

2023

How Chile's Welcome Turned Sour

Cristián Doña-Reveco

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Mixed Migration Review 2023

Highlights • Interviews • Essays • Data

Regional issues through regional perspectives



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How Chile’s welcome turned sour

The past five years have seen a marked cooling in the Chilean state’s previously open-armed response to arrivals of people fleeing Venezuela as their numbers increased dramatically. Public sentiment has also soured, providing fuel for far-right parties ahead of key elections.

By Cristián Doña-Reveco¹

Introduction

Immigration to Chile has grown considerably since the end of Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship in 1990. Until mid-2017, political debates about immigration—including refugees and asylum seekers in mixed migratory movements—lacked a sense of urgency, but that began to change in the second half of the year with the rapid increase of arrivals from Venezuela. Chile initially welcomed Venezuelan refugees and migrants, more so than other recent immigrant groups, but the five-fold growth of this population led to major changes in policy and increasingly negative public attitudes.

These attitudes have been fomented amid a continuing triple-headed crisis: the political fallout of the national wave of violent protests that started in 2019; the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic; and the economic disruption wrought by the pandemic.

While anti-immigration movements and adverse media portrayals of immigration are not new to Chile, the current climate is especially hostile to Venezuelans and immigration in general. This does not bode well for a country where immigrants are increasingly needed in the labour market and where, ahead of key elections in the next two years, right-wing politicians capitalise on such xenophobia.

Table 1. Chile’s foreign-born population by country of birth (%)

Country of birth	Census				
	1992	2002	2012	2017	2021 (est)
Venezuela	2.1	2.4	2.3	11.1	30.0
Peru	6.7	20.5	30.5	25.1	16.6
Haiti	0.0	0.0	0.5	8.4	12.2
Colombia	1.5	2.2	8.1	14.1	11.7
Bolivia	6.7	5.9	7.4	9.9	8.9
Argentina	30.0	26.1	16.8	8.9	5.2
Ecuador	2.0	5.1	4.8	3.7	2.8
Dominican Rep.	0.1	0.2	1.0	1.6	1.3
Spain	8.6	4.9	3.3	2.2	1.3
Brazil	4.0	3.7	2.9	1.9	1.3
Other countries	38.3	28.9	22.5	13.0	8.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	(114,634)	(184,464)	(339,536)	(783,282)	(1,482,390)
Percentage of total population	0.9	1.2	2.0	4.5	7.6

Sources: [Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas](#) (ENI) for all years except 2012, when the census was [deemed flawed](#) as it reportedly failed to account for almost 10 percent of Chile’s inhabitants.

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Background: migration trends

Chile became a popular destination country in the early 1990s, having been an emigration nation at least since the 1950s. Its attraction stemmed from its growing reputation as a “good neighbour in a bad neighbourhood.”² Chile enjoyed continuous economic growth—particularly between 1990 and 1998—as well as political stability and low rates of criminality.

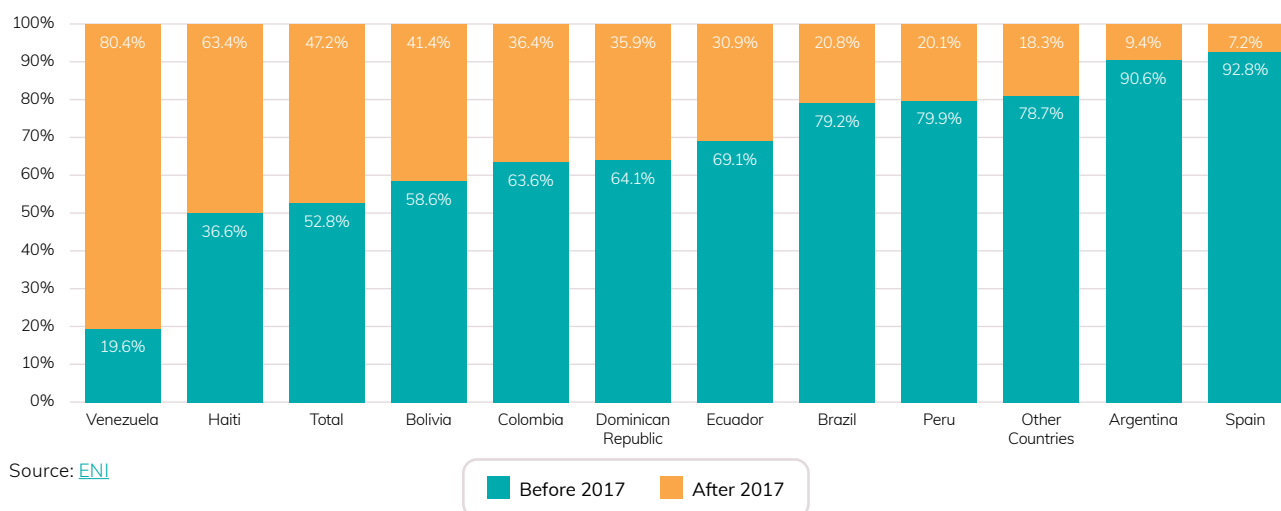
For most of this period, migrants (and refugees) came mainly from Chile’s three neighbours: Argentina, Bolivia and Peru. In 2012, a non-adjacent South American country—Colombia—surpassed Bolivia in terms of arrivals for the first time (see Table 1). By 2017, Colombians and Venezuelans were the second and third largest immigrant communities after Peruvians. Haitians grew from less than one percent of Chile’s foreign-born population in 2012 to more than eight percent in 2017, becoming the sixth-largest community.

