

The Return of Chile's Left

Por Laura Burzywoda · 13/12/2017

Recent elections in Chile offer hope that the country's neoliberal consensus will soon shatter

chile

Beatriz Sánchez, pictured here receiving the Raquel Correa award on June 23, 2016, was the Frente Amplio's presidential candidate, receiving one-fifth of the vote.

By René Rojas, [Jacobin](#)

Some might find the results of Chile's recent presidential and congressional elections discouraging. In many ways, the vote resembled an American election: general disgust with the political class depressed turnout to under 50 percent, the ballot stifled energy for continued mass mobilizations, and key sectors of the Left chose a lesser-evil strategy in hopes of blocking the hard right's return to power.

The parallels to the United States are not mere coincidence. They reflect declining popular militancy as well as elite domination of politics. The analogy, however, ends there.

The results were momentous. For the first time in nearly fifty years, genuine left, popular forces reestablished themselves on the electoral landscape, threatening the power of the bipartisan duopoly that has dominated Chile's post-[Pinochet](#) democracy.

Of course, things could have been even better. Had the Communist Party (PCC) thrown its support behind the infant Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA), right-wing billionaire and former president Sebastián Piñera would be facing left candidate Beatriz Sánchez in the upcoming runoff rather than soporific centrist Alejandro Guillier.

Communist shortsightedness notwithstanding, the election represents a watershed for Chilean politics, breaking through the elite bipartisanship that had successfully contained demands from below since 1990.

The Historic

The Pinochet dictatorship established Chile's currently disintegrating partisan and electoral institutions. And, since the return to democracy, the country's political class has defended them, hoping to permanently forestall working-class challenges.

By the late 1950s, Chile's electoral system was characterized by a "three-thirds" pattern. The Left (Allende's coalitions anchored in the labor movement and the Communist and Socialist Parties), the center (the go-it-alone modernizing Christian Democrats [CD] founded in 1957), and the old, hard right (represented by oligarchic parties that fused into the National Party [NP]) roughly split the vote in three.

Unless two of these groups formed an alliance — as when, under the threat of an ascendant anticapitalist movement, the NP backed the CD in 1964 to block Salvador Allende's victory — no political force could win even a decisive plurality. When Allende was finally elected in 1970, it was with only 36 percent of the vote.

Though he came close, his inability to secure a majority opened the door for the center-right elite alliance that ushered in the devastating 1973 [coup](#).

“Moderates” saw this as evidence of Chile’s electoral institutions’ flaws, arguing that they produce high-stakes fragmentation that inevitably creates extra-institutional conflict. They have since endorsed the quasi-winner-take-all system that Pinochet’s authoritarian constitution enshrined and that survives largely intact.

Proponents argue that, to avoid the instability of the 1960s and 1970s, Chile needed electoral rules promoting coalition building and guaranteeing voting majorities. When the return to democracy was negotiated in the late 1980s, all mainstream parties, including the refashioned Socialist Party (SP) and its offshoots, accepted the new rules. After all, the alliance Allende’s former party built with the CDs gave the socialists access to power and all the spoils of “responsible” governance.

This institutionalist fix disempowered popular forces. The first-two-past-the-post system squeezed out the Communists and cut off the campaigns they mobilized in opposition to the dictatorship and its radical free market policies. In short, the commitment to stable political institutions represented an acceptance of the inviolability of oligarchic rule.

Some observers attribute this year’s breakthrough to SP president [Michelle Bachelet’s](#) electoral reform, but they are overstating the effects of her modest changes.

In many ways, the reforms were designed to shore up centrist power. The new apportionment system formally follows the D’Hondt model, which divides congressional seats according to average vote tallies and thereby, at least in the

theory, allows for more third party representation. But the legislation spread its newly created parliamentary seats in ways that could maintain high thresholds for meaningful representation. Were it not for the collapse of partisan legitimacy, the center-left and center-right coalitions might have once again dominated congress.

But these formations began losing their hold on voters well before the electoral reforms, as a [resurgence of mass movements](#) rocked the post-authoritarian party system. If anything, Bachelet's legislation was a concession — one that didn't go nearly far enough — to the mobilizations that carried a handful of radical student activists to Congress in 2013, including telegenic young Communist Camila Vallejo.

Along with educational and tax reforms, Bachelet's party promised the electoral changes to the newly mobilized sectors — and the Communist Party in particular — in exchange for their support.

In 2013, the PCC emerged from the neoliberal regime's wilderness and joined the CD and SP-led Concertación coalition. After losing to the center-right for the first time since re-democratization in 2010, this expanded formation — now minted New Majority (NM) — allowed the center-left to reclaim power.

Party oligarchs saw the Communist seal of approval as a way to legitimize a business-endorsed reform package in the eyes of the discontented sectors the PCC had helped lead. In so doing, however, it drove away an important chunk of Christian Democrats.

Communist voters and the party's improved standing — thanks to its key role in the mass student and the revitalized miners' movements — helped push Bachelet back into the presidency in 2013. But the maneuver fractured the old Concertación and failed to contain rising discontent.

