



**Chileans (Or At Least Some)
Prepare To Vote For Their New
President**

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On December 11, 2009 Chile will hold a Presidential election. This election will be the fifth since Chile's return to democracy in 1990 and the first since the death of General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. The 2009 race is proving to be highly contested; none of the principal candidates has a realistic possibility of surpassing the 50% threshold needed to avoid a run-off election. Among the three leading candidates, Sebastian Piñera, the center-right wing candidate, holds a 10% lead over the center-left ruling coalition's candidate, Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, and a 17% lead over an independent candidate, Marco Enríquez-Ominami Gumucio. In a run-off, current polls (early November) indicate that Piñera holds a 6% lead over Frei; these polls also indicate that Piñera has a 3% lead over Enríquez-Ominami. About 20% of the electorate remains undecided. Whoever wins will inherit a country that has successfully withstood the global financial crisis and will most likely be in the midst of an upward cycle of economic recovery, but he will also inherit a country where issues of political apathy and social inequity require urgent attention.

To understand the current elections in Chile, it is necessary to have a general understanding of that country's recent history. For most of its independent history, Chile has been a republican democracy, but a coup d'état led by General Pinochet occurred on September 11, 1973. For seventeen years General Pinochet ruled Chile, as Dictator and President, with legislative power vested in a military junta composed of the heads of the various branches of the armed forces. In 1980 the military government promulgated a new Constitution for Chile. Included in the new national charter was a call for a transition period of eight years at the end of which a plebiscite would be held to accept (YES) or reject (NO) an extension of Pinochet's time in power. On October 5, 1988 the NO vote won with 54.7%,¹ setting the stage for Chile's return to democratic rule. Since the 1988 Plebiscite that returned democracy to Chile there have been four Presidents of the Republic: Patricio Aylwin Azocar (1990-1994), Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle (1994-2000), Ricardo Lagos Escobar (2000-2006) and Michelle Bachelet Jeria (2006-2010). The Chilean Constitution of 1980 does not permit consecutive Presidential terms. For this reason there have been four different Presidents in the past two decades, even though some of them had very high approval ratings at the end of their terms. President Bachelet's current approval rating ranges between 76 and 84% and, if she were permitted a second consecutive term, she

¹ http://www.ndi.org/files/257_cl_transition_spa.pdf p. 2 other numbers given as a result are 55.99%



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would almost undoubtedly be re-elected. All four of the Presidents who have held office since 1990 are members of the *Concertación*, a political umbrella which brings together most of the various parties which took part in the campaign for the NO and helped depose General Pinochet. In 2006 General Pinochet died, removing (to use a mixed avian anatomical metaphor) an albatross from the neck of the right wing of the Chilean political spectrum.

With regard to the upcoming Presidential elections it is important to note that Chile is a multi-party democracy. As a result, six to eight candidates were disputing the Presidential election in early September.² After the registration deadline only four candidates remained in the running. Only three candidates have broken out of single digits and have a realistic chance of being elected. In order to be elected president a candidate must win 50% + 1 of the votes cast in the election. It is highly unlikely that in a three (or more) way race that any single candidate will reach this required benchmark. The electoral law calls for a second round of elections to take place on January 17, 2010 if no candidate has garnered the required majority in the first round. The winner of the election will assume the Presidential office on March 11, 2010 and serve a single four-year term.

The two leading candidates contesting the 2009 election belong to long established political umbrella groups. Sebastian Piñera is the candidate of the *Coalición por el Cambio* (sometimes also referred to as the *Alianza por Chile*). The principal constituent political parties of *Coalición/Alianza* are the *Union Democristiana Independiente* (UDI) and the *Renovación Nacional* (RN). These two parties are long-term collaborators; they formed a coalition to contest the 1989 election under the name of *Democracia y Progreso*, in which Hernán Büchi (Finance Minister/Treasury Secretary under Pinochet)³ was their candidate. The two parties also collaborated in subsequent elections under various coalition names. UDI was formed in 1983 as an ideologically orthodox right wing political movement; it is a conservative political party that espouses a neoliberal approach to economic development. In the 1988 Plebiscite, the UDI was a major supporter of extending General Pinochet's rule. RN was founded in 1987 as a center-right liberal party that supports conservative political positions and a neoliberal, yet pragmatic, approach in economic matters. In regard to the transition to democracy, RN was associated with extending General Pinochet's rule, but it did so in a softer manner. Additionally, there was an element within the RN that voted for the NO in the 1988 Plebiscite; Mr. Piñera, the current Presidential candidate, claims to have been part of this group.