Arrivals from Haiti and Venezuela

The most significant changes occurred since the second half of 2017. According to Chile’s National Institute of Statistics (ENI), almost half of all immigrants present in the country as of December 2021—including 80 percent of Venezuelans and 63 percent of Haitians—had arrived after the 2017 census (see Graph 1).

Haitian immigration to Chile took off after the 2010 earthquake, growing almost a hundredfold between 2012 (when there were fewer than 2,000 Haitians in Chile) and late 2021.³ The reasons for this increase are multiple. First, Chile received a significant number of Haitians who had originally emigrated to Brazil but then left as Brazil’s economy stagnated and Chile’s remained attractive.⁴ Second, unlike Haiti, Chile was seen as a peaceful country, with good security.⁵ Third, immigration networks developed and solidified as Haitians established in Chile began inviting friends and family to join them. Last, this immigration was facilitated by the inauguration of non-stop, low-cost flights between Port-au-Prince and Santiago.⁶

Graphic 1. Arrivals of foreign nationals in Chile before and after 2017



2 Doña-Reveco, C. (2022) *Immigrant Invasions to the South American Tiger: Immigration Representations in Chilean Newspapers (1991–2001)*. Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies.

3 McDonnel, P. & Poblete, J. (2021) *Haitians in Chile: Rough going for many prompts large-scale migration toward U.S.* Los Angeles Times.

4 Yates, C. (2021) *Haitian Migration through the Americas: A Decade in the Making*. Migration Policy Institute.

5 The participation of Chilean troops in MINUSTAH, the UN stabilisation mission deployed in Haiti in 2004, also contributed to Chile’s attraction.

6 Ugarte, S. (2022) *Skilling race: Affective labor and “white” pedagogies in the Chilean service economy*. American Anthropologist.

6 Vega, F. (2018) *La aerolínea de Mongolia que disparó el aterrizaje de haitianos: en enero llegaron 5 mil*. CIPER Chile.

Chile was among the leading destinations during the large-scale exodus from Venezuela that began in the mid-2010s, ranking fifth among Latin American states.⁷ Until about 2018, most Venezuelans travelling to Chile flew directly to Santiago but, thereafter, land routes through the northern border city of Arica, and most recently through unauthorised entry points, predominated. Overall, this immigrant group has a lower poverty level compared to the total immigrant group (11% versus 17%) and has significantly higher levels of education than other immigrants, with 68 percent having a post-secondary degree.⁸ Chile's attractions as a destination for migrating Venezuelans are similar to those of other countries in the region: considerably better security and basic services than Venezuela; the opportunity to reunite with family members; and job prospects.⁹

This rapid increase in Haitian and Venezuelan immigration caught the Chilean state unprepared and led to significant changes in immigration policy that centred mainly on Venezuelans and Haitians. Immigration was a major campaign topic ahead of general elections in 2017, when right-wing presidential candidate Sebastián Piñera warned that a victory by his centre-left rival Alejandro Guillier would lead to "Chilezuela", a pejorative term based on the supposedly negative effects of Venezuelan migration.¹⁰ (Piñera, who had previously served as president between 2010 and 2014, won the election).

Three post-Pinochet periods of immigration policy

Until 2021, Chile's visa regime and immigration management had been defined by a law created during the Pinochet dictatorship, two aspects of which came to dominate immigration debates in the late 2010s. First, the law allowed the government to create and issue a range of temporary visas for different categories of migrants. Second, it allowed most foreigners to enter Chile with a six-month tourist permit and then change their status under one of various temporary visa regimes. Such was the laxity of the system that it was not uncommon for foreigners, especially those from the Global North, to repeatedly renew their tourist permit by spending a few days in Argentina every six months, thereby avoiding the considerable cost and red tape of applying for a visa.