The pro-capital reforms, along with a string of corruption scandals, provided new evidence that this “progressive” coalition, Communists and all, governed in defense of the elites rather than for the touted New Majority. The independent left thus managed to build on its small but influential parliamentary presence, extend its support in key sectors of the revitalized working class, and gain experience in local government.

Distancing themselves from the Communist endorsement of Bachelet’s agenda, congressional representatives and key Frente Amplio figures Gabriel Boric and Giorgio Jackson highlighted the reforms’ shortcomings.

The comparison between Jackson and Vallejo is telling: whereas the latter stuck steadfastly with her party’s alliance, the former publicly broke with the New Majority and insisted on the movement’s original demands, winning enormous grassroots credibility for his party and its radical allies.

From their pulpits, Jackson and Boric mentored a new generation of public school educators, who, having participated in the student mobilizations, went on to dispute the ineffectual Communist leadership of their union. Jackson’s and Boric’s consistent opposition to Bachelet’s market-friendly reforms lent political cover and programmatic coherence to an emerging mass movement against Chile’s privatized pensions. Finally, after a successful grassroots campaign, a local coalition successfully elected Izquierda Autónoma founding member and former student leader Jorge Sharp as mayor of Valparaíso, the country’s third largest city.

From these positions of power, the new independent left accomplished two aims. First, it spread its emancipatory ideals alongside a concrete social-democratic program based on a critique of Chilean democracy’s exclusionary nature. New demands arose from parliament, from student federations, from dissident labor

caucuses, and from movements for the decommodification of social provisions, eventually turning into a platform that calls for full public education, universal health care and social security, more aggressive taxation of the wealthy, and sector-wide collective bargaining rights.

Second, the new left began uniting radical and progressive opposition groupings. These included age-old green and humanist opposition as well as Nueva Democracia, founded by former Communist Cristián Cuevas, who tired of his old party's support for the neoliberal center-left. Though bringing together over a dozen still relatively precarious organizations produced its own tensions, the anti-neoliberal Frente Amplio arrived in January 2017.

The Front aimed to win a solid foothold in national elections and build an axis around which poor people's groups and a revitalized labor movement could more formally coalesce. The results surpassed what even their most hopeful supporters expected.

Its presidential candidate, former independent radio host Beatriz Sánchez, won one-fifth of all valid votes. Her 1.34 million far exceeded what any left candidate has claimed since the return to democracy. Iconic Communist figure Gladys Marín received only 225,000 total votes in 1999; ten years later, Jorge Arrate won 433,000 votes; Sánchez more than tripled his impressive results. Most important, however, she fell only two points — just 150,000 votes — short of edging out the New Majority's Guillier for a spot in next month's runoff.

The FA's success also appears in its parliamentary showing, where it won twenty seats in the lower house. To put this number in perspective, the Front has seven more representatives than the crumbling CDs and two more than Bachelet's PS, two pillars of the post-authoritarian regime.

In a number of central, urban districts, the FA claimed the second-highest vote share. In an important middle-class Santiago district, it gained three of the eight posts up for grabs. In Valparaíso as well as in Santiago's working-class Estación Central, it elected two members to congress.

Interestingly, the Communists only secured one seat from the latter district and none from the former, though the party had enjoyed a historical presence in both. In fact, the PCC only matched the FA's seats in one working-class Santiago district, and even there, it took just 15.5 percent to the Front's 23 percent.

The 20 percent cast for the Frente Amplio is simply unprecedented. While other third parties have experienced success in recent elections, this is the first time since the dictatorship that an alliance rooted in mass mobilization and calling for egalitarian reforms achieved this level of public support. Considering that [Allende](#) only won 5 percent in his first, 1952 run, this result looks more like the 1958 contest, when he won 28 percent and the working class reached the doorstep of state power.

While we have not returned to the three-thirds arrangement and the FA does not come close to the Allende front's militancy, organization, or ideological development, one thing is inescapable: the two-headed oligarchic and neoliberal party system is in irreversible decline, and non-elite groups are once again fighting for power at the national level.

The Inept

The New Majority was not alone in misreading the general mood and actual balance of forces. All major polls overstated support for Piñera and underestimated

Sánchez. Though the Front [itself](#) “never expected such positive results,” pollsters seemed to conspire in their dismissal of the party’s ability to connect with voters.

CADEM, perhaps the country’s most prestigious survey, essentially ruled Sánchez out, predicting that Piñera might win the first round outright. [Its polls](#) had support for Sánchez free-falling from 26 percent in July to a mere 12 percent by October; Piñera’s tendency over the same period, according to these professionals, went in the opposite direction, growing from 38 to 45 percent.

Chile’s other top polling firm, CEP, projected an even greater distance between the candidates with [only](#) 8.5 percent of decided voters allegedly supporting Sánchez.

Of course, just as they did in the United States, pollsters claimed to have misinterpreted undecided voters’ inclinations and to have missed “[hidden voters](#).” But what they really ignored as they built pro-business [biases](#) into their methods to promote the interest of corporate sponsors was Chile’s growing frustration and defiance.

