "capable of influencing audience members' understanding of political reality (affecting not just what to think about but what to think about it)"
- Framing is also used in music to evoke certain emotions and shape the way in which the audience will interpret the message
- According to Jere T. Humphreys, music can also be used to reject the status quo and as a "vehicle for protests against events and conditions" which we see in Chile against both Pinochet's dictatorship and former President, Sebastián Piñera through the framing of songs

## "Canción de Muerte y Esperanza por Víctor Jara" by Osvaldo Rodríguez:

La Muerte te tocó con su campana,  
te salió en el camino, te llamó,  
mientras en una esquina de la vida  
una muchacha cantaba tu canción.

Ay, ¿qué haremos camarada para ti?  
¿Qué harán los niños de la población?  
¿Quién le estará cantando en el umbral?

Pero el viento hacia el sur se fortalece  
y ya canta en secreto tu canción.

Es la hora en que duermes tu cabeza,  
no el sueño de los justos, sí no aquel  
de quién sabe que viene en la mañana,  
La luz que nadie puede detener.

Ay, Amanda anda buscándote, quizás  
te encuentre en una fábrica en que estés  
ejerciendo el derecho de vivir.

¿En qué peña del viento andas cantando  
con tantos compañeros que no sé?

En las calles humeantes de la guerra  
anda revoloteando una canción.  
En los telares, en las herramientas,  
que hablan con el fantasma de tu voz.

Ay, los bosques en el sur te sentirán,  
porque les perteneces tu canción,  
porque te alimentaron una vez.

Una calle una flor una ventana,  
reclaman tu derecho de volver  
y así hemos de verte una mañana  
vestido de murmullos y de pie,  
envuelto en una manta de neblina  
y los que matan no te podrán ver.

Ay, algunos pensarán que no es así,  
que al viento se le puede detener  
o que el silencio se tragó tu voz.

Pero yo sé que tú vienes cantando  
entre los compañeros se te ve...

Death struck you with its bell  
It appeared on your path, it called you  
while in a corner of life  
a young woman was singing your song.

Oh, what will we do for you, comrade?  
What will the children of the town do?  
Who will be singing to you at the threshold?

But the wind to the south is growing stronger  
And is already secretly singing your song.

It is the hour when your head sleeps,  
Not the sleep of the righteous, but that  
of one who knows what is coming in the morning  
the light that no one can stop

Oh, Amanda is looking for you, perhaps  
She will find you in a factory where you are  
Exercising the right to live

On what windy cliff are you singing  
With so many companions I don't know

In the smoky streets of war  
A song is fluttering.  
In the looms, in the tools,  
That speak with the ghost of your voice

Oh, the forests in the south will feel you  
Because your song belongs to them  
Because they nourished you once

A street, a flower, a window  
claim your right to return  
and so we will see you one morning  
dressed in whispers and standing,  
wrapped in a blanket of mist  
And those who kill will not be able to see you.

Oh, some may think it's not true,  
That the wind can be stopped,  
Or that silence has swallowed your voice

But I know you're coming, singing,  
you can be seen among your companions...

## "El Derecho de Vivir en Paz" by Víctor Jara:

El derecho de vivir  
Poeta Ho Chi Minh  
Que golpea de Vietnam  
A toda la humanidad

Ningún cañón borrará  
El surco de tu arrozal  
El derecho de vivir en paz

Indochina es el lugar  
Más allá del ancho mar  
Donde revientan la flor  
Con genocidio y napalm  
La luna es una explosión  
Que funde todo el clamor  
El derecho de vivir en paz (x2)

Tío Ho, nuestra canción  
Es fuego de puro amor  
Es palomo palomar  
Olivo del olivar

Es el canto universal  
Cadena que hará triunfar  
El derecho de vivir en paz (x2)

The right to live  
Poet Ho Chi Minh  
What a strike on Vietnam  
To all of humanity

No cannon will erase  
The furrow of your rice field  
The right to live in peace

Indochina is the place  
Beyond the wide sea  
Where they destroy the flower  
With genocide and napalm  
The moon is an explosion  
That melts all the clamor  
The right to live in peace (x2)

Uncle Ho, our song  
Is the fire of pure love  
Its palomo palomar  
Olive tree of the olive grove

It's the universal song  
The chain that will make you triumphant  
The right to live in peace (x2)