Between the end of Pinochet's dictatorship in March 1990 and the culmination of President Piñera's second term in March 2022, Chile's migration policy can be delineated into three distinct periods.

Stage one (1990-2002): policy by default

The initial stage can be characterised as "policy by default" or, colloquially, the "policy of no policy." The relatively slow increase in arrival numbers, coupled with a focus on managing the transition from military rule to democracy, relegated immigration to a secondary position on the political agenda.

Stage two (2002-2017): disjointed reactivity

The subsequent stage has been described as the "politics of the state of mind" era.¹¹ During this period, successive governments reacted to a more rapid rise in arrival numbers by intensifying efforts to formulate immigration-related policies. These policies, however, constituted a collection of significant yet disjointed endeavours, marked by limited and unsuccessful efforts to establish a comprehensive immigration framework. As a consequence, they manifested as provisional measures, susceptible to alteration, retention, or disregard, depending upon the inclinations of who was in power at the time.¹² Notwithstanding these developments, it's worth noting that Michele Bachelet's first presidential administration (2006-2010) officially labelled Chile as a "welcoming country" for immigrants.

2010 saw the enactment of the Law for the Protection of Refugees, which established a legal protection framework and incorporated Chile's obligations as a signatory to the Refugee Convention.¹³ But the legislation has not had the expected effects, nor has it been applied consistently. The awarding of refugee status remains rare: one NGO reports that barely three percent of asylum seekers receive it and that most foreign-born people in Chile are processed as immigrants, regardless of why they left their country of origin.¹⁴ This is because asylum seekers entering Chile are rarely informed of their rights by the border police; others are arbitrarily denied entry, leading them to use unauthorised entry points, which prevents them from having a proper evaluation process.¹⁵

7 R4V (n.d.) [Refugiados y migrantes de Venezuela](#). This can be partly explained by a historical connection between the two countries: after the coup in 1973 that brought Pinochet to power, many Chileans fled to Venezuela.

8 Margarit, D. et al. (2022) [Migración venezolana en Chile: desafíos para su integración](#). Revista Ideele.

9 Testa, G. (2019) [Waning welcome: The growing challenges facing mixed migration flows from Venezuela](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

10 El Mostrador (2017) [Bloomberg y las presidenciales: alarmismo venezolano surge en Chile en la previa de reñida elección](#).

11 Thayer, L. E., Stang, F. & Dilla, C. (2020) La política del estado de ánimo. Derechos limitados, institucionalidad débil y reconocimiento parcial en las políticas migratorias locales en Santiago de Chile. Perfiles Latinoamericanos.

12 Thayer, L.E. (2021) [Closed Doors and Open Footprints: Undocumented Migration, Precarious Trajectories, and Restrictive Policies in Chile](#). Migraciones Internacionales; Doña-Reveco, C. (2018) [Amid Record Numbers of Arrivals, Chile Turns Rightward on Immigration](#). Migration Policy Institute.

13 UNHCR (2010) [Chile passes landmark domestic legislation on refugees](#).

14 Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes (n.d.) [Migración en Chile portal - Refugio](#).

15 Liberona, N. & López, E. (2018) [Crisis del sistema humanitario en Chile. Refugiadas colombianas deslegitimadas en la frontera norte](#). Estudios atacameños.

This second stage lasted up to the end of Bachelet's second administration (2014-2017) and the rapid growth in arrivals from Venezuela and Haiti that caught her government by surprise. In the absence of a comprehensive immigration policy, this growth gave rise to rumours and media reports alleging that Bachelet had made a secret agreement with the United Nations to receive Haitians and Venezuelans.¹⁶

Stage three (2018 onwards): closing doors

Less than a month after his second term in office began in March 2017, Sebastián Piñera unveiled his “cleaning up the house” migration doctrine. This included a set of policy changes to make immigration more difficult, particularly from Haiti and Venezuela. First, he revived and beefed up the Plan Frontera Norte, a comprehensive initiative his previous administration had launched in 2011 to strengthen security and combat drug trafficking along the northern border, saying it would focus on the “mafias operating in the area” and that it was “key to reducing crime and illegal immigration to Chile”.¹⁷ While focused mostly on Venezuelans and Haitians, this plan also affected Colombian, Peruvian, and Bolivian immigrants.

