Chile's Former President Michelle Bachelet Zeroes In on Second Term with Decisive First-Round Win

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Chile’s Former President Michelle Bachelet Zeroes In on Second Term with Decisive First-Round Win

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: Chile
Published: 2013-11-22

Opposition candidate and former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010) cruised to victory in Chile’s Nov. 17 first-round presidential election, scooping up nearly twice as many votes as her closest rival, Evelyn Matthei of the governing Alianza coalition, and sending the rest of the crowded field packing.

Bachelet, leader of the center-left Nueva Mayoría coalition, won nearly 47% of the vote, well ahead of Matthei (25%) but short of the 50% mark needed to win the presidency outright. "We knew the challenge of winning in just one round would be complicated. We gave it our all and came very close to doing it," she told reporters following the Nov. 17 vote.

Third place went to Marco Enríquez-Ominami (10.98%), a progressive former deputy who, despite poll predictions to the contrary, finished narrowly ahead of independent economist Franco Parisi (10.11%). Enríquez-Ominami, just 36 at the time, also finished third in the 2009 first-round presidential election (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2009). The other five candidates participating in Sunday’s contest—Marcel Claude, Alfredo Sfeir, Roxana Miranda, Ricardo Israel, and Tomás Jocelyn-Holt—together netted just over 7% of the vote.

Bachelet, a divorcee and self-proclaimed agnostic, made history eight years ago when she beat current President Sebastián Piñera to become Chile’s first female head of state (NotiSur, Jan. 20, 2006). She had been hoping to make history again by becoming the first presidential candidate since Eduardo Frei, in 1993, to win election in just a single round. The popular ex-president failed in that bid—mostly because of the record number of participants in the contest—but is still the odds-on favorite to win come Dec. 15, when she and Matthei go head-to-head in the second-round runoff.

A victory over Matthei would make Bachelet the first post-dictatorship president to earn a second term in office. Bachelet’s popular predecessor, President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), contemplated a second run for office but—for reasons never made public—eventually opted against it. Ex-President Frei (1994-2000) tried but failed to win his old job back in the last election, losing to Piñera in a 2010 runoff (NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2010). Chilean presidents are allowed to serve multiple terms but barred from seeking immediate reelection.

Shuffling the deck
Bachelet, a member of the Partido Socialista (PS), left office in early 2010 with an 80% approval rating. For the next couple of years, however, she carefully kept her distance from Chilean politics, taking up residence in New York City—where she served as head of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)—and keeping press contact to a minimum. The ex-president put an end to her splendid isolation this past March, coupling her dramatic return to Chile with a long-awaited announcement that, yes, she would again run for office (NotiSur, April 19, 2013). She has enjoyed undisputed front-runner status ever since.
Chile’s conservative Alianza, a partnership between the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN) and hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), has struggled to come up with a viable challenger. Early on, many in the coalition rallied around charismatic former business executive Laurence Golborne, who held several ministerial posts under President Piñera. But, after being linked to a pair of financial scandals, Golborne’s once-shining political star suddenly went dim (NotiSur, May 10, 2013). The UDI opted instead for Pablo Longueira, a party veteran serving at the time as Piñera’s economy minister. To the surprise of many observers, Longueira beat the RN’s preferred candidate, fellow Cabinet minister Andrés Allamand, in an intracoalition primary (NotiSur, July 12, 2013). Soon afterward, however, Longueira dropped out of the race, citing depression (NotiSur, Aug. 9, 2013).

Forced back to the proverbial drawing board, the Alianza chose yet another Cabinet member, Labor Minister Matthei, who received only grudging support from the RN and—by the time her candidacy was made official—had less than three months left to mount her campaign. Many questioned if she would even make it past the first round of voting. Polls published as recently as last month had her running neck and neck with Parisi, who was making steady gains until Matthei went on the attack, accusing the independent candidate of financial mismanagement. Following his disappointing fourth-place finish in Sunday’s vote, Parisi fired back at his Alianza rival. "Along the way we encountered the worst kind of politics," he told reporters. "Señora Matthei is a really, really bad person."

**Familiar foes**

Interestingly, the two presidential finalists have a shared personal history dating back to the 1950s, when they were neighbors and schoolmates on an Air Force base in northern Chile. The candidates’ fathers—Gen. Alberto Bachelet and Fernando Matthei Aubel, a colonel at the time—were colleagues and friends. History would eventually divide the two families. Following the 1973 military coup that toppled President Salvador Allende (1970-1973), Alberto Bachelet—an ally of the deposed president—was imprisoned. He died in early 1974 while being held at the Academia de Guerra de la Aviación (AGA) in Santiago, which military authorities were using as a detention and torture center. Matthei Aubel had been assigned command of the AGA several weeks earlier. Dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) later appointed him health minister.

Evelyn Matthei began her political career with the RN but later switched to the more conservative UDI. Her confrontational political style contrasts sharply with the soft-spoken approach preferred by Bachelet, who governed as a moderate during her first term in office but has since swung left in an effort to better align herself with civil society groups that have protested en masse in recent years demanding major political and educational reforms.

Despite losing the first round by nearly 22 percentage points, Matthei insists she still has a chance. "There are huge differences separating us from the left, and those [differences] will come to light in the next 30 days," she told supporters Sunday night. "They say everything needs to be knocked down, that we need to rebuild from scratch, starting with a new Constitution. We believe we’ve already built a solid country, one that just needs to be improved."

Matthei’s optimism aside, most analysts view Bachelet’s return to power as almost a foregone conclusion. More difficult to predict, they say, is what will happen after she takes office. Expectations are high, particularly among students and other civil society players curious to know...
when—or if—Bachelet will make good on the major reforms she promised. Many on the left want her to act, and act fast. The political right, in the meantime, will no doubt want to block her efforts.

The "student gang"

Much of what the next president can or cannot do will depend on the climate in Congress. In parliamentary elections, also held Nov. 17, Bachelet’s Nueva Mayoría gained several seats in both the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. The center-left coalition fell short, however, of the landslide victory that—assuming Bachelet wins the presidency—would have given her the two-thirds majority required to pass major constitutional reforms.

The Nueva Mayoría—as the opposition Concertación coalition, now with support from the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh), has been re christened—extended its majority in the Senate by a single seat and now has a 21 to 16 advantage over the Alianza. It fared even better in the lower house, picking up 10 seats.

The elections were particularly costly for the UDI, which lost nine deputy seats as well as a handful of key Senate races. Both Golborne and Pablo Zalaquett, a former Santiago mayor, lost to RN rivals. The once powerful Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC), the opposition bloc’s most centrist member, also suffered a setback, losing three of its nine Senate seats.

Perhaps the day’s biggest winners were what some in the press have already dubbed the banda estudiantil (student gang). Several of the student leaders who emerged in recent years from Chile’s influential education-reform movement tested their luck in the Nov. 17 elections. Four of the young deputy candidates—Giorgio Jackson, Gabriel Boric, Karol Cariola, and Camila Vallejo—came out victorious.

"The thing that resonates most is the triumph of the so-called social-movement representatives," said political analyst Cristóbal Bellolio. "The faces of discontent, of indignation, the ones who put the Piñera government in check ... they’re the real winners today."

-- End --