

Chile: Of Movements and Mayors

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Contents

- [Cause for Celebration?](#)
- [Sobering Realities](#)
- [The Trend Toward Abstention](#)
- [Communists' Failed Strategy](#)
- [What's Needed Now](#)

CHILEANS WENT TO the polls on October 28, 2012 to elect mayors and city councils from Arica, bordering Peru in the North, to Punta Arenas in southern Tierra del Fuego. Considering the student movement that unleashed what seemed like unstoppable waves of mass militancy over the past year and a half, one might have expected gains for popular and working-class forces. Yet while students and subsequent rebellions had shaken the previously stable foundations of the region's model post-authoritarian neoliberal regime, election results are discouraging on many counts.

No left anti-regime force established itself on the national scene. Further, the overall distribution of formal institutional power remains essentially intact. Finally, the attempt by the Communists to shift national politics to the left from within the regime's parameters has failed miserably.

The question now is whether these results will have a demoralizing impact on the mass movements that have reemerged after two decades of slumber, or whether this failure will revitalize them by conclusively burying fantasies of realigning the "center-left" on a genuinely reformist slant.

These were the first municipal elections since the right-wing Alianza por Chile won the presidency in a run-off almost three years ago, when Sebastián Piñera, a businessman owing his billions to privatizations and other anti-popular economic policies of the military regime, took 51.6% second-round votes in January 2010. While his was the first presidential triumph by the center-right coalition following the return to democracy 20 years prior, the Alianza had already edged the center-left Concertación in the 2008 nationwide local elections with 40.7% of votes.

The October elections reversed these results: the Concertación por la Democracia coalition, anchored around the powerful Christian Democrats and the Socialists, came away with 43.1% of votes cast, while the ruling alliance obtained 37.5%. [1]

Cause for Celebration?

Not surprisingly, the Concertación is boasting that this 'progressive' victory clears the way to a return to power in next year's presidential elections. With Piñera's pitiful public standing — at 27%, his approval ratings are the lowest for any standing Latin American president — and business unprepared to countenance four more years of disruptive mobilizations under another right-wing government, the center-left coalition is confident former president Michelle Bachelet will be elected. [2]

The cause for rejoicing among Chile's Socialists and Christian Democrats is obvious: they will once again be able to name partisan oligarchs to critical and lucrative posts managing relations with the country's business elites.

The Communist party is celebrating for other reasons. In the immediate sense, they are hailing their formal alliance forged with a sector of the Concertación as the primary factor in the Right's defeat. The Communists argue that the 6% they have steadily garnered in recent elections, including the first round of the 2010 presidential elections and the 2008 local contests, was the critical fraction that propelled the reformers to victory. In the same spirit, they are urging the Concertación to deepen the alliance in time for the upcoming presidential elections. [3]

More broadly, they credit their pact with the Concertación as the decisive strategy for completing Chile's democratic transition. By their estimation, Chile remains shackled by the dictatorship's legacy, namely the 1980 Constitution imposed by Pinochet, which the Concertación was unable to overturn in 20 years in government.

For the Communists, the Right's re-ascendance represents the largest threat to achieving full liberal democracy. In their not unreasonable analysis, diminishing the Alianza once and for all would enable a reform of Chile's binomial electoral scheme — a sort “top two winners take all” system — which the moderate left accepted when negotiating the transition and which famously shut out the Communists and smaller radical groups.

Incorporating the CP into a broadened Concertación should muster the needed votes to secure elections, expand representation and build the parliamentary strength to amend the constitution and establish some form of proportional representation. The heretofore eschewed progressive alliance will, in short, finally generate the conditions for veritable “bourgeois democracy” and meaningful social reforms benefiting workers and the poor.

As the CP's president and rookie congressman Guillermo Tellier put it: “We want to share our happiness with the general results; and, in particular, we believe they are auspicious because the pact we pushed was successful. The end was to snatch the greatest possible number of mayoralities from the Right, because the main competition was with the Alianza, with the government, and we achieved... a basis for an oppositional convergence based on a single program.” [4]

Sobering Realities

The reality is not as encouraging. The first thing to note is that the vote further entrenched the two-block regime, a type of bipartisan neoliberal fellowship, established by the negotiated 1989-1990 transition out of the dictatorship. Electoral results hardly amount to a meaningful shift in national correlation of forces.