New visa rules

Second, Piñera unveiled a new set of visas required by people coming from Haiti and Venezuela in a bid to reduce immigration from those countries and to end the common practice of entering Chile on a tourist permit before applying for a temporary visa. These four visas—the democratic responsibility visa for Venezuelans, the family reunification visa for Haitians, and consular tourist visas for both countries—were only available from the Chilean consulate in the country of origin, and rejection rates, especially in the case of Haiti, were high.¹⁸ Those who entered Chile without one of these visas became liable to deportation. Consequently, legal migration from both countries declined significantly.

While the creation of a specific visa regime for Venezuelans might be construed as a step toward accepting more immigrants from that country, in practice, lack of information, the low availability of Venezuelan passports, the cost of the visas, and understaffing of Chilean consulates meant that few Venezuelan applicants were awarded democratic responsibility visas (or any other Chilean visa).¹⁹

The new visa rules for Venezuelans defied a 2018 InterAmerican Court of Human Rights resolution that urged members of the Organization of American States to recognise the refugee status of people fleeing Venezuela, both as individuals and as a group.²⁰ They also went against the Mercosur Residency Agreement, under which residents of member states of the Southern Common Market, including Venezuela, are allowed to live and work visa-free in other member states. Chile, an associate member of Mercosur, has not domesticated this agreement.

By making it harder to enter Chile through legal channels, the new rules had the effect of rerouting immigrants to unauthorised border crossings points and increasing their vulnerability to and dependence on coyotes and smuggling groups.²¹

Piñera's administration continued participating in non-binding regional consultative processes, such as the South American Conference on Migration, and was a founding member of the Quito Process.²² But contrary to expectations, in 2018 his administration decided at the last minute to not sign the Global Compact for Migration—although it did sign the Global Compact on Refugees—claiming that the instrument promoted “illegal” immigration, diminished national sovereignty regarding migration, and established obligations on the Chilean state that went against his migration policy.²³ Piñera was thus seen as allowing domestic politics to trump Chile's international responsibilities.²⁴

Covid-19 and “forced immobility”

Like many countries all over the world Chile closed its borders in early 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This added to an already complex situation by creating “forced immobility”, or what some analysts termed “mobility in immobility.”²⁵ The closures led to a concentration of migrants along the Peru-Chile border, increased unauthorised entries and prevented foreigners in Chile from returning to their countries safely amid growing threats to their health and employment opportunities.²⁶

Legislative revamp

In 2021, Piñera's administration enacted Chile's first new migration law in almost 40 years. The new legislation

16 Such rumours endured: in 2021, far-right presidential candidate José Antonio Kast alleged on the campaign trail that Bachelet had allowed “thousands of illegal immigrants” to enter Chile.

17 Bakit, M. (2018) [Legada de inmigrantes por mar, el nuevo fenómeno que preocupa al Gobierno](#). El Mercurio.

18 Venezuelans were later able to obtain the democratic responsibility visa from any Chilean consulate worldwide.

19 SJM (2022) [Migración en Chile: Aprendizajes y Desafíos Para los Próximos Años](#).

20 Inter American Court of Human Rights (2018) [Resolution 2/18 Forced Migration of Venezuelans](#).

21 Thayer, E. (2021) [Closed Doors and Open Footprints: Undocumented Migration, Precarious Trajectories, and Restrictive Policies in Chile](#). Migraciones Internacionales.

22 Established in 2018, the Quito Process comprises meetings and commitments established among Latin American countries to coordinate responses to the Venezuelan refugee and migrant crisis.

23 Prensa Presidencia (2018) [Presidente Piñera defiende posición de no sumarse al Pacto Mundial para la Migración](#)

24 Doña-Reveco, C. (2018). [El Pacto Global sobre Migraciones ¿qué más podemos decir?](#) La Tercera.

25 Vera Espinoza, M., Zapata, G. & Gandini, L. (2020) [Mobility in immobility: Latin American migrants trapped amid COVID-19](#). Open Democracy.

26 Freir, F. & Jara Castillo, S. (2021) [Human Mobility and Covid-19 in the Andean Region](#). E-International Relations.

uses human rights language but expands government power to deport migrants and limit their protections. It promises to respect migrants' rights "regardless of their migration status" yet curtails movement for those without legal status. Equal benefits are assured, but only for immigrants who have been in Chile for over two years. A court challenge has delayed the law's full enforcement and its implantation. Regulations were only published in February 2022, so it remains to be seen what impact it will have on future immigration and immigrant experiences.²⁷

New government, same stripes

Also in 2021, when Chile was embroiled in interrelated socio-political, public health and economic crises, voters elected a left-wing candidate, Gabriel Boric, as their new president. Even though his campaign took a liberal approach to international migration and promised a regularisation programme,²⁸ since coming to power his government has in fact maintained some of its predecessor's most controversial policies, including deportations and the militarisation of the northern border. Nor did Boric make good on his campaign pledge to ratify the Global Compact for Migration.

