

# Chile's elections marked by voter abstention and growth of both the pseudo-left and fascistic right

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Chile's ex-president Sebastián Piñera, the third-richest man in the country and presidential candidate for the far-right coalition Chile Vamos (Let's Go Chile), was expected to come close to the majority needed to become president in Sunday's elections. Most polls showed him reaching between 40 and 45 percent.

However, as the preliminary results came in, the late-night party at Piñera's campaign hub was overshadowed by the prospect of an uphill second round on December 17 against Alejandro Guillier, a senator of the ruling Social-Democrat and Stalinist coalition, the New Majority.

The presidential race underscored the vast gulf between the political establishment and the Chilean working class. With 14.3 million eligible voters, the abstention rate reached 53 percent. And out of the minority who cast their ballots, 36.6 percent (2.4 million votes) went to Piñera and 22.6 percent (1.5 million votes) went to Guillier. The biggest shift in vote was toward Beatriz Sánchez of the pseudo-left Frente Amplio (Broad Front), which placed third with 20.3 percent (1.3 million) of the votes.

In his speech Sunday, Guillier said that both the Christian Democrat Carolina Goic and Sánchez called to congratulate him, suggesting they will back him in the second round.

Another significant shift was the casting of over half a million votes, or almost 8 percent, for the fascistic José Antonio Kast, an anti-immigrant demagogue who openly vindicates the legacy of the US-backed military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), which murdered, tortured and imprisoned tens of thousands of Chilean workers and youth.

On Sunday, Kast immediately threw his support behind Piñera, who has also appealed to Christian fundamentalism and the military throughout his campaign, and publicly accepted Kast's support on Monday. "Piñera will fulfill all of our most fundamental desires," Kast declared.

Most of the coverage in the corporate-controlled press has focused on the results of Frente Amplio, portraying the coalition as the upcoming new official "left," which "deserves to celebrate." This reaction represents a sigh of relief that bourgeois rule has found a new "left" flank to divert the anger

of growing number of workers and youth toward all the traditional parties.

This was the first round of elections since President Michelle Bachelet's reform of the electoral "binomial system," which favored the election of one legislator for each of the two main coalitions and relegated smaller parties to obscurity. The new "proportional system" was introduced by the Bachelet government partly in response to a string of corruption scandals during past elections, including one involving her son.

The new legislation also reshaped the electoral districts, imposed a 40 percent minimum of female candidates and limited campaign financing by companies. The avowed goal was to reverse the sharp fall in turnout that was already taking place, illustrated by a drop from 87 percent in the 1989 elections to 50 percent in the 2013 elections.

The result was the opposite. The law's increase of seats in the Senate from 38 to 43 (and 50 by 2021) and of deputies from 120 to 155 deputies was received with disgust by many. The *Economist* quoted a common Chilean reaction that the "reform" would only yield "more clowns for the circus."

Overall, Sunday's results manifest a continuous growth in opposition toward the political establishment, especially against the incumbent coalition, which has ruled the country for the better part of the three decades since the end of the Pinochet regime. Minor changes to the extreme free-market framework established under Pinochet notwithstanding, the Social Democrats and Stalinists, which also control the trade union bureaucracy, have defended the continuous accumulation of wealth by the same powerful economic groups while leaving a majority of Chileans facing precarious economic conditions.

The New Majority had already lost an entire faction of its coalition, the Christian Democrats, as a result of its loss of popular support. On Sunday, moreover, their number of deputies fell from 67 to 43 and their senators from 21 to 15. In comparison, Chile Vamos jumped to 73 deputies and 19 senators, and Frente Amplio will have 20 deputies and one senator.

The New Majority campaigned on the basis of defending the reforms carried out by the Bachelet administration, namely its

increase of the corporate tax from 20 to 27 percent, which was carried out ostensibly to finance universal free education. Grants for the poorest college students have already benefitted 280,000 youth, but its universal expansion is still being discussed in Congress. Her administration also partially legalized abortion and same-sex civil unions.