Former President Eduardo Frei is the candidate of the *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia* that is composed of center and moderate left parties. The grouping was

² September 14, 2009 was the last day to register candidacy

³ Due to ambivalence on the part of Büchi of the UDI, RN also nominated Sergio Onofre Jarpa who had been Interior Minister under Pinochet



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originally formed to oppose the extension of the Pinochet dictatorship by promoting the NO option. The principal parties that make up the *Concertación* are: the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (PDC), the *Partido por la Democracia* (PPD), the *Partido Radical Social Demócrata* (PRSD) and the *Partido Socialista* (PS). The PDC (in Chile) is a center left party that adheres to the precepts of Christian Humanism as put forth by Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which calls for the creation of a more just society to resolve the problems of modernity. In social matters it is a conservative party, but in economic matters the PDC leans to the center-left. It sees an important role for the State as an active player in fomenting a more equitable socio-economic order. The PPD is a center-left party that was originally created as a vehicle to oppose the extension of Pinochet's rule in 1988. Today it describes itself as liberal and progressive along the lines of European social-democratic parties. The PRSD is a center-left party, that is founded on the principles of rational humanism, social democracy, strict separation of church and state and a decentralized democracy. The PS is a left wing party whose ideology is rooted in Marxism and in social-democratic action. The current President, Michelle Bachelet, is a member of the PS.

To the candidates of the two "traditional" umbrella groups must now be added an independent candidate, Marco Enríquez-Ominami Gumucio. Over the past months he has gone from being a longshot to becoming a credible challenger for a spot in an eventual run-off. Until June 2009 Mr. Enríquez-Ominami was a militant of the PS, which he left in order to run as an independent candidate. His politics must be considered center-left. He presents himself as leading "a political, social and cultural movement, which seeks to erect the basis for a 'real change in generation and in the vocation of progress'." ⁴ Included in his political agenda are issues related to a more just economic distribution, sustainable growth, environmental considerations and an expanded and transparent democracy. The biggest opportunity is also the biggest challenge for Mr. Enríquez-Ominami's candidacy: how to motivate an apathetic electorate and encourage younger voters to participate in a political process that many find irrelevant.

The inability of the fourth candidate Jorge Arrate, who heads a left wing coalition, to pass beyond single digits in the polls make his likely impact negligible in the context of a first electoral round. His endorsement for a second round will be of value; most of his supporters are likely to support anyone who opposes the Piñera *Coalición/Alianza* camp.

The key issues in this Presidential campaign are:

- Unequal distribution of wealth. Despite the fact that Chile is being considered for membership in the OECD, there is still a serious issue of poverty and highly unequal distribution of wealth. The position of the *Coalición/Alianza* is that there needs

⁴ http://www.marco2010.cl/?page_id=3



to be an extension of economic benefits to senior citizens and creation of a minimum family income program as part of a new Ministry of Social Development. The *Coalición/Alianza* proposes to create one million new stable jobs and support small and medium sized enterprises. The position of the *Concertación* is to continue with the social protection programs that they have already instituted and to increase the reach of these programs. The *Concertación* proposes to create a Ministry of Development to support small and medium enterprises and encourage innovation. They also plan to develop a new labor code to protect workers. The position of Enríquez-Ominami is to change the Chilean neoliberal economic model to one that prioritizes social solidarity. Also part of his platform is a modification of the tax code so that it will favor workers and the environment.