During the first semester of 2023, Boric's administration unveiled its own migration policy.²⁹ While described as having a focus on human rights and gender equality—it incorporates programmes on gender violence, family reunification and the protection of immigrant minors—the policy maintains and even reinforces the securitisation tenor of immigration control that has been part of Chile's immigration policy for almost 50 years. Examples of this include the introduction of biometric registration of foreign residents, the creation of a committee to handle deportations of irregular migrants, the broadening of deportation criteria (to include people charged with misdemeanours), the expansion of control zones to 10 kilometres from the border; and the imposition of fines for those who transport undocumented immigrants from border zones.

At the time of writing, Chile's National Congress was debating measures promoted by the Boric administration that would criminalise the irregular entry of anyone ineligible to claim asylum or who comes from a safe third country. The proposals clash with existing refugee laws which state that those seeking asylum are protected from, inter alia, being rejected at the border, being punished for irregular entry, and even from non-refoulement. And they

run counter to Chile's international obligations, notably those under the Refugee Convention.³⁰

Visa conundrums

One of the stated ambitions of Boric's migration policy is to introduce sufficient visa flexibility to meet domestic labour requirements, especially in the agricultural sector, which is facing a shortage of close to 150,000 workers.³¹ But this is another example of where policy objectives run up against the fine print of legislation.³² The 2021 migration law includes two types of visas that could be used for agricultural labourers. One is a seasonal workers' visa, which needs to be requested in the country of origin and signed in the Chilean consulate there. It allows workers to stay in Chile for a maximum of six months per year for a total of five years and does not lead to permanent residency. The second is a visa for border residents that allows people from Bolivia and Peru to work in agriculture in northern Chile. However, farm workers in the centre of the country, where most agriculture takes place, are not from neighbouring countries but from Haiti.³³ Considering the current conditions in Haiti, and the low rate of visa approval for Haitians, agrobusiness and seasonal migrants alike will struggle to benefit from these arrangements. Instead, employers will have to rely on immigrant workers already in Chile—an option that fails to address the labour shortage—and/or go abroad to different countries to hire seasonal workers.³⁴ There is thus a risk of incentivising the hiring of unauthorised immigrants, while increasing migrants' vulnerability to labour abuses, hampering their integration into Chilean society, and fuelling negative attitudes towards them.

Migration in the media

Previous analyses have shown that, depending on the country of origin, the Chilean press has tended to present immigrants as either the source of socio-cultural and economic development or as the culprits of almost every social problem in Chile, categorising them as either "good immigrants" or "bad immigrants". Such portrayals have also evolved over time: while people of German origin are today the quintessential good immigrants, this was not the perception in the late 1800s. Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian immigrants were discriminated against in the early part of the 20th century, but now are seen as important economic and business communities. Peruvian and East Asian immigrants were mostly negatively portrayed in the early 1990s, while today they are all but invisible in the Chilean press.³⁵

27 Doña-Reveco, C. (2021) [Chile's Retooled Migration Law Offers More Restrictions, Less Welcome](#). Migration Policy Institute.

28 Boric, G. (2021) [Plan de Gobierno Aprueba Dignidad 2022 – 2026](#).

29 Servicio Nacional de Migraciones (n.d.) [Política Nacional de Migración y Extranjería](#).

30 [Official Communication](#) sent from the United Nations' Office of the High Commission for Human Rights to the Chilean Government regarding the congressional debates over modifications to Law 21,325, 24 May 2023.

31 Infomigra (2023) [Sector agrícola dialoga con Gobierno por entrega expedita de visas](#).

32 Doña-Reveco, C. (2021) [Chile's Retooled Migration Law Offers More Restrictions, Less Welcome](#). Migration Policy Institute.

33 Micheletti, S. et al. (2019) [Inserción laboral de migrantes en los territorios agrarios de Chile: el caso de la región del Maule](#). Cultura-hombre-sociedad.

34 Servicio Nacional de Migraciones (n.d.) [Política Nacional de Migración y Extranjería](#).

35 Doña-Reveco (2022) op cit; Martínez Alarcón, G., & Doña Reveco, C. (2022) ["¡Estos inmigrantes!" Un análisis de la memoria colectiva de la inmigración europea en la prensa chilena, 1850-1920](#). Périplos: Revista de Estudios sobre Migraciones.