The outcome faithfully reflects vote shares since the transition: beginning in the mid-1990s, both competing blocs have received between 40 and 45% of votes cast in first round presidential elections. Municipal elections have seen marginal swings in both directions, while second-round presidential elections have exhibited increases of up to 54% thanks to the adherence of “independents,” the Communists and their lesser electoral allies foremost among these.

As noted by the editors of Mercurio, the powerful mouthpiece of business, the share won by the Right coalition remained roughly equal to the vote it received in 2004. [5] This pattern in turn should be understood as the partisan institutionalization of a deeper divide in Chilean society. Whereas three-fifths of the population is squarely democratic and inclined toward progressive reform, a hard

40% of society is conservative and even authoritarian. [6]

Following 18 months of continual grassroots organization and mobilization, many hoped that local contests might spawn an electoral force representing sectors preferring more radical democratic reform, which until now have been diluted among the 60% who could only turn to the Concertación for formal representation. No such national presence crystallized; instead, genuinely popular and reformist sectors stand to become further marginalized from competition over the levers of state power.

The Trend Toward Abstention

This raises a second point. Although the recent popular mobilizations should have encouraged newly activated groups and individuals to come out and vote, abstention reached the highest level since redemocratization. The promising impetus for the emergence of a new, independent working-class electoral option dissipated as 60% of voters preferred to stay home. This compares scandalously to the 86% turnout in the 2008 local elections and general participation rates since the end of the dictatorship which have hovered around 90%.

This means that the Concertación won the elections with a scant backing of 17% of the electorate, roughly the thinning layer of society that still looks upon this pillar of post-Pinochet neoliberal democracy with sentiments other than outright disgust. Were the Communist approach as promising for democratization as the Party argues, one would have expected the Concertación pact to motivate voters among the vast layers who are precisely demanding deepened democracy. Curiously, while acknowledging that the turnout rate reflects the price paid by the political class for evenly and serially betraying popular demands, the CP hitched itself to the worst offenders.

In truth, the sudden drop is not the result of an equally abrupt disenchantment with politics. It was simply the first time Chileans could legally sit out elections as prior to now voting had been mandatory. To be sure, low turnout signals well-documented (and at times politically articulated) opposition to ruling parties and institutions. An important layer of youth and activists heeded calls by the ACES, the radical coordinating assembly that organizes and leads militant high school students, to make a political statement via abstention. [7]

Absent a viable alternative that can dispute the disruptive hegemony of Chile's double-headed neoliberal regime in the halls of power AND in the streets, however, the current and unresolved crisis of legitimacy will not translate into a loss of power. The Concertación, which commands only about 15% of popular approval, is correct to be worried. But voices announcing, either in celebration or lamentation, the demise of its ability to rule remain overstated.

With strong backing from business, which is regretting its sponsorship of the more openly pro-market Alianza, the Concertación will almost certainly regain the presidency next year. For the moment, the economic elites who have profited obscenely from Chile's brand of oligarchic democracy will continue to wield overwhelming influence in what has become one of the most unequal countries of the world.

Communists' Failed Strategy

Finally, the disappointing yet predictable action of the Communist Party led to the squandering (for now) of the potential generated by the student movement. The party's youth wing, the Juventudes Comunistas (JJCC) known as the Jota (or 'J'), was undeniably instrumental in activating and directing

student movement in 2011.

Under Jota leadership, three of the four most important student federations (University of Chile, University of Santiago and University of Concepción) correctly read the mood on campuses and ably built a successful, if tense, alliance with secondary students that facilitated mass mobilization. Within a year, however, the Young Communists were being punished in National University Student Federation (FECH) elections for its parent formation's insistence on cutting parliamentary deals to address student demands rather than continue to strengthen the movement on campuses, neighborhoods and the streets.

