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Chilean Coalition Candidate Lagos Remains Ahead Despite Some Drop in Polls

by LADB Staff

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Socialist Ricardo Lagos, presidential candidate for Chile's governing Concertacion coalition, leads in voter-preference polls, but that lead has diminished in recent weeks. With challenger Joaquin Lavin narrowing Lagos' lead, a runoff is likely. If none of the six presidential candidates wins a majority in the Dec. 12 balloting, the top two vote-getters will compete in a runoff Jan. 16. President Eduardo Frei steps down on March 11.

In the latest voter-preference poll by the Centro de Estudios Publicos (CEP), Lavin, candidate for the right-wing alliance, had 36.7% against 39.2% for Lagos. This poll follows a survey by the Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Contemporanea (CERC) in early October, which gave Lagos 42% of the vote, against 35.4% for Lavin. In that poll, Lavin's popularity had climbed more than 5 percentage points in three months, while Lagos had slipped by 2 points.

In a CEP survey released Nov. 1, at least one-third of respondents said they could not identify with any of the country's three leading political forces the Concertacion, the right-wing opposition, or the Partido Comunista (PC). The pollsters concluded that 37% leaned toward the Concertacion, 20% toward the rightist alliance, and 3% toward the PC.

Unemployment was listed as the most important issue among respondents. Joblessness has almost doubled in recent years and now stands at 11.5%. Chile is experiencing its first recession since the 1982-1983 global oil crisis, the result of the Asian and Brazilian crises and low prices for copper, Chile's most important export.

Analysts say both the increasing unemployment and the apparent weakness of Lagos' campaign have hurt him and make a runoff likely. In his campaign, Lagos has stressed social equality and constitutional reform, two areas in which Frei has been criticized. Lagos has made clear his support for reforming the Constitution, engineered by former dictator Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), saying it is time for a change and for completing the transition to democracy. He said his priorities would be growth with equality for all Chileans, education, health, environment, public security, and decentralization.

Lavin borrows left's issues

Backers of Lagos say his campaign has been thrown off balance by Lavin's embrace of positions normally taken by the left. Lavin, a member of the ultraconservative Catholic organization Opus Dei, has campaigned on grassroots issues such as crime and education and said the Concertacion is no longer relevant. His campaign promises include creating jobs and improving the lives of the poor. "The rich can take care of themselves," said Lavin, campaigning in a poor barrio. "I'm going to fight for the weak." He pledged to help more disadvantaged students go to college, said that

pensions for the elderly would go up, and promised to end the long waiting lines at public-health clinics.

Many conservative politicians and military officers are concerned that Lavin is moving too far to the left. His suggestion that military spending can be cut and his guarded statements on Pinochet have raised questions among the right. In an interview, Lavin said Pinochet's arrest in London was an affront to Chilean sovereignty, but he added that the charges against the general should be handled in Chilean courts like any other case if he is returned to Chile.

The former mayor of Las Condes, an upper-class suburb of Santiago, Lavin has taken advantage of Pinochet's absence to advance moderate positions. With the former dictator under house arrest in London and his closest supporters concentrating on winning his release, Lavin has distanced himself from the military and worked to make converts among the middle and working classes who have become frustrated with the Concertacion.

Part of Lavin's rise in the polls can also be attributed to the refusal of some members of Frei's Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) to back the socialist Lagos as the Concertacion candidate. Economists see little difference between the candidates on economic-policies issues. Both would be expected to continue neoliberal policies, credited for bringing annual growth of about 7% a year during most of the 1990s, until the recession hit late last year. The two candidates released the outline of their economic plans at a seminar attended by more than 1,000 business leaders. Lagos called on the business sector to forget the past and set aside mistrust to unite and face a new era, while Lavin proposed totally restructuring the government.

Lagos outlined the progress made by the governing Concertacion and called on the executives to create a "new strategic alliance" to foster national development. Lavin criticized the Frei administration and said the nation could return to a growth rate of 7% per year and create one million new jobs in the next six years. "Our program is based on three pillars," said Lavin, "a new macroeconomic balance that will stimulate export growth, investments and savings, creating new opportunities for entrepreneurial initiative, and re-engineering the State."

Youth turned off by politics

The number of eligible voters, about 8 million, has fallen since the last election, despite what should have been an increase of more than 200,000 new voters who have not bothered to register. Young potential voters are the most apathetic. In the 1990 plebiscite that began the return to democracy, 18- and-19- year-olds made up 5% of the electorate. That percentage has gradually declined to less than 1% this year.

The percentage of voters between the ages of 20 and 24 went from 15.6% in 1988 to 4.8% this year. Young people express a lack of interest in party politics and they view all parties negatively. Another factor that could affect the outcome of the election is the increase of women voters, who now comprise more than half the electorate. This had led to an effort by all candidates to win the women's vote. Two women are among the six candidates for president: PC candidate Gladys Marin and Sara Larrain, candidate for the ecology movement. [Sources: Notimex, 10/27/99; The Financial Times (London), 10/28/99; Clarin (Argentina), 10/30/99, 11/04/99; Reuters, 11/02-04/99; El Nuevo

Herald (Miami), 11/04/99; Spanish news service EFE, 10/02/99, 10/31/99, 11/02/99, 11/04/99, 11/05/99;
The New York Times, 11/07/99]

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