- Education reform. Despite nearly universal literacy, access to quality education and the social mobility opportunities that this provides are highly unequal as demonstrated by performances on standardized tests and university placement examinations. The position of the *Coalición/Alianza* is to double the subvention per student and improve access to pre-school and beyond. The position of the *Concertación* is that quality education is the responsibility of the State. They propose to create 100,000 new spaces in nursery schools and kindergartens; develop a grant and loan system so that all deserving students can access higher education; increase subvention for all school levels by at least 20%. The position of Enríquez-Ominami is to propose an increase in preschool access, increase support for public universities, increase training of teachers, and develop new financing for scientific and technological research.
- Law and order. Although not a major problem by Latin-American standards, Chile's crime rate has exploded in the past decade. How society should react has become a serious question. It is important to note that the police force of Chile is a fraction of the size it should be considering the country's geography and population. The position of the *Coalición/Alianza* is to call for a crackdown on delinquency and narco-trafficking. The position of the *Concertación* is to propose to add 6,000 new police officers for neighborhoods and to develop local programs of social intervention to rehabilitate drug addicted youths. The position of Enríquez-Ominami is that creating a more just society through increased opportunities will roll crime back.
- Indigenous issues. Indigenous communities represent, according to the 2002 census, about 4.6% of the population. A segment of the Mapuche community in south-central Chile is turning towards violent confrontation with the State in order to regain control of ancestral lands. How the State should respond to this violence is part of a national debate. The position of the *Coalición/Alianza* is that this is a law and order matter. The position of the *Concertación* is that the Constitution needs to be modified to recognize the rights of indigenous people and that there is a need



to promote initiatives to increase political participation by indigenous peoples. The position of Enríquez-Ominami is the same as that of the *Concertación*.

- Political domination by Santiago. Chilean senators, deputies, mayors and other elected officials have no local residency requirement when running for public office. As a result, most high-level elected officials that represent communities outside of the metropolitan region are in fact from Santiago, the capital. Political parties of right and left arrange candidacies without consideration of the candidates' connection to the community they purport to represent, giving rise to a significant deficit of effective representation. The position of the *Coalición/Alianza* is to reinforce and democratize regional and community governments and to transfer resources to the regions in a more equitable fashion. The position of the *Concertación* is to increase municipal budgets, to increase autonomy of regions and municipalities and to give them more resources to develop their own projects. The position of Enríquez-Ominami is to decentralize government and give more voice to the regions and to social organizations. He proposes to promote "direct democracy" through plebiscites and referendums leading to a new Constitution and social contract.
- Energy and environment. Chile's rapid and high economic growth rate has placed strains on the Nation's energy resources. Lacking fossil fuels, Chile has prioritized the construction of hydroelectric resources without adequate consideration of environmental impact and long-term sustainability. The construction of nuclear plants is also being evaluated. Given Chile's susceptibility to earthquakes this may or may not be the best of policies. The position of the *Coalición/Alianza* is to favor sustainable development while promoting renewable and non-conventional energy sources in a manner that respects the environment. The platform of the *Concertación* is rather silent on this topic. Recent newspaper articles indicate that both Piñera and Frei support massive new hydroelectric projects and development of nuclear energy, while Enríquez-Ominami opposes these types of development. Enríquez-Ominami has been endorsed by Chile's Ecologist Party and his call for ecologically conscientious economic growth that benefits all Chileans is an important plank of his platform.
- Armed forces financing. The Chilean Armed Forces have been on a shopping spree thanks to the high value of copper. Currently, Chilean Armed Forces purchases of armaments are financed by 10% of the profits from international sales of copper made by CODELCO (Chile's copper company). Although an important issue nationally, it is not part of the platforms of any of the candidates at this time. Most likely, the cause for this is the probability that President Bachelet will have resolved this issue prior to leaving office.



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The *Concertación* has led Chile for nearly twenty years. In the view of some critics, it is exhausted, inefficient and lacking in vision. Its supporters point out that it managed a difficult transition to democracy, oversaw unprecedented growth and diversification of Chile's economy and, thanks to prudent fiscal policy, it provided the country with the financial depth to employ counter-cyclical spending to ameliorate the impact of the global financial crisis. The *Coalición/Alianza*, no longer under the long shadow of Pinochet and the rejection he caused for a significant portion of the electorate, is positioning itself as a responsible steward of the economic growth Chile has enjoyed, while bringing new ideas and talent with clean hands to expand economic growth along neoliberal lines. Enriquez-Ominami has called for a redistribution of wealth through increased taxation on corporations and the wealthiest segments of society.