Haitians bear the brunt

The tone of the media's coverage of immigration is often determined by country of origin. Similarly, a given immigrant group's "visibility" is more important than its numerical size. For example, Haitian immigrants—being black and not Spanish speakers in a predominantly mestizo (mixed race) society—have been usually portrayed as embodying the perceived characteristics of their country of origin: poor, violent and backward, regardless of an individual's educational level and economic status. While in the early 2010s the press reported Haitians being welcomed by Chilean society—albeit in a paternalistic and racialised way—more recently Haitians have become overrepresented in negative news articles in comparison to other national groups. They are often used as stereotypes, especially when the more negative aspects of immigration are being discussed.³⁶

Haitians now are portrayed in Chilean news media as the type of visitors who overstayed their welcome and as emblematic of the perceived abuse of tourist permits (discussed above). As immigration from Haiti and other countries increased, news media began highlighting this situation as a form of "gaming the system." The inauguration of direct flights from Port-au-Prince to Santiago by previously unknown airlines and chartered flights helped reinforce this perception.³⁷ Thus, Haitians became the "non-tourists", a concept that quickly became a shorthand for alleged illegality and a justification for Piñera's "clean up the house" doctrine. Haitians have also become the exemplar of integration difficulties, since they are presented as incapable of understanding Chilean laws and customs.³⁸

Changing attitudes to Venezuelans

Warmer reception before 2017

Venezuelan immigrants can be divided between those who arrived before and after 2017. While both groups are part of the Venezuelan displacement associated with the crisis in their home country, there are some important differences between how each is characterised in the press. The first group arrived mostly by plane, benefiting—like Haitians and other foreigners—from their entitlement

to enter Chile as tourists and then request a temporary visa. Unlike Haitians, however, this group was presented as "legal" in the press, as part of a political emigration to which Chile felt compelled to respond in the same way that Venezuela had received thousands of Chilean exiles during Pinochet's dictatorship. These immigrants are described, usually in positive terms, as victims of a dictatorial regime, and were used by right-wing politicians deriding the failures of left-wing governments. Even Piñera, shortly after his second presidential term began, spoke favourably about the possible reception of Venezuelan immigrants.³⁹

Attitudes sour as numbers rise

This positive attitude towards Venezuelan migrants began to change as the numbers of arrivals increased sharply starting in mid-2017. Those then leaving Venezuela amid the country's economic collapse generally had lower levels of education, were from a lower socioeconomic status and tended to travel by land.⁴⁰ Like Haitian immigrants, they have been portrayed as people who are "gaming the system" and as entering, or trying to enter, the country illegally.

The representation of Venezuelans became "bipolar": on one hand they were still the political emigrants of a dictatorial state, on the other they increasingly became associated—despite the attempts of some newspapers—with rising levels of crime, especially after the Estallido Social, a series of massive demonstrations (against the soaring cost of living and growing inequality) and riots that mostly took place between October 2019 and March 2020, first in Santiago before spreading to the rest of the country.⁴¹ Some media reported that Venezuelans were among the instigators of the initial protests; two days after they began the then defence minister presented Piñera with an intelligence report—debunked by recent judicial investigations—which stated that there were 600 Venezuelan agents in Chile "who had entered the country as refugees."⁴²

Piñera's administration also alleged that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was an instigator of the uprising, describing the unrest as payback for Piñera's support for Venezuela's opposition. But although Maduro was vocally supportive of the Chilean protests (and for some South American politicians the revolts in Chile, Colombia

36 Bello Arellano, D. (2023) [Del rechazo a la aceptación: la nacionalidad como rasgo de diferenciación de los inmigrantes en el discurso de opinión en Chile \(2017-2019\)](#). Revista Pueblos y fronteras digital.

37 Vega, F. (2018) [La aerolínea de Mongolia que disparó el aterrizaje de haitianos: en enero llegaron 5 mil](#). Ciper Chile; Cifuentes, G. (2018) [La verdad tras el video de avión sin logo que llegó al aeropuerto de Pudahuel con haitianos](#). Radio Bio-Bio Chile.

38 Bello Arellano, 2023: 20

39 Piñera stated shortly after his inauguration in 2018 that "We will continue to receive Venezuelans in Chile, because we have a duty of solidarity and I never forget that when Chile lost its democracy, Venezuela was very generous with Chileans who were looking for new opportunities." Bustos, A. (2021) [¿Por la boca muere el pez? La solidaridad a migrantes venezolanos que el Gobierno prometió y olvidó por las expulsiones](#). Diario U de Chile.

