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Chile's Presidential Race Heads to Wide-Open Final Round

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Billionaire businessman and former head of state Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) took the opening round of Chile's crowded presidential election, but not by the slam-dunk margin many pundits predicted. The result sets the stage for a wide-open runoff on Dec. 17 against second-place finisher Alejandro Guillier. An independent senator and former television newscaster, Guillier is a relative newcomer to the political world, but he has a chance, nevertheless, to upset the more experienced conservative—provided he can unite the divided left.

The placement of the candidates played out more or less as predicted, with Piñera (36.6%), Guillier (22.7%), and journalist Beatriz Sánchez (20.3%) of the upstart leftist coalition Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA) securing the top three spots in the Nov. 19 contest. But the vote percentages the candidates received varied significantly from pre-election poll numbers and challenge the notion that Piñera is a "prohibitive favorite," as a recent Los Angeles Times article described him.

Analysts suggested for months that a 40% vote haul in the first round would give Piñera enough of a cushion to make victory in next month's runoff highly probable, and most pollsters predicted he would reach that magic number. The Centro de Estudios Públicos (Center of Public Studies, CEP), Chile's most prestigious polling firm, projected Piñera's first-round finish at 44%, as did the final CERC-MORI poll (Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Contemporánea/Market & Opinion Research International). Another research firm, CADEM, put the number even higher, at 45%.

The actual result for Piñera was well below those projections. The opposite was true for the FA's Sánchez. The CEP expected her to win just 8% of the vote. Instead she took more than a fifth of all votes and came close to sneaking past Guillier for a chance to face Piñera directly in the second round, according to the Servicio Electoral de Chile (SERVEL), the country's electoral authority. The discrepancy prompted some feisty remarks from the FA candidate in her post-election speech in Santiago, the Chilean capital.

"Where is this oracle, the CEP, erasing us from the map? Where are the other polls that said we didn't have a chance?" Sánchez asked. "They said we were out of it. But that was false. We were in it!"

The leading pollsters also missed the mark on fourth-place finisher José Antonio Kast, a conservative congressman and former member of the hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (Independent Democratic Union, UDI) party. The CEP predicted that the late-entry candidate would win just 1.7% of the vote. Instead he finished with nearly 8%, ahead of Carolina Goic (5.9%) of the centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party, PDC) and Marco Enríquez-Ominami (5.7%) of the Partido Progresista (Progressive Party, PRO). Two other candidates—leftists Eduardo Artés and Alejandro Navarro—won just 0.9% of the vote between them.

Scrambling for votes

Piñera hopes to pick up the support of Kast voters in the presidential runoff, his third since 2006. Guillier, on the other hand, will be wooing backers of the various left-wing candidates, though just how much enthusiasm he can generate among those voters remains to be seen.

Technically an independent, the former newscaster went into the Nov. 19 election with the endorsement of nearly all the party groups in President Michelle Bachelet's center-left Nueva Mayoría (New Majority, NM) coalition. Only the PDC declined, choosing to run its own candidate, Goic, instead ([NotiSur, June 16, 2017](#)). But after her disappointing finish, the PDC senator—who promptly resigned as party president—gestured support for Guillier by saying it will be his responsibility “to lead the progressive project” against the “right-wing option represented by Sebastián Piñera.”

Guillier also received endorsements from former president Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), who launched an early bid for reelection but dropped out of the race in April ([NotiSur, July 21, 2017](#)), and from sixth-place finisher Enríquez-Ominami, who has run for president in each of the past three elections, faring progressively worse each time.

“Right now, it's [Guillier's] time,” Enríquez-Ominami said.

The biggest question, though, is what happens with the 20% of voters who opted for Sánchez in the first round. Without at least a good portion of FA supporters, analysts agree, Guillier will be hard pressed to win. In her Nov. 19 speech, Sánchez refrained from making any kind of overt endorsement of Guillier, saying only that she wants to “initiate a conversation” regarding the next step in the process. But she also made it clear that she strongly opposes Piñera, calling his candidacy “a step backward.”

Even if Sánchez does eventually back Guillier, it's unclear how many of her supporters—people who are keen for an alternative to the two-coalition status quo that has dominated Chilean politics since the return of democracy in 1990—will follow suit.