A majority of active students blamed this change in approach for the weakening of the movement over the past six months. [8] Last year, after the Communists' would-be allies stood by idly as Alianza senators passed an education budget opposed by most in the movement, the CP's iconic student leader Camila Vallejo lost the National University federation's presidency to a harder, more independent left, Time magazine's accolades notwithstanding. [9] Having lost considerable prestige on campuses, Vallejo's urgent appeal, to which dozens of other student leaders endorsing the CP-Concertación pact signed on, calling on student activists to ignore the ACES-promoted boycott, largely fell on deaf ears. [10]

Given the demobilizing effect of partisan bargaining on the movement, the logic of the statement was unpersuasive.

More recently, just days after the municipal vote, the costs paid by Communists on campuses were even greater, as the JJCC was relegated to third place behind newly constituted autonomist ultras. [11] In lieu of taking stock of this growing disappointment, the party stubbornly sticks with an electoral strategy aimed at expanding the pro-business Concertación toward the left in exchange for the influence the party retains at the grassroots level in shanties, on campuses and in unions.

The bankruptcy of this strategy is becoming increasingly clear. Moving toward more representative voting rules is absolutely essential for full democracy to have even a remote chance in Chile; but achieving it via subsumption into the Concertación is self-defeating.

The true decision-makers within the Concertación, the infamous Socialist and Christian Democrat jerarcas (hierarchs), have and will continue to systematically undermine reform that conflicts with the interests of their corporate constituents. And the Communist Party's inability, despite its electoralist enthusiasm, to turn out left voters who could theoretically pressure these party bosses, proves that their dominance inside the coalition remains unshakeable.

Indeed, the essence of the problem is that the quid pro quo pursued by the Communists inevitably erodes the very influence they hope to trade for posts and reforms. The Communist's pact with the more left-leaning parties of the Concertación, particularly the PPD, directly garnered them only 1.4% of votes in these elections. Joining the PPD's list resulted in the election of six mayors, by no serious standard a game-changing improvement over the four towns they controlled following their extra-Concertación run in 2008.

The faulty calculus of the Communists is best illustrated by results in Estación Central, a working-class Santiago township with a historic Communist base. There, even with hardy Concertación support, the presumed victory of Jota university leader Camilo Ballesteros turned into an embarrassing defeat as the incumbent hard right UDI party retained power. Just as impoverished workers punished Ballesteros for allying with the executors of their social and civil exclusion, elections will condemn the Party to irrelevance if it fails to correct its unimaginative dependence on neoliberalism's managers.

What's Needed Now

In sum, achieving meaningful political and economic democracy in Chile has nothing to do with the Communists' obsolete (if ever valid) stagist formula for the full conquest of liberal democracy ostensibly threatened by the resurgence of erstwhile Pinochet supporters. Pitching their leaking tent in the backyard of neoliberal "democrats," who have diligently safeguarded the exclusionary orthodoxy imposed by the military regime, is a losing gambit.

The threat to real social and political democracy in Chile is not a comeback by the "retrograde" Right. Instead, the actual barrier to worker rights, free and quality education for all, restoration of usurped indigenous lands, and popular control of the country's resources, is the power-sharing regime that has so handsomely benefited the Concertación.

The elite rewards these so-called Social Democrats receive for an effective stewardship of corporate interests explains why, while in power for 20 years, they systematically blocked labor protections, opposed renationalization of education, and repressed Mapuche activists fighting for land. Realizing this, the task of student, popular and working-class militants is to keep building their movements, and to elaborate from these rising forces an electoral strategy that confronts the entire institutional edifice of post-authoritarian neoliberalism.

The best lesson is offered by Communist and Socialist strategies not of today but of 50 years ago. In the 1960s, these parties abandoned their previously fruitless coalitional machinations and finally agreed on the wisdom of coming together in an independent electoral alliance erected atop half a century of working-class and popular organization.

Whether in the present moment this effort comes from forces defecting from these parties, from new radical grassroots organizations, or from a combination of these, the imperative is unavoidable. Continued failures will demoralize already frustrated working and poor sectors and extend the neoliberal regime's lock on power.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) n° 162, January/February 2013. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

[1] These figures represent mayoral contests alone. Elections for council seats display the same pattern though results reflect a slightly higher degree of dispersion.