40 Testa, G. (2019) [Waning welcome: The growing challenges facing mixed migration flows from Venezuela](#). Mixed Migration Centre.

41 Diario Antofagasta (2022) ["Vamos a seguir recibiendo venezolanos en Chile": La invitación de Piñera que terminó con el líder del Tren de Aragua ingresando al país con visa y por paso habilitado](#).

42 Cossio Lopez, H. (2020) [El «Plan Zeta» de Piñera: El informe de la DINE sobre la amenaza extranjera que hizo que el Presidente hablara de guerra](#).

and other countries were part of a larger plan to depose neoliberalism and create Bolivarian revolutions throughout the region) there is no information that supports any direct involvement of the Venezuelan government in the Estallido Social.⁴³ Nevertheless, the allegations, reported uncritically in some newspapers, led new Venezuelan immigrants to be (unfairly) linked to Caracas's purported plans to foment further social unrest in Chile.⁴⁴

The Covid-19 effect

The coronavirus pandemic heightened racist and xenophobic media attacks against immigrants, mostly Haitians and Venezuelans, who had been already constantly covered in the press. Haitian immigrants, who in a previous era had been associated with the spread of HIV in Chile, were reported to be possible sources of Covid-19 contagion as they were more likely to share living spaces. Newspapers also covered the large number of camps formed by immigrants in front and around their embassies in the expectation of repatriation. More sympathetic reporting covered the heightened risk migrants faced of losing their jobs because of the pandemic as well as their role as providers of medical care in public hospitals and deliverers of food and other essential goods.⁴⁵

The hostility continued in 2021 and 2022, leading newspapers to focus their reporting on anti-immigration protests, especially in the north of Chile. Residents and leaders of urban centres in the north criticised the central government for attempting to establish Covid-19 reception areas in their communities, and immigrants were associated with increasing levels of criminality.⁴⁶ This acrimony reached a nadir with the burning of a makeshift immigrant camp in the northern city of Iquique and growing protests in other parts of the country.⁴⁷ At the same time, newspapers also began reporting on a significant increase in the number of immigrants trying to enter Chile through different points of the northern border, especially via Colchane in the highlands next to Bolivia. Newspapers continuously called this a major “crisis” and cited local authorities describing the situation as being “out of control”.⁴⁸ Consequently, more

troops were deployed at the northern border.⁴⁹ The (domestic and international) media's alarmist framing of immigration in the north, and the spurious association between crime and immigration, have continued since Boric's inauguration in March 2022.⁵⁰

Public opinion also hardens

There appears to be a clear correlation in Chile between the extent of negative press coverage of immigration and the hostility of public opinion towards foreign-born residents, which seems to be less influenced by changes in the number of arrivals.

Opinion polls conducted over the past three decades show that Chileans have developed increasingly strong feelings against undocumented immigrants.⁵¹ In recent surveys, more than half of respondents said that the state should prohibit all immigration, and almost half consider that irregular immigration is one of the three main causes of crimes in Chile. Such anti-immigration opinions have become more prevalent and more overt and can be plausibly associated with the country's political, economic and public health crises and with the negative representation of immigrants—mostly Venezuelans, but also Haitians and Colombians—in the Chilean press.⁵² Other destination countries of Venezuela's exodus, such as Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, have a negative attitude towards all immigrants. Chileans, however, are unique in having both a mainly positive attitude towards receiving immigrants from outside Latin America and a predominantly negative attitude towards those from within the region.

43 Dammert, L., & Sazo, D. (2020). [Scapegoats of the 2019 Chilean Riots: From Foreign Intervention to Riff-Raff Involvement](#). SAIS Review of International Affairs.

44 Romo Pontiga, G. (2020) [¿Están llegando venezolanos para un nuevo estallido social en Chile?](#) El Dínamo.

45 Andrade, E. (2020) [Brigada Migrante de Salud: médicos extranjeros para enfrentar la crisis sanitaria](#). Radio Universidad de Chile; Pizarro, J.C. (2020) [Pandemia económica: Migrantes intentan subsistir en medio de la crisis sanitaria](#). Diario El Día.

46 Iquique Vision (2020) [Movilización en Huará por migrantes](#).

47 Deutsche Welle (2021) [“¿Cómo se explica el odio?”: Crónica internacional analiza la marcha antiinmigrante que mostró “el lado más inhumano de Chile.”](#); Menéndez, C. (2021) [Estallido social contra los inmigrantes indocumentados en Iquique](#). Euronews; Menéndez, C. (2021). [Protestas antiinmigración en Chile y choques en Santiago](#). Euronews.