## Lyrical Analysis:

- The song by Rodríguez directly references the murder of his musical colleague, Víctor Jara, after being tortured and shot by Pinochet's agents
- Rodríguez also references another song by Jara, "Te Recuerdo Amanda," a song about a couple named Manuel and Amanda after Jara's parents, with Manuel dying representing the working class in anti-imperialist protests
- "Exercising the right to live" is a direct political message defending the working class and the ways in which they were exploited
- Members of the Nueva Canción Chilena were forced into exile throughout the Pinochet dictatorship as the political and folkloric style of music was prohibited
- The song by Jara was written as a direct protest to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war, and later became an anthem for peace against Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile
- The lyrics directly criticize the violence and bombings in Vietnam while referencing the leader Ho Chi Minh, painting the picture of pacifism
- The song appeared again, unifying the people in protest in 2019 during the Estallido Social (Social Outburst), which is the largest protest in Chilean history
- This song expresses the desire for peace using a few universal symbols of peace such as the white dove and the olive branch while advocating for hope and resistance



## The Role of the Estallido Social in Chile:

- Student protests began in 2011 under Sebastián Piñera's first term regarding the lack of education system reforms after the transition to democracy in 1990
- Protests began once again in 2019 following a 30-peso increase to subway fares across the city
- This price hike was the catalyst for the Estallido Social in which over 1 million citizens filled the streets across Chile to protest Piñera's second presidential term regarding socioeconomic injustices, a lack of access to education, and a lifestyle free of influence from Pinochet's legacy and dictatorship
- Even today, Chile still operates under the constitution written and passed during Pinochet's dictatorship in 1980, highlighting the influence and constant presence of the dictator
- During the massive protests, Jara's song was played through the streets and even rewritten by a group of Chilean artists to properly reflect the more modern problems the population was facing