Another question mark is whether Piñera will be able to siphon off a significant chunk of PDC voters. The centrist party was one of the pillars of the four-party Concertación coalition that governed the country for two decades after dictator Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) left power. But it has become increasingly isolated since Bachelet expanded the coalition leftward—and renamed it the NM—by incorporating the Partido Comunista de Chile (Chilean Communist Party, PCCh) and other left-wing groups. At least some of the PDC's traditional voters, as a result, are up for grabs, analysts suspect.

Abstention and articulation

The other unknown factor, of course, is voter participation. The Piñera and Guillier campaign teams can make all the pre-runoff calculations they want, but none of it matters if people don't vote. Abstention rates have grown significantly, especially since 2012, when the country abandoned obligatory voting. For last year's municipal elections, just 35% of eligible voters participated, a post-dictatorship low ([NotiSur, Dec. 2, 2016](#)). Turnout was higher for the Nov. 19 general election—when voters also elected a new Congress—but was still low: Only about 46% of eligible voters showed up, according to SERVEL.

Little wonder that President Bachelet, in what analysts described as a surprisingly political post-election speech, included a get-out-the-vote plea.

“Five out of every 10 of our compatriots didn’t vote [in the first round],” she lamented. “We need all the voices, all the viewpoints to decide on the path our nation takes.” The outgoing president also took the opportunity to defend her progressive policy record as the right recipe for the country.

“For decades,” she said, “progressivism is what has allowed Chile to move forward socially and in terms of freedoms, rights, respect, modernization, and sustainable growth.”

Bachelet will soon complete her second, non-consecutive term after first holding office from 2006 until 2010. Wildly popular at the conclusion of her initial term, she used that political capital to steamroll back into power in 2014 and push through a quick succession of reforms. Within a year, however, her approval rating began to plummet, in part because of an embarrassing corruption scandal involving her son and daughter-in-law, but also due to slowed economic growth numbers ([NotiSur, April 24, 2015](#)).

Piñera has sought to capitalize on the president’s poor numbers, blaming the economic slowdown on what he insists was an overly ambitious reform push, and promising a return to the more prosperous days of Chile’s not-so-distant past. Bachelet’s struggles, in that sense, have widely been interpreted as a boost for the right and a liability for the left. But in light of the general election, some analysts are now shifting the narrative, saying that the results—especially the unexpected surge of Sánchez and the FA—show to a certain degree that Bachelet was right all along: that the Chilean public, in fact, still has an appetite for progressive reform.

“The result of the election, I believe, is unequivocal: The left is in the majority,” Universidad de Chile law professor Fernando Atria told the independent news site *El Mostrador*. “The problem is that this left-wing majority isn’t well articulated. It has an articulation deficit. But it doesn’t lack popular support.”

Congressional overhaul

The elections were also an opportunity to showcase two of President Bachelet’s signature reforms: the extension of the vote to finally include Chileans residing abroad, and the elimination of the country’s long-entrenched binomial majoritarian system for electing members of Congress.

The binomial system was a legacy of the Pinochet regime that artificially fostered political parity in the legislature by making it extremely difficult for a single political coalition to control both seats in a given voting district ([NotiSur, Feb. 10, 2012](#)). Instead the seats tended to be split, with one going to the top vote-getter overall and the second going to the top vote-getter from the opposing coalition, even if he or she finished third in actual number of votes. Historically, the unusual system favored the right, which was understandably loath to do away with it and had the numbers in Congress (due in large part to those rules) to resist reform.

With the healthy majorities she won in 2013, Bachelet was finally able to scrap the system— an historic feat. As part of her reform, she also expanded the number of seats in the Senate from 38 to 50, and in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Congress, from 120 to 155 ([NotiSur, Feb. 13, 2015](#)). The Nov. 19 election was the first to incorporate the new rules, and the results—with regards to political plurality—were immediate, albeit at the expense, in some regards, of Bachelet’s own coalition.

In the Senate, NM stalwarts such as Andrés Zaldívar and Ignacio Walker of the PDC and Camilo Escalona of the Partido Socialista (Socialist Party, PS) lost after years in office. The FA, in contrast, will have its first ever senator: 39-year-old Juan Ignacio Latorre, one of 12 new faces joining the upper house. The FA did even better in the Chamber of Deputies, upping the number of seats it controls from three to 21. Overall, more than half the members in the Chamber are new to the job. Female representation will also increase, from 16% to 23%.

“Today we know that Chile wants to keep advancing,” Bachelet said in her speech after polls closed. “That’s what the citizens demand, that’s what they’ve said with their votes, and we know that it’s possible. For that, we need unity from among all those who want the transformations and progress Chile requires.”

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