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Confounding Experts, a Familiar Face Returns to Power in Chile

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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In early 2006, when the race for the presidency resulted in a runoff between billionaire businessman Sebastián Piñera, a conservative, and Michelle Bachelet, of the center-left Partido Socialista (Socialist Party, PS), little did voters know just how thoroughly the two figures would dominate Chile's political landscape over the next dozen years and counting.

In that contest—the first and only time the two heavyweights would go head-to-head—Bachelet came out on top, earning herself a place in history as the country's first female head of state ([NotiSur, Jan. 20, 2006](#)). But four years later, with Bachelet barred by term-limit rules from seeking immediate reelection, it was Piñera who made history, beating former president Eduardo Frei (1994-2000) to become the first rightist leader of Chile since democracy was restored in 1990 ([NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2010](#)). Not to be outdone, Bachelet stormed her way back into the presidency in 2014, this time with an ambitious reform agenda and a comfortable majority in Congress ([NotiSur, Feb. 21, 2014](#)). Now, though, the two-time president is preparing, once again, to cede power to Piñera, who secured his own second term with a surprisingly comfortable win (54.6% versus 45.4%) over Sen. Alejandro Guillier in Chile's Dec. 17 runoff election.

The runoff result left analysts scratching their heads, especially as it came in the wake of a first-round contest, held Nov. 19, in which Piñera fared significantly worse than anticipated (he finished first, but with only 36.6% of the vote), and a far-left candidate, radio journalist Beatriz Sánchez of the upstart Frente Amplio coalition (Broad Front, FA), greatly exceeded expectations ([NotiSur, Dec. 1, 2017](#)). Adding to the confusion are the surveys that for years have suggested that Chileans are fed up with the country's principal political parties and their aging leadership cadre. And yet, given the choice between Piñera and Guillier, a relative newcomer to politics, voters opted once again for a familiar face.

The question of why or how Piñera secured his second term in power—especially given the serious popularity problems he experienced during his first stint in office (2010-2014)—is very much up for debate. Certainly, though, Chile's anemic economic growth numbers over the past few years played a role, as did Bachelet's poor, second-term approval ratings, which nosedived beginning in early 2015 after her son and daughter-in-law were implicated in an embarrassing corruption scandal ([NotiSur, April 24, 2015](#)).

In 2016, the copper-dependent economy grew just 1.6%, down from 2.3% in 2015, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). During most of Piñera's time as president, in contrast, annual growth numbers were above 5%. Piñera and his allies on the political right blame Bachelet and her reform agenda for the downturn, saying it scared off investors. The message was echoed by business leaders and in the mainstream press, and recent stock market fluctuations only added to the impression. After the first-round vote, in which Piñera failed to achieve the margin polls had predicted, stocks in Chile tumbled. After his Dec. 17 victory, they soared.

For many voters, in other words, Piñera's promise to get the economy rolling again—to get things back to the way they were during his first term as president—was immensely appealing. And who better to fulfill that promise, his supporters insisted, than a proven businessman and Harvard-trained economist with an estimated net worth (according to the US business magazine *Forbes*) of US\$2.7 billion?

"I voted for him for the economy," José Oyaneder, a 54-year-old salesman, told the Reuters news agency. "When he was president, my [business] was quite good, and I hope this time it's the same."

Lasting divisions

The once and future president also benefited, no doubt, from deep divisions on the political left. Bachelet's multi-party coalition, Nueva Mayoría (New Majority, NM), initially promised to hold a primary and thus present a consensus candidate in the first round of the election. Internal disagreements, however, prompted the member parties to forgo the primary plan. The centrist Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party, PDC), as a result, presented its own candidate, Sen. Carolina Goic, while the coalition's other factions backed Guillier.

Complicating matters was the rise of the FA, which came together only a year ago but has already made a huge mark on Chilean politics. Unlike the NM, the far-left coalition did hold a primary, selecting Sánchez, who generated significant buzz from the start and in many ways upstaged Guillier in the first round of voting. Sánchez finished third, winning 20.3% of the vote despite polls predicting she wouldn't even reach double figures. Guillier took 22.7%. Goic finished with nearly 5.9%, and another left-leaning candidate, Marco Enríquez-Ominami, won 5.7%. Two other leftists took less than 1% of the vote between them.