48 BBC (2022) [El inédito bloqueo en el norte de Chile en protesta contra la inseguridad y la crisis migratoria](#).

49 El Mercurio Antofagasta (2021) [Crisis: más de mil inmigrantes ingresan por frontera norte, pese a intervención del Ejército](#).

50 The numerous examples of this trend include: Zuñiga, J. (2022) [Socióloga Carolina Stefani y la crisis migratoria del norte: “El desastre que está dejando este gobierno no es fácil de resolver.”](#), The Clinic; and Sanhueza, A. M. (2022) [El Ejército chileno se despliega en la frontera norte ante la crisis migratoria](#). El País.

51 Findings of various polls can be found at: [Estudio Nacional de Opinión Pública N°46, Diciembre 2003](#); [Estudio Nacional de Opinión Pública N°79, Abril-Mayo 2017](#); [Estudio Nacional de Opinión Pública N°86, Abril-Mayo 2022](#); and [Encuesta CEP N° 89, Junio-Julio 2023](#).

52 Author's analysis of data from [Estudio Nacional de Opinión Pública N°86, Abril-Mayo 2022](#); [Encuesta CEP N° 89, Junio-Julio 2023](#).

Conclusion

Until fairly recently, Chile took a somewhat liberal approach to the entry of foreign-born people, which facilitated the arrival of new immigrants. Chile's participation in regional migration fora was based on the protection and defence of immigrants' human rights. At the same time, regardless of the political leanings of the government in power, the Chilean state opted to use its visa regimes to manage a wide range of arrivals with varying protection needs—some seeking asylum, others better economic opportunities, some both of the above—from countries such as Venezuela, Haiti, Peru, Argentina, and even Global North states such as (former colonial power) Spain and the United States.⁵³

In 2021, the president of the Association of Venezuelans in Chile complained of a “media campaign to blame immigration for all of Chile's structural problems.”⁵⁴ But newspaper coverage and public opinion during this era of “new immigration” to Chile have been very mixed in tone. The recent rapid increase of immigrants from Venezuela and Haiti, however, has brought to light a constant but underlying anti-immigrant sentiment among the public. This sentiment most likely will affect the integration of immigrants, especially immigrant minors, who comprise around a third of schoolchildren in some areas of the country.

This anti-immigrant sentiment is set to play a key role in campaigns ahead of next year's municipal and gubernatorial elections and the 2025 presidential election. Support for the far-right Partido Republicano, led by likely presidential candidate José Antonio Kast, is growing faster than that for any other political party.⁵⁵ The Partido Republicano won the largest number of seats (23) in this year's election for the Constitutional Council, which is tasked with drafting a new basic law for Chile.⁵⁶ Kast and his party have repeatedly signalled their intention to limit immigration, take a more authoritarian approach to fight crime, and restore “traditional moral values”.⁵⁷

The rapid increase of immigration from Venezuela and Haiti since 2017 has influenced the development of more restrictive approaches to immigration policy in Chile. Since becoming an immigration country in the early 1990s, Chile's governments' have struggled to define a comprehensive immigration policy. Regardless of the governments ideology and their intentions, every formal and informal attempt to deal with immigration has been more driven by changes in the (rising) number of immigrants entering the country. Their characteristics,

and the governments' perception of public opinion and actual public opinion compounded by the media shape policy more than careful analysis of the opportunities that immigration might bring to a country like Chile, particularly in the face of significant labour shortages in the country. Lastly, despite President Boric's public calls for a regional response to Venezuelan displacement, Chile's policies seem to be following the example of the Global North's more restrictive approaches while attempting a quick fix for a long-term issue.

53 Doña-Reveco, C. (2018) [Amid Record Numbers of Arrivals, Chile Turns Rightward on Immigration](#). Migration Policy Institute.

54 Paúl, F. (2021) [¿El fin del 'sueño chileno'? los migrantes que luchan por permanecer en un país que les cierra las puertas](#). BBC.

55 Kast won the first round of the 2021 presidential election but lost to Gabriel Boric in the run-off.

56 Another right-wing party, Unidad por Chile, won 16 seats, meaning that the right-wing bloc has a majority large enough to push through its draft of a new constitution.

57 Radio Cooperativa (2023) [Un ministro ad hoc y centros de detención provisorios: Las propuestas de Kast contra la inmigración ilegal](#).