Under the current Chilean Constitution, no matter which President is elected, he will have to work with a divided Legislature. Elections for both houses of Parliament are held at the same time as Presidential elections, but the possibilities that either party will win a large enough majority to rule with an independent mandate is made nearly impossible due to the "*sistema binominal*". The system works in the following way: for a given district the parties or coalitions must each submit a list of two candidates. In order for both candidates of a given list to win, they must not only receive a majority of votes, but also outperform the other list by a margin greater than two to one. Failing this, one candidate of the winning list is elected, as is a candidate of the list with the second majority. For the *Concertación* this system has undermined its clear majority at election time; for the *Coalición/Aliaza* the system provides stability; and for independents it means being virtually shut out of the political system.

A huge challenge for all candidates to the Presidency is how to engage with those disaffected with the political process. Voting in Chile is mandatory for those registered, and failing to vote results in significant fines. However, registering to vote is not a requirement; as a result a total of about 3.9 million people over the age of 18 are not registered (not all of these would be eligible to register, for reasons other than age) and will not take part in the electoral process. There are currently 8.3 million people registered to vote in Chile. Particularly troubling is the apathy of many younger voters, who, unlike the previous generation, view politics as an exercise in irrelevance and futility.⁵ The reasons for lack of interest about the current electoral cycle in a significant segment of the younger generation are probably multiple. Most prominent among the likely explanations is the temporal separation of this generation from direct emotional experience of the traumatic events surrounding the *coup d'état*, the subsequent military dictatorship and the struggle to

⁵ As per the National Institute for Youth (INJUV) the majority of the unregistered are young voters who should represent 35% of the electorate but today they do not exceed 7.5% of registered voters. A last minute attempt to extend the registration period by a further 30 days was dismissed.



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regain democracy (persons now between the age of 18 and 25 were born after these events occurred or were in early childhood). A second important factor may be that politics is perceived as ossified and irrelevant to young people's daily lives and to their consumer-driven priorities. Contributing to this perception are communicational disconnections between young people and the political establishment, dominated by old guard figures. Another element of Chilean politics, the binomial system, has locked the government into paralysis on some issues and such high levels of compromise on others that skepticism about the prospects for "real change" may be being transformed into apathy. Among many young people this combination of factors is apparently leading to a "why bother" attitude towards registering to vote (older voters may share this attitude, but because they've already registered, they are required by law to vote). It is interesting that apathy is not characteristic of young Chilean people with regard to topics of direct, immediate interest to them. For example, in 2006 the so-called Penguins' Revolution (school dress codes of navy blue blazers, white shirts and ties confer the sobriquet of "penguin" on Chilean students) took place. For a period of about three months, more than 100,000 high school students across the country marched, went on strike and took over many campuses of emblematic schools to demand educational sector reform.

This election cycle is the first in which a significant electoral fragmentation of the *Concertación* has occurred, as demonstrated by the independent candidacy of Enriquez-Ominami. He has attracted supporters principally from those who have traditionally voted in favor of the governing party. This Presidential election seems to be placing more emphasis on personalities rather than on issues. Is this phenomenon driven by a generational change (Enriquez-Ominami is much younger than Frei or Piñera)? Or is it driven by disillusionment with a political system that is perceived as unresponsive? Even some on the right are grumbling that if Mr. Piñera were to win, his administration would be just another *Concertación* government.

Resources

A Marco Enríquez-Ominami <http://www.marco2010.cl>
Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) <http://www.pdc.cl>
Partido por la Democracia (PPD) <http://www.ppd.cl>
Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD) <http://www.partidoradical.cl>
Partido Socialista (PS) <http://www.pschile.cl>
Renovacion Nacional (RN) <http://rn.cl>
Union Democratica Independiente (UDI) <http://www.udi.cl>

Chilean Electoral Service <http://www.servei.cl>



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Chilean Civil Registry <http://www.registrocivil.cl>

Chilean National Statistical Institute <http://www.ine.cl>

Chilean National Institute for Youth <http://www.injuv.gob.cl>

Centro Estudios Publicos Chile <http://www.cepchile.cl>

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Papiers d'actualité

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