Altogether, the various center-left and left-wing candidates drew more than 55% of the vote, prompting pundits to declare that the race—which Piñera had been leading for months, according to poll numbers—was suddenly too close to call. In the end, though, the divisions proved decisive as Guillier, in the four weeks between the first and second rounds of the election, proved unable to reassemble enough of the left's fragmented pieces to win a majority. More specifically, the result showed that the FA votes "don't transfer," as Jennifer Pribble, an associate professor of political science and international studies at the University of Richmond, and Juan Pablo Luna, a political science professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, in Santiago, wrote in an analysis for *The Washington Post*.

"That's in part because Broad Front parties and movements are deeply anti-establishment," the authors noted. "The organizations emerged, in part, because activists were frustrated with the traditional center-left parties' oligarchic tendencies. Any cooperation with the New Majority then, would undermine the Broad Front's message and credibility with its base, endangering the young coalition's consolidation."

Piñera, in contrast, did manage to bring votes together when it mattered most. In the runoff, he upped his haul from approximately 2.4 million votes in the first round to almost 3.8 million, presumably by attracting the bulk of people who voted for far-right candidate José Antonio Kast, the fourth-place finisher on Nov. 19 with nearly 8% of the vote, as well as some moderates who normally side with the NM but were perhaps frightened off by Guillier's last-minute overtures to the far-left FA.

“To some extent, then, the success of the right—and the new conditions under which it will govern—should be read as a direct reflection of the rise of Frente Amplio’s new left,” Marianne González Le Saux, a Ph.D. candidate in history at Columbia University in New York and adjunct professor of legal history at Alberto Hurtado University in Santiago, suggested in a recent article for the non-profit organization and online news magazine North American Congress in Latin America (NACLA).

Congress and la calle

Having beaten Guillier soundly—by more than nine percentage points—Piñera can reasonably claim to have a “new majority” of his own. He’ll also be in the favorable position of facing a fragmented opposition. Still, it remains to be seen how much momentum his mandate will really allow, especially given the complicated scenario that awaits him when Chile’s new-look Congress convenes in March.

One of Bachelet’s most significant reforms was to increase the number of seats in Congress and replace Chile’s much-maligned but long-entrenched binomial majoritarian rules for electing members of Congress with a more representative system (NotiCen, Feb. 13, 2015). The old system—a legacy of the Gen. Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990)—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).

Last year’s parliamentary elections—held Nov. 19, the same day as the first round of the presidential contest—were the first to incorporate the new rules, and the impact was clear. The new Congress is significantly younger, more politically diverse, and with greater female representation than its predecessor.

The lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, will now have 155 seats, up from 120. Of those, Piñera’s coalition, Chile Vamos (Let’s Go Chile), will have the largest representation, with 71 deputies, or 46%. But it won’t have a simple majority and will thus be forced to negotiate not only with the NM, which will have 57 seats (36%), but also the ascendant FA, which upped its representation from three seats to 20. Piñera will face an even more difficult scenario in the 38-member Senate, where Chile Vamos has two fewer seats (19 versus 21) than the NM. The FA, for its part, will have one seat, its first.

If history is a guide, Piñera could also face stiff opposition in la calle (the street). During his first term, student leaders—several of whom are now representatives in Congress—organized a series of massive street protests that pummeled the president’s approval numbers and, in many ways, co-opted his agenda (NotiSur, July 22, 2011, and Aug. 19, 2011). Allies of the conservative businessman are already trying to offset the possibility of a repeat scenario.

“It doesn’t need to be that way,” Andrés Chadwick, a key Cabinet member during Piñera’s first term, told reporters on Election Day. “The street isn’t Chile.”

In the meantime, though, groups like the Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile (Confederation of Chilean Students, CONFECH) are preparing to mobilize once again.

Piñera’s reelection is “the worst scenario,” CONFECH spokesperson Alfonso Mohor told the Chilean business paper Pulso. “Effectively, social unrest will be one of the characteristics that mark the year 2018.”

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