After coming to power promising deep reforms with the support of the Communist Party-dominated trade union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left, Bachelet's measures have been a complete disappointment. Piñera, for his part, has threatened to fully or partially revoke the extremely limited measures undertaken by Bachelet.

The country's fiscal system still receives the bulk of its income from a regressive value-added tax of 19 percent, the third-highest in Latin America, while average tuition for higher education is still one of the most expensive relative to per-capita income. Nonetheless, the government still found money to increase its defense budget last year to over \$2.5 billion, which equals the second highest share of GDP in South America after Ecuador.

Throughout this past year, the forces around the government have suppressed student protests for free education, betrayed a copper miners' strike in February and turned their back on a march of 2 million Chileans against the privatized pension funds (AFPs). Such a response has in turn further deepened this social opposition against the entire political establishment, including against the pseudo-left. Furthermore, in the context of extreme wealth inequality and a stagnant economy pulled down by low commodity prices and the global economic crisis, the stage is being set for a major intensification of the class struggle.

Half of all workers in Chile make less than US\$400 each month, and, up until the 95th percentile of the population, family income remains roughly below US\$1,500, or a million pesos. However, it's at this point in the income curve that the elbow turns sharply. According to the World Bank, the remaining top 5 percent in Chile receives 51.5 percent of all income, making it the most unequal country of the OECD.

Beyond pitiful electoral reforms, such wealth inequality means in practice that at least 95 percent of the population has no genuine political representation. A 2015 study by economist Fernando Leiva reported that the income of a handful of 20 economic groups adds up to 52.6 percent of Chile's GDP. The document then goes into the long-term support by the most powerful conglomerate, the Luksic group, behind the New Majority.

According to *El Mostrador*, this period of economic downturn has also seen a massive growth of finance capital. Stock capitalization, for instance, reached 82 percent of GDP in 2015, with 13 groups controlling two-thirds of this amount. Oxford University professor, José Gabriel Palma, described it in stark terms: "Chile is not a market economy. It's an economy of market groups, in which giant conglomerates

extract incomes via an oligarchic concentration." It must be added that such extraction and extraordinary accumulation of income fundamentally proceed from the unpaid labor of the Chilean working class.

Income inequality is particularly sharp within the top 5 percent. For instance, just the top 0.1 percent receives almost two-fifths of the income of the top 5 percent, or 18 percent of national income.

The bitter struggle for a more favorable distribution of wealth within this top 5 percent has found expression in such formations as the Frente Amplio, which has combined left populism with nationalism and identity politics to seek greater privileges for these layers.

At the same time, whether it's through its growing presence in the trade union bureaucracy or in Congress, Frente Amplio's chief concern is to politically disarm Chilean workers to defend these privileges, which are dependent upon the explosive levels of wealth in the hands of the Chilean financial oligarchy and the financial elite in the US and Europe.

Their spokespeople, Sebastián de Polo (Democratic Revolution) and Karina Oliva (Power Party), said in April that they are not a "left" organization, rejecting the term altogether, but a "citizen's coalition." Such word games seek to blur the orientation of their policies toward the defense of the interests of the capitalist class. Similarly, their co-thinkers in Spain, Podemos, which congratulated the Frente Amplio for their results Monday, have also insisted that they reject the "politics of left and right," as their leader Pablo Iglesias stated in 2014, but see themselves as defenders of the "citizenry."

Santiago University political analyst René Jara told the AFP news agency that Frente Amplio's results had "completely reshaped Chile's political landscape." The vote, he said, gave the front "a very strong negotiating power in the second round." He added that, while Frente Amplio had been reluctant to back Guillier, "They are obliged to do so because if not they will be responsible for the return of Piñera." In other words, the task of the pseudo-left will be to attempt to corral its voters behind the ruling party.

The only way to confront the social and political attacks by the ruling class against workers, whether they are being imposed by the traditional bourgeois parties or pseudo-left formations like Podemos, Syriza, Frente Amplio and others, is through the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program.



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