## Chilean Public Opinion on Democracy:

Figure 1: Satisfaction with Democracy

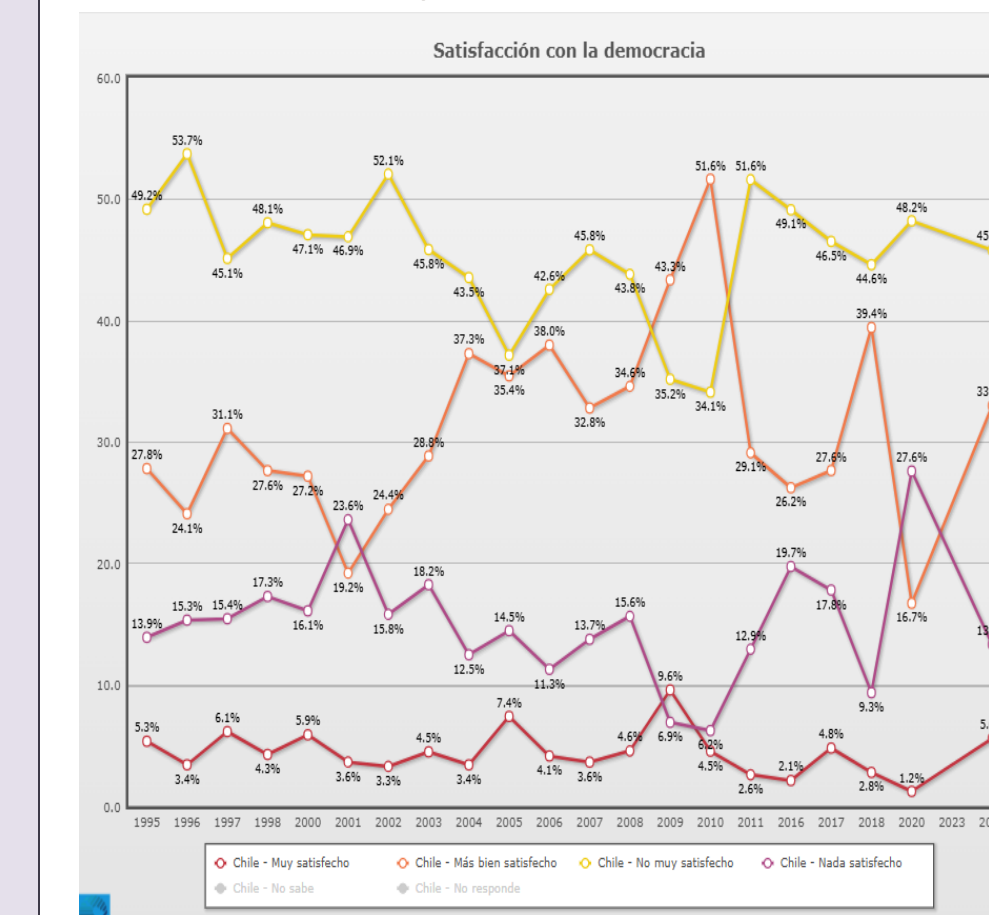
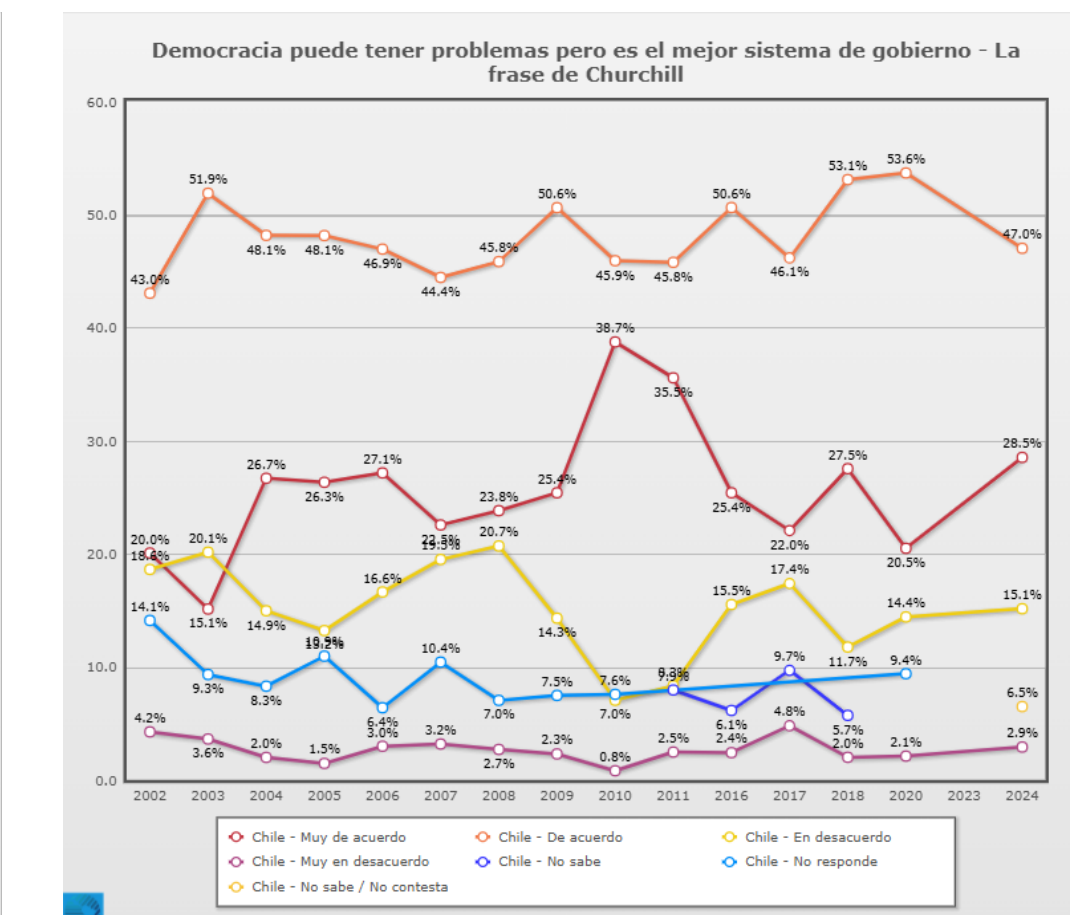


Figure 2: Is Democracy the Best Government?



- The graph on the left – Figure 1 – displays public opinion on democracy asking the participants to rank how satisfied they are with democracy with the following options "Very satisfied, Rather satisfied, Not very satisfied, or Not at all satisfied"
- The data shows that from 2011-2024, more than 44% of respondents are "Not very satisfied"
- The graph on the right – Figure 2 – asks to what extent the respondents agree with the following statement: "Democracy may have its problems, but it is the best system of government" with the options "Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly disagree"
- As represented by the orange and red lines – agree and strongly agree, respectively – they combine for over 60% in every year for which there is available data between 2002-2024
- This reflects strong commitment to democracy despite satisfaction being relatively low as seen in Figure 1, indicating that the Chilean population remains dedicated to democracy despite being discontent with its current state

## Implications:

- Music functioning as political communication is not unique to Chile or its Nueva Canción movement, but this music served as cultural representation and gave voice to the lower political classes of Chile
- The artists frame the songs' political messages, emphasizing peace and resistance and appear in different moments throughout Chile's history promoting social justice and democratic values
- Modern music continues to work as political communication with the most prominent example being Bad Bunny's halftime performance in 2026, promoting peace, hope, resistance, and love instead of hate or violence

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