

PRESIDENTE



Chileans go to the polls.  
Photo by Rodrigo Arangua/AFP/Getty Images.



Photo by Rodrigo Arangua/AFP/Getty Images.

Sebastián Piñera demonstrates his soccer skills.

## ELECTION 2010

## Chile Heads Right

by Kirsten Sehnbruch

**O**n January 19, 2010, two decades of government by the Concertación, Chile's center-left coalition, came to an end. The triumphant winner of the election, Sebastián Piñera, received the congratulations of the outgoing president, Michelle Bachelet, and the defeated Concertación candidate, Eduardo Frei, while his supporters took to the streets to celebrate, honking the horns of their shiny SUVs. The *pelolais*, upper-class girls with glossy hair and high heels, got lost downtown near Plaza Italia because they had never before ventured beyond the confines of Santiago's four high-income districts. More disconcertingly, portraits of Chile's former dictator,

Augusto Pinochet, appeared from nowhere to line the streets in some wealthy areas of town.

It was a rare display of upper-class celebration in a city that continues to be marked by the stark contrast between a few shiny skyscrapers and the humble homes of the majority of its population. These unusual images prompt the question: How did a left-of-center coalition that has made extraordinary progress in every policy area lose an election, even as its extremely popular outgoing president clocked up record approval ratings?

The result of this election was by no means a foregone conclusion, despite the poor performance of

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Photo courtesy of Marco Enríquez-Ominami.

Marco Enríquez-Ominami on the campaign trail.

the Concertación's candidate, Eduardo Frei, in the first round. In fact, considering that the coalition has spent the last 20 years in government, the election result was impressive: rather than a resounding victory for the right, Piñera won the presidency by a 3 percent margin and did not obtain the majority he needed in both houses of Congress to prevent the Concertación from being able to block legislation.

Still, the Concertación lost the presidency.

Four immediate reasons spring to mind. First, 20 years in office, no matter how well executed, is a long time for any government. Tired of seeing the same faces on TV for the last two decades (and even longer if we consider the Concertación's role as opposition to the Pinochet dictatorship), the Chilean electorate wanted change. During the last 20 years, Chile has evolved beyond recognition, as have the aspirations of its population. Twenty years ago, the main issue was poverty. Now, Chileans are more concerned with the country's persistently high levels of inequality and access to higher education and health care. The irony of the situation is that the Concertación changed Chile faster than it adapted to that change itself.

The ad-hoc candidacy of a relatively unknown congressman, Marco Enríquez-Ominami, is a testimony

to how fed up Chileans have become with traditional politics. Formerly a member of the Socialist party, Enríquez-Ominami broke with the Concertación to run as an independent, garnering an astonishing 20.1 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections. His candidacy, which came about due to a lack of democratic decision-making within the Concertación, was the second factor contributing to the coalition's defeat: Enríquez-Ominami split the vote in the first round of the elections and then failed to give Frei his wholehearted support in the second round.

The third problem lay with the Concertación's candidate. In a year when the electorate demanded change, Eduardo Frei was a throwback. Not only had he previously served as president (1994-2000), he is also the son of a former president. The drawbacks of Frei's association with the past were compounded by his lack of personal pizzazz. In a democracy in which the personalities of presidents increasingly decide election results, the reliable, competent, but nevertheless lackluster figure of Frei did little to pull in votes for the Concertación.

While a candidate with a stronger personality would undoubtedly have made a difference in this election, the fourth reason for the Concertación's loss is probably the

most critical. Chile's binominal election system, in which two candidates from each competing coalition stand in each district, almost automatically guarantees the victory of at least one candidate from the governing and one from the opposition coalition in every electoral district. This leads to a system of pre-negotiated democracy, in which who wins depends more on which candidate is set to compete against which coalition partner than on any real competition between political coalitions. The resultant jockeying for candidacy strains the unity of the coalition. Moreover, the inertia that this system generates prevents the emergence of younger politicians: candidacies are awarded by party elders, rather than being the result of any organic grassroots process.

This system of negotiated democracy has undoubtedly led to cronyism and a degree of clientelism within the coalitions, even though actual corruption rates in Chile remain very low. This phenomenon has been more visible to the electorate in the case of the Concertación because these party negotiations have been replicated within the governing administration, leading to the impression that

offices are filled according to political connections rather than merit.