The experts’ myopia is startling yet unsurprising. As [Sánchez put](#) it, finally letting loose against public-opinion shapers who consistently demeaned her and her party, “all these columnists who fill up pages in newspapers have no idea what happens, they have no clue about the real Chile.”

If we might expect pollsters’ and journalists’ internalization of elite culture and interests, we can’t say the same of the Communists. The fact that they linked their fortune to the crumbling foundation of Chile’s neoliberal order is nothing short of astonishing.

Already in mid-2013, when the PCC betrayed the student movement and allied with Concertación, the center-left coalition had less than 15 percent public approval.

This time around, with the Guillier campaign already underway, approval for NM fell to half that paltry figure. Their delusion of forming a new democratic, reform majority within the dominant bipartisan regime is matched only their ability to ignore the potential for genuine realignment represented by the FA and its constituent movements.

After decades of marginalization, the PCC saw the invitation to join the center-left coalition as a long-overdue seat at the table. It hoped it could use its New Majority membership to promote the left-most features of Bachelet's program. Trading its former inconsequence for a visible national platform, it believed it could provide the extra push needed to permanently defeat Pinochet's radical pro-market legacy, all while holding Bachelet to her campaign promises by "pressuring from inside."

But the party didn't predict that, faced with opposition from Piñera's center-right coalition, it would inevitably find itself defending the most watered-down versions of the reform package. In the end, the PCC failed to recognize that the Concertación was no vehicle for defeating neoliberalism. As manager of the existing order, the Concertación, and later New Majority, represented mainstays of the very regime that must be overturned to defeat neoliberalism in Chile.

That said, Communist entrenchment in the center-left coalition has produced undeniable returns. In addition to getting the party's message through a media blockade, it expanded its congressional presence. But the eight seats it won last week — more than doubling its caucus — are only two-fifths of those the Front won.

Had they been unrestrained by their party's alliance, Communist candidates could have galvanized popular sentiments and done even better. And had the PCC broken with NM, its support for FA would have delivered an even stronger blow to the neoliberal duopoly.

The Uncertain

These watershed elections introduce promising unpredictability to Chilean politics, especially on the Left. Support for the Frente Amplio could open new paths for other left forces that have felt compelled to remain in Nueva Mayoría as the only available option. The Front's immediate moves will be decisive.

Though the PCC is unlikely to follow the example of Cuevas, its bases may do so. There are encouraging signs that miners, for instance, will continue to break with Communist leadership and pursue independent radical local leadership and tactics. Partisan reconfigurations are more likely among the Socialists. The FA's viability may splinter Allende's party, freeing sections from the dominance of its neoliberal leadership.

The Frente Amplio's next steps remain unclear, but its initial signals are promising. Now at the center of Chilean politics, the FA must decide what to do in the runoff election. Two weeks ago, Piñera seemed like a shoo-in, but the Front's 20 percent would give Guillier a real shot.

NM has launched an aggressive campaign to court the FA's voters. Fortunately, the Front unambiguously announced that it will not negotiate with New Majority. Its main leaders — including Boric, [Jackson](#), Sánchez, and Sharp — have all declared that they will continue to serve as a militant opposition, no matter who wins.

NM is currently using both promises and threats to win over FA voters.

When Guillier's offensive began, Sharp turned expectations on their head, [inviting](#) the Communists to join the Front's fight against privatized pensions and education. The almost comical response came immediately: not only did the PCC fully support the FA's radical reform program, but the Nueva Mayoría in its entirety,

including the Christian Democrats, wanted to win the runoff precisely in order to enact these very reforms. As a signal to the Left, and apparently unironically, Guillier appointed the Communist Vallejo to a key post in his reorganized campaign team.

But the FA didn't budge, reminding the candidate that NM failed to pass these reforms while in office. So Guillier resorted to blackmail. The Front, he claimed, would bear the responsibility if Piñera wins. Unintimidated, the FA's leaders threw the ball right back: if Piñera triumphs, NM can only blame itself. To secure a victory, the center-left coalition must convince independent left voters that Guillier will bring about their desired reforms.

Wisely, the FA has not given anything up in exchange for ministerial posts or other offerings. Now firmly established, it is using its leverage to extract concessions without spending any political capital.

Unlike the Communists, the Frente Amplio will be able to act independently and mobilize allied movements if and when the next government fails to fulfill its promises. The PCC chose to strengthen the bipartisan regime in order to win reforms, but the FA seems committed to strengthening mass movements in hopes that they will bring down the neoliberal regime.

As Gonzalo Winter, a newly elected congress member from Boric's Movimiento Autonomista, put it:

"We want to transform Chile, not just go and enjoy ourselves in Congress. As the Movimiento Autonomista, we're clear that neither congressional representatives nor presidents change countries, nor do radical ideas alone; rather it's organized people, ready to take charge of their lives, to defend radical transformations and ideas."

The last time political forces had a real chance of winning such popular power was in 1973, before the [coup](#) that toppled Allende.

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