[2] See TeleSUR: El 50 por ciento de chilenos quiere de vuelta a Bachelet en la presidencia (<http://www.telesurtv.net/articulos/2012/08/21/chilenos-mantienen-apoyo-a-michelle-bachelet-par-a-presidenciales-en-2013-500.html>). Polling firms close to the government place his approval at a slightly higher 32%.

[3] In truth, Communist support for the Concertación in run-offs has been the mainstay of their

electoral strategy since 2000. That year and again in 2006, the CP instructed its followers to vote for the Concertación candidates in order to stave off the threat of a right-wing anti-democratic reversal. Indeed, a tactical alliance with the CP was formalized in 2010, in which Communists were ceded three safe districts on Concertación parliamentary lists and thus welcomed back to Parliament after 37 years. By then, however, disaffection with the center-left neoliberals was so profound, that even with CP second-round votes, the coalition was defeated.

[4] For a full picture of Communists' present triumphalism, see *Rebellion: El Partido Comunista duplica su número de concejales y gobernará en seis comunas* (<http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=158451&titular=el-partido-comunista-duplica-su-n%FAmero-de-concejales-y-gobernar%E1-en-seis-comunas->). Without blinking, after he went on to claim "our outlook is to establish a link with the social movement, strengthening it, be it unions, the student movement or the urban poor. In the local elections, we were able to oust mayors who were tenacious enemies of educational reform, of free education, they were absolutely defeated, so this social movement will continued and we are strengthening it." He failed to mention that the Concertación parties that replaced them are also tenacious enemies of the student movement's main demands.

[5] 29 October, 2012 editorial in *El Mercurio*. The piece is no longer available online. For a summary, see *EL ENOJOSO EDITORIAL DE "EL MERCURIO."* (http://www.reporte.cl/principal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=308&catid=42) The editorial also laments that, "the private sector, having forgotten the bitter experiences of the 1970s [under Allende's radical Popular Unity government] as a source of political funding is practically non-existent today." In the analysis of veteran left journalist, Manuel Cabieses, this was a clear indication that business has "cut the floor" from under the Alianza and will restore its financing of the Concertación. See <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=158885&titular=ocho-millones-nos-contemplan->.

[6] Those stunned by the center-right victory in the 2010 presidential elections should not forget that 22 years prior, 44% of Chileans voted "Yes" in the generally free plebiscite in which they were asked whether they desired the continuation of the military regime.

[7] See *Rebellion*. "Quienes han resultado electos lo han sido con menos del 40% de los votos" (<http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=158485&titular=%22quienes-han-resultado-electos-lo-han-sido-con-menos-del-40%-de-los-votos%22->). The ACES went beyond calling for a no-vote. They also urged high school students to form organized contingents and directly confront candidates of all stripes, demanding clear statements on their positions on education reform. See <http://www.theclinic.cl/2012/09/29/manifiesto-de-la-aces-respecto-del-llamado-a-funeral-las-elecciones-municipales/>.

[8] See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/dec/20/camila-vallejo-influence-growin>g.

[9] The Jota fires back that the sectarianism of the more radical forces that have supplanted them is to blame. See <http://www.elmostrador.cl/noticias/pais/2012/11/15/por-que-el-movimiento-estudiantil-guateo-en-2012/>. In reality, both positions are correct. But what's inescapable is that without the CP's overriding partisan and electoralist inclinations, the harder left would never have been placed in a position to operate in its isolating manner.

[10] See

<http://www.eldinamo.cl/2012/10/19/sigue-la-polemica-45-dirigentes-estudiantiles-llaman-oponerse-a-campana-yo-no-presto-el-voto-y-participar-en-las-municipales/>. The statement read:

“participating in these elections will not only create a better context for the movement’s future by supporting sympathetic candidates, it also communicates a citizen’s rejection, as categorical as it is peaceful, of candidates that criminalized the movement or ignored its demands.”

[11] For results of FECH elections see

<http://www.latercera.com/noticia/educacion/2012/11/657-493168-9-lista-continuadora-de-gestion-de-gabriel-boric-gana-elecciones-de-la-fech.shtml>. Gains by autonomists, who put together the

“Luchar” (Struggle) slate, on one hand reflect healthy new impulses from below. On the other hand, the success of groups that think very lowly of strategic organizing, reflects the disenchantment generated by the Jota.