In addition, this system prevents political renewal, as it is difficult for outsiders to break into party negotiations or to set up independent candidacies. It also explains why political parties in Chile are so poorly regarded by the electorate and magnifies why 20 years in office, an extraordinary feat in itself, left voters looking for change.

The big question now is whether Sebastián Piñera will really be able to institute the changes he promised in the short four-year presidential term, which does not allow for consecutive reelections. These promises include recovering economic growth rates of 6 percent per annum, generating one million decent jobs, privatizing a portion of the state copper company, reforming the government, reducing crime and taking a tougher judicial approach to criminals.

Since Piñera does not have a clear majority in either house of Congress, the Concertación could mount a strong opposition to any policies it does not favor. Furthermore, Piñera will have to face the difficulty of balancing the interests within his coalition. His own party, Renovación

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Eduardo Frei speaks to supporters.



Photo courtesy of Eduardo Frei.



Photo by Lisa de Vreede.

Piñera supporters celebrate victory.

Nacional (National Renewal, RN), has more senators, but his coalition partner, the Unión Democrática Independiente (Independent Democratic Union, UDI) has twice as many deputies and clearly expects to play an important role in his government. Therefore, the first dilemma Piñera will face is how to balance these pressures, particularly since many of the UDI's members are so closely linked to the former dictator, Augusto Pinochet. The question of whether Piñera would include politicians in his administration who had also participated in Pinochet's government caused a lot of tension during the final days before the presidential election. Although Piñera knows that any association with the dictatorship is politically dangerous, he also has to keep his coalition partners happy. Just as presidents Lagos and Bachelet had to prove that the left is no longer the left of Salvador Allende, Piñera has to prove that the right is no longer the right of Augusto Pinochet.

Piñera's cabinet nominations show that he is well aware of these issues. Out of a cabinet of 22 ministers, Piñera only picked eight from his coalition parties. One minister,

Jaime Ravinet, is a long-standing Christian Democrat and a former minister in the Lagos administration. The remaining 13 ministers are not party militants but independent technocrats. By selecting a cabinet with such a large number of independent ministers, Piñera is sending several clear signals: first, he is relegating political parties to a position of secondary importance. Second, he is demonstrating that he has selected his ministers for their qualifications and levels of expertise rather than to satisfy party quotas. Third, his nominations distance his government from the Pinochet dictatorship and force the parties that back him to follow this shift towards the political center. Fourth, the fact that most of the new ministers come from high-level management positions in the private sector demonstrates Piñera's desire to introduce a change of attitude and greater efficiency into Chile's public sector. Fifth, governing with members of the opposition in key ministerial positions demonstrates Piñera's desire to establish a government of national unity, a new concept in Chilean politics, where the lines between government and opposition have never yet been crossed.

So far, Piñera's strategy constitutes a high-risk political gamble. As yet, it is too early to say whether he will win or lose. Appointing cabinet ministers without political experience or party endorsement could backfire. The same goes for appointing ministers from the private sector who have obvious conflicts of interest between their new and their old positions. Again, this is untested ground for Chile's post-transition democracy, which will have to find transparent mechanisms for managing these conflicts of interest.

It is clear that Piñera is betting on the unity and political discipline of his coalition, which will be driven by a desire to win the 2014 election and thus definitively break the Concertación's stranglehold on power. If his cabinet functions smoothly and successfully, this unity is likely to hold. Problems could arise if the new cabinet makes mistakes or is faced with unexpected popular unrest.

Chile's immediate political future will also depend to a significant extent on the role of President Bachelet, who could potentially stand for reelection in 2014. While her overwhelming approval ratings make her a potential candidate, the clamor for generational change, together with the lack of political unity in a Concertación that

needs to regroup and rethink, could have an impact on the race.

In any case, the 2014 elections will be very different from past elections: an electoral reform is likely to be passed that will no longer require people to register to vote. Registration will become automatic while the actual voting will become voluntary. At present, voters are not obliged to register, and many choose not to, but once they do, it is mandatory for them to vote in every subsequent election or they may be fined. This means that young people, who since 1990 have generally not bothered to register to vote, will be able to do so without going through the previously required administrative steps. It also means that many of those who currently get out and vote may stay home. These changes will have an unpredictable impact on voting patterns, so in 2014 anything could happen.

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The new president faces unforeseen challenges: fishing boats cast ashore by a tsunami, February 2010.



Photo by Claudio Santana/AFP